

Why Leadership Matters: One School's Journey to Success

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In the following study, the researcher, an experienced leadership coach and former principal, observed the leadership practices of a first-year principal over the course of one year as student achievement at his school increased dramatically. Employing participant observation, document analysis, interviewing, and administration of a teacher survey, the researcher gathered and analyzed data in an effort to identify those leadership strategies that could be replicated at other school sites. Findings are summarized in a timeline of leadership activities that may have contributed to the successful efforts at this particular elementary school site.

In our current climate of data-driven school assessment, school administrators are held accountable for student performance on standardized measures of academic achievement. In California, cumulative scores on Content Standards tests and soon the Common Core Assessments are tabulated, compared within and among districts, and published for public access. School rankings impact funding decisions, staff retention, and community perceptions of how well the school is serving the educational needs of children and youth (Fiore, 2011). In this climate, school administrators are experiencing increasing pressure to increase student achievement.

School climate research findings have shown that principals are a critical component in school efforts to improve student outcomes (Cotton, 2003; Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2006; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; McGough, 2003; Mullen, Gordon, Greenlee, & Anderson, 2002; Spillane, 2006), and that principals impact student performance through influencing the purposes and goals of the school, the culture, the school structure, the social networks, and the people (Copland, 2003; Smylie & Hart, 1999). Leithwood et al. (2004) argued that of all the factors that contribute to student achievement, leadership's effect is second only to classroom instruction.

While there is general recognition of the importance of school leadership, an action plan that identifies components and recommends sequencing has proven more elusive for researchers. In this article, the author, an experienced leadership coach and former principal, summarizes an opportunity to observe the leadership practices of a principal over the course of a single year as student achievement at his school increased dramatically. Through participant observation, document analysis, interviews, and a teacher survey, the researcher gathered and analyzed data in an effort to create a template of replicable leadership strategies that could be utilized at other school sites.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study builds upon the findings of previous researchers: Leithwood et al. (2004); Marzano et al. (2005); and Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008). In their meta-analysis of 70 empirical studies, Marzano et al. (2005) studied a variety of principal leadership components, including building a sense of community, establishing school routines, providing teachers with necessary resources, and advocating for school stakeholders. This research indicted the average effect size of school leadership on student achievement to be approximately 0.25. Robinson et al. (2008) analyzed the results of 12 studies and inductively identified five leadership dimensions in which instructional leadership significantly affected student outcomes: (a) establishing goals and expectations; (b) resourcing strategically; (c) planning and coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum; (d) promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and (e) ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. These findings aligned with those of Leithwood et al. (2004), who had identified three sets of leadership practices that most dramatically impacted student achievement: (a) setting directions, (b) developing people, and (c) redesigning the organization to develop one that supports the performance of administrators, teachers, and students. In this study, the researcher analyzed the leadership actions of one principal, Marcos Ferdinand of Alameda School, using Leithwood et al.'s (2004) framework.

METHODOLOGY

In order to gather detailed data about principal activities, the researcher selected case study methodology as described by Cresswell (1998): exploration of an entity or phenomenon (the case) bounded by time (one year) and activity (leadership). During the course of the study, the researcher, engaged as a leadership coach for Marcos Ferdinand, functioned as a participant observer as described by Stake (1995): a researcher who makes first-hand observations, sometimes engaging personally in the activities. Thus, the researcher had not only the benefit of direct engagement with the principal's leadership activities but also considerable knowledge of the school district, its history, and the administrative structure.

This qualitative research case study of the principal's leadership practices at Alameda Elementary used purposive sampling to gather data about the principal's activities, staff response, and student test performance. Studying the principal's leadership over the course of one year at one school site served as saturation sampling since the researcher gathered data associated with principal activities and the improvements in student test performance on district benchmark assessments during the designated time period.

Study Site

Alameda Elementary, part of an urban school district, is located in a highly industrial, nonresidential area of a large county in Southern California. The school serves 400 children in grades 3-5, with the majority of the children in third grade coming to Alameda from a feeder K-2 school. The school's student population remained relatively static over the three years prior to this study, and all students qualified for free lunch (see Table 1). The teaching staff also remained unchanged for the previous three years. Alameda had been led by the same principal from 2005, another principal serving a one-year term, 2009-2010, prior to the arrival in 2010 of the principal in this study, Marcos Ferdinand, a first year principal. As a first year principal in this district, Mr. Ferdinand qualified for and agreed to be mentored by a leadership coach, the researcher in this study.

Table 1
Alameda Student Demographics 2008-2011

Subgroup	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011
African American	12.3%	8.5%	6.25%
Hispanic or Latino	87.1%	88.8%	93.5%
Special Education	3.4%	2.6%	3.75%
Free Lunch	100%	100%	100%

(California Department of Education, Accountability Reporting, 2009, 2010, 2011)

Data Collection

Data were collected from meetings with the principal, the researcher's observations and notes, school and public records, a culminating principal interview, and teachers' open-ended survey responses.

The researcher met twice monthly with Alameda's principal to discuss his recent and future activities. The twice monthly meetings provided detailed information about the principal's leadership actions, his thoughts about the impact of his activities, and his observations of classroom and administrative functions. They also were an opportunity for the leadership coach (researcher) to seek clarification on her observations and perspectives and offer suggestions. After each meeting, the researcher created detailed summary notes of the meeting.

Twice monthly the researcher and the principal walked classrooms and observed instruction and teacher collaboration meetings. The presence of the researcher facilitated subsequent administration of the follow-up teacher survey.

Data were gathered from the principal's leadership notes about his observations, checklists he prepared to address teacher concerns, and school records. School ranking data were collected from the district and the California Department of Education (California Department of Education, 2012).

Toward the end of the school year, the researcher met with the principal for a summary interview about what he believed to be the practices that contributed to the significant increase in student achievement.

In August when the test results were returned, the researcher participated in a staff meeting organized to analyze Alameda's 2010-2011 state tests results. At the close of the meeting, the researcher asked the teachers to explain in a few paragraphs what they considered the contributing factors to the huge growth in student achievement and to email their responses to the principal.

Researcher as Participant Observer

Although the literature acknowledges that there are benefits when a researcher functions as a participant observer, there are also challenges, which can include issues related to validity and conflict of interest (Merriam 2009). To address the issue of validity, the researcher asked teachers, the principal, and the assistant superintendent to participate in member checks. Additionally, data from survey responses were triangulated with the coach's notes and district and state documents. The researcher recognized that the lack of respondent anonymity in the teacher surveys may have affected their responses; however, the researcher was able to reference data from her previous observations and discussions with teachers and these data were consistent with the information from the teachers in the end-of-year survey.

RESULTS

Over the 2010-2011 school year, data were collected from observations; notes; meetings; a culminating principal interview; teacher surveys; and school, district, and state records. At the end of the school year, the data were organized, analyzed for themes, classified, coded using manual techniques, and examined for evidence of school improvement and adherence to the three sets of leadership practices identified by Leithwood et al. (2004): (a) setting directions, (b) developing people, and (c) redesigning the organization to develop one that supported the performance of all stakeholders.

School Academic Achievement

In August, 2010, Alameda School was the lowest performing elementary school in the district with an Academic Performance Index (API) of 670 (California Department of Education, 2011). One year later, in 2011, the school had increased its API by 155 points, from 670 to 825. Alameda had progressed from the lowest performing school in the district, 24th out of 24 schools, to the 8th highest. The school made historic gains not just within the district but also in the State of California by being one of few schools on record in the state with such impressive gains in a single school year. Table 2 summarizes the increases and decreases in API scores from 2010 to 2011 for the other 23 elementary schools in Alameda's district.

Table 2
District Changes in Elementary School District API Rankings 2010 and 2011

Category	Number	Range	Mean	Median
Schools with Increased API Scores (not including Alameda Elementary)	13 Schools	2 to 73 Increase	28 Increase	31 Increase
Schools with Decreased API Scores	10 Schools	-1 to -105 Decrease	-28 Decrease	-17 Decrease

Note: The Academic Performance Index is a state term to determine a school's annual academic performance. The definition is tied to the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) [2001]. NCLB mandates every state to create an accountability system, each with its own set of standards and aligned benchmark assessments. In California, educators apply a five tier configuration: Far Below Basic, Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced, to classify a student's performance level on the California Standards Tests for the Academic Performance Index (API). Attached to each tier are cut points ranging from 150 to 600. The cut point for proficiency on the California Standards Tests in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics is 350 for grades 2 through 8. The number and percentage of items students must answer correctly to reach 350 varies from subject to subject and grade to grade. The Annual Performance Index summarizes a school's academic performance based on the number of students who advance from one cut point to another (California Department of Education, 2010-2011).

Leadership Practices

Analysis of data collected from observations, notes, meetings with the principal, the principal interview, and the teacher surveys suggested that principal leadership was the primary factor systematically contributing over the course of the year to the end-of-year increases in student achievement. Data analysis further suggested that the principal's leadership behaviors fell under themes corresponding with the three categories identified by Leithwood et al. (2004) as those leadership practices that most dramatically impact student achievement: (a) setting directions, (b) developing people, and (c) redesigning the organization to develop one that supports the performance of administrator, teachers, and students. Each theme will be addressed individually.

Setting directions. Principal Marcos Ferdinand had been promoted from vice principal of a middle school in X District to principal of Alameda School in June of 2010. Interview data documented that he established as his first task an assessment of the condition of the facilities and the physical appearance of the school. After district personnel painted the outside of the school in July 2010, Mr. Ferdinand coordinated a team of plant workers, parent and teacher volunteers, and friends to paint more than 50% of the classrooms and touch up the murals prior to the opening of school. He arranged the removal of e-waste and damaged furniture; floors were polished and landscaping improved. By the time students and teachers arrived in September, the physical appearance communicated that there was a leader in charge who cared about the appearance of the school and the quality of the working environment. Teacher survey responses confirmed that staff appreciated coming to work in this upgraded environment. Observation notes and data from the principal's culminating interview substantiated that this attention to the school and classroom environments was sustained throughout the year and that the principal continued to model leadership by picking up trash as he made his daily rounds of the campus.

The principal met with teachers and staff to develop the vision and establish the direction for the school. During the first school-wide meeting, administrators, teachers, custodians, and clerical staff discussed the vision and goals for the school. What emerged was a shared vision and goals for the year based on district policies and a set of core beliefs that represented the interests of all stakeholders. One core component, which became the school's cornerstone and driving force, was the belief that all students can achieve mastery of state standards in a school environment conducive to student learning. At the close of the collaborative meeting, the principal communicated that the school's vision would be revisited throughout the year to ensure that it continued to be reasonable and applicable and help school employees make sense of their responsibilities.

The principal also communicated to his teachers that he and two designated support teachers would spend much of their time in classrooms monitoring and modeling best instructional practices, assisting with individual students as requested, and providing side-by-side teaching services when appropriate. Data confirmed that these leadership activities were maintained throughout the school year.

Developing people. Leithwood et al.'s (2004) second category, developing people, was a focus of the principal's initial activities associated with setting goals and then continued as an ongoing emphasis for the remainder of the school year. Developing people included not only attention to the needs of teachers and staff but also attention to student needs. Support for teachers included specific feedback from daily classroom visits, side-by-side teaching, modeling instruction in classrooms, promotion of professional learning communities (PLCs), release time to observe other teachers on and off campus, and finding opportunities for teachers to participate in district level training. Principal Ferdinand believed that one of his main responsibilities as an educational leader was to observe classrooms and monitor the implementation of instructional programs. Accordingly, he developed a checklist, which helped him identify areas for praise and areas for growth and strove to provide teachers with feedback within 24 hours. He also required, in line with the district mandate, biweekly assessments for math and language arts in order to plan and drive future instruction. Likewise, twice monthly the principal, the instructional support team, and teachers would analyze the data and set goals. The researcher's notes and observations recorded those data, including California State test data, district quarterly benchmark assessments, and grade level biweekly common assessments, were being treated as transparent and that student data were posted in a data room for teachers to review in advance of their weekly meetings. An additional entry in the researcher's notes carries the observation that the support teacher's room was a data repository location where teachers were able to see how students were doing not only by name, but also by face.

To assist teachers with planning and collaboration, the principal committed to making time for professional learning communities as extolled by Defour, Defour, Eaker, and Karhenek (2004): "the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement" (p. xi). The principal not only provided weekly opportunities for the PLCs to meet but also allocated funding for teachers to meet after school and on weekends when needed.

For on-site professional development the principal invited outside trainers and presenters to the school to inform, model, observe, explain new programs, and coach alongside teachers. Additionally, he arranged for teachers to visit high performing schools with similar demographics, and he regularly accompanied the teacher or teachers on visits.

Support activities for students, many of which are discussed in the next section on redesign elements, also emerged from the school’s collection and assessment of data. Measurable goals were established for every student, and a student could be called in during the teacher data sessions in an effort to include the student as an active participant in the selection of appropriate interventions and support.

Redesigning the organization. From the beginning, Principal Ferdinand set about redesigning the organization of Alameda Elementary that supported the performance of all stakeholders, with the goal of having the teachers, staff, and students embrace the idea of being a community committed to sharing with and learning from each other. Early in the year, he met with teachers, cafeteria workers, and the custodial staff to design the instructional day and discuss the support structures necessary for student success. Meeting notes document that he appealed to his cafeteria and custodial staff to become partners in developing systems to ensure smooth operations and a clean and inviting environment.

Consistent with his commitment to modeling leadership, the principal maintained a presence in classrooms, providing assistance to students, sharing ideas with teachers, giving input, creating instructional charts, modeling lessons, or learning from teachers. Additionally, the principal had his own group of students that he tutored, and he came in on Saturdays to work alongside the teachers in Saturday Academy, a program created to support struggling students in reading and math.

During his initial summer, while directing the upgrade of the physical appearance of the school, Principal Ferdinand had examined fall student and teacher placement. He subsequently reassigned only one teacher, but discovered students with chronic records of suspensions and reassigned those students to teachers known for their rigorous instruction, high expectations for their students, and highly-structured classrooms.

Upon discovering that only 25% of the entire student body was proficient in reading (see Table 3), he led a redesign of the core instructional program to include daily guided-reading in a highly structured environment, instructional reading workshops, and Accelerated Readers. He also added a comprehensive Response to Intervention [RtI] program (Horowitz, 2005) implemented four days a week during regular school hours to provide an intensive reading support safety net for 100 students considered *at-risk*. Data from the California Department of Education (2011) confirmed that proficiency rose from 25% to 49% for English Language Arts within this one-year period, and from 52% to 73% for proficiency in mathematics (see Table 3).

Table 3
*Alameda Student Performance on State Test (2010, 2011)**

California Content Standards Test Component	Percent of students proficient or advanced in English Language Arts	Percent of students proficient or advanced in Mathematics
2010 Test Year	25%	52%
2011 Test Year	49%	73%

*(California Department of Education, 2011)

In response to staff recommendations, the principal implemented cyclical reviews of State standards, standards-based supplementary instructional programs, Saturday and after school programs, and dedicated resources such as software tutorials in order to enhance instruction and target the standards in a more strategic way.

Summation of Findings

Analysis of data from research meetings, observations, notes, the principal's culminating interview, the teacher open-ended survey, California State test data, district quarterly benchmark assessments, and grade level bi-weekly common assessments confirmed that Alameda Elementary achieved notable academic improvement within a one year period as measured by standardized tests. In their culminating interview, the researcher and Principal Ferdinand identified the following principal characteristics that supported the leadership activities and that they believed were important contributions to Alameda's academic achievement:

1. Acknowledging that you are responsible for every child entrusted to you
2. Assuming responsibility for the successes or failure of the school
3. Being thankful for your job and the responsibility others have placed on you
4. Being a servant leader: leading by example, rolling up your sleeves, and being in the trenches with the troops (being the first to tutor and lead Saturday school)
5. Inspiring others to strive for more through words and deeds
6. Providing the vision that it can be done (the nuts and bolts of CST growth), i.e., making the impossible conceivable
7. Meeting quarterly with teachers to analyze the progress of every child in their class and to discuss support specifically for every child by name
8. Staying focused on instruction
9. Listening to and considering the ideas of others
10. Recognizing that there is more than just one way and being open to multiple paths to success
11. Admitting that you do not have all the answers, but acknowledging that together you can figure it out
12. Spending most of your time in classrooms, where the action is
13. Showing that failure is not an option, but risk taking and falls along the way are okay and part of growth.

Analysis of responses to the teachers' open-ended survey indicated that teachers credited the principal with providing the vision and the leadership to create a supportive and inclusive climate that led to Alameda's success. Typical of the open-ended responses was the following comment from Teacher C: "The key was that the person in charge of the school connected with everyone and gained everyone's trust. It became a pleasure to come and take part of the movement that was evident to succeed." This observation is consistent with the components of effective leadership cited in research findings by Marzano et al. (2005), Robinson et al. (2008), and Leithwood et al. (2004).

DISCUSSION

The previous sections presented the positive findings from a year-long study of a principal implementing leadership-driven activities to improve student achievement scores at one school site. The researcher initiated this study with the intention of documenting successful leadership practices in order to create a timetable of leadership activities that could be implemented at other sites and lead to student improvement at those sites. As the leadership coach for Principal Ferdinand, the researcher observed that this particular principal was purposeful and resolute regarding setting the direction for the school community and staying the course. He firmly believed that the only way to improve student achievement was through developing and empowering all adults in his building. He provided resources, training, and personal support. He removed barriers to success by empowering adults, removing structures and positions that did not seem to significantly impact student achievement and replacing them with others such as data structures that included a data room; quarterly data conferences between individual teachers the principal, and instructional support team; and sacred times for professional learning communities to grow and focus on learning.

Tables 4, 5 and 6 present an overview of Principal Ferdinand’s leadership activities and timelines that the researcher observed during this study. The activities in Table 4, which occurred over the first summer and prior to the beginning of the academic year, correspond to Leithwood et al.’s (2004) first category: Setting directions.

Table 4
Principal’s Leadership Activities: Setting Directions

Timeframe	Activity
First Summer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess physical condition of school grounds, exterior & interior of building; contract for repairs & assemble team for volunteer work Assess teacher & student placement Invite ALL staff & parent leaders in for one-on-one meetings Reassign teachers & students as needed Request personnel/position changes as needed Assess availability of support structures, including student support, teacher support, and intervention programs
Prior to start of school year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hold school-wide meeting/planning session to gain stakeholder agreement on school vision and goals, set instructional day, structure support programs, & identify additional support structures that may be needed Commit to support PLCs, instructional planning time, & teacher needs

The activities in Table 5, which correspond to Leithwood et al.'s (2004) second category: Developing people, were pursued during the academic year.

Table 5
Principal's Leadership Activities: Developing People

Timeframe	Activity
Academic year	Visit classroom daily with support teacher(s) to observe, support, assist, model, & work with small groups of students Keep checklist in office of teachers' zones of proximal development & support needs (Vygotsky, 1978) Provide feedback to teachers within 24 hours of classroom visits Monitor physical condition of school Treat data as transparent & post for teacher access/action Conduct regularly scheduled school-wide meetings to reassess goals Meet regularly with teachers for data analysis & systematic review of student progress toward mastery of state standards Encourage student participation in decisions on intervention & support Insure adequate time & financial support for PLCs Arrange for teacher participation in district level training, bring trainers & outside resources to campus, encourage teacher visits to high-performing schools Serve as leadership model (pick up trash, tutor students, engage in school & extracurricular activities) Open the school and classrooms to other district educators for observation & feedback

The activities in Table 6, which were undertaken at the end of the academic year and during the second summer, correspond to Leithwood et al.'s (2004) third category: Redesigning the organization to develop one that supports the performance of administrators, teachers, and students.

Table 6
Principal's Leadership Activities: Redesigning the Organization

Timeframe	Activity
End of year	Holds school-wide meeting to revisit goals and review accomplishments
Second Summer	Meet with teachers to assess district and state data and celebrate successes

As the preceding sections demonstrate, the researcher's impression of the principal's yearlong leadership efforts was essentially positive; however, not all of the principal's efforts produced the results he desired. Principal Ferdinand initiated the school year believing that teachers should be able to work through their own disagreements without his intervening; by the end of the year he had learned that there would be times when he had to intervene to ensure that PLCs and adult working relationships remained healthy. He also had to learn when and how to initiate difficult conversations with people he admired.

The researcher believes that other principals can implement the leadership components identified in this study and offers the information in Tables 4, 5, and 6 as templates; however, she cautions that the success at Alameda Elementary should be viewed as a whole-school effort in which each component was important for the success of the entire effort. Even the teachers at Alameda became aware of the importance of a holistic approach, as explained by Teacher H:

When looking at the program elements and practices that led to success in the 2010-2011 school-year, it is important to remember that these elements were part of a whole system focused on success. In this sense, it would not be possible to pick out one specific program or practice and say "Ah ha! If we do this, our students will progress." I think that one of the reasons these programs and practices were so effective was because they functioned as a synergistic whole. (Teacher H, Teacher Survey Comment, 2011)

Other educational leaders wishing to create a positive and inclusive climate leading to stakeholder engagement and student improvement should assess the following at their school site: ability to improve exterior and interior physical environments; potential for cooperation from teachers, parents, and staff; resources to support professional learning communities, on-site trainings, and off-site visits; ability to gather, manage, and display data; ability to reassign teachers to different grades and students to different teachers; availability of resources for intervention programs, after-school activities, and Saturday school; level of support from the district office; principal time for modeling classroom participation, student tutoring, participation in academic interventions, providing individual feedback to teachers and staff, holding weekly, biweekly, and monthly meetings; and principal self-accountability.

The researcher also believes that the success of a leadership effort may be impacted by the presence or absence of a leadership coach. Throughout his initial year of implementing his leadership practices, Principal Ferdinand had the benefit of an experienced leadership coach who was able to offer perspectives based upon her training and experience and help guide the principal in reflection and interpretation.

Further research on highly successful schools using the components of the Leithwood et al. (2004) leadership sets is needed to determine the generalizability of this study. Undertaking such research is important. Unless we have principals committing holistically to proven leadership practices, we will have only pockets of high student achievement in schools and districts with school-wide and broad based student achievement remaining elusive.

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