Leadership White Paper

Defining the Problem and Purpose

Today’s school leaders face unprecedented challenges to deliver results. Current educational reform focuses on students successfully engaging with more rigorous curriculum standards and as a result, performing better on high-stakes assessments (Fullen, 2014). The tension to deliver positive results has placed significant pressure on principals. Over three-quarters of principals’ report their job has become too complicated. Nearly 9 out of 10 principals believe ultimately, the principal is accountable for everything that happens to students in school and 74% of teachers surveyed also agree (Strauss, 2013). Sadly, these statistics suggest principals and teachers alike have fallen victim to what Viviane Robinson (2011) refers to as the “heroic leadership trap” where people mistakenly “exaggerate the principal’s influence and importance and attribute more influence, power, and energy to leaders than is either reasonable or realistic” (p. 18).

There is no doubt there is a direct link between principal leadership and improved student outcomes; even though only a very small percentage of research studies have examined the impact of leadership on student outcomes (Grisom and Loeb 2013; Robinson, 2011; Marzano, Waters and McNulty, 2005; Cotton, 2003). Nonetheless, policy makers and professional associations across the country have taken notice of the direct relationship between leadership and improved student outcomes. A positive outcome given these findings is the shift from focusing on more abstract concepts about leadership styles to more operationally defined set of leadership practices commonly referred to in the literature as leadership “responsibilities,” “domains,” “behaviors,” and “practices.” A clearer definition of where to focus efforts allows leaders to consider the quality and frequency with which they engage in leadership behaviors that have demonstrated effect on improving student outcomes (Robinson, 2011). The challenge school leaders face is three-fold: (1) distributing leadership; (2) demonstrating the types of leadership practices to focus individual and collective efforts for improving student outcomes; (3) demonstrating the leadership competencies needed to engage in the leadership practices with good effect. The purpose of this white paper is to clearly define a “leader,” summarize the principal leadership literature, and identify critical features of leadership that will assist leaders in improving student outcomes.

Defining the “Leader”

The need to develop a purposeful community for all school staff to collectively maintain focus on priorities and then exercise leadership in supporting student outcomes is well documented in the literature as being necessary for both achieving outcomes and sustaining evidence-based practices that work (McIntosh, Predy, Upreti, Hume, Turri, Mathews, 2013). Unfortunately, embedded in this finding are two issues preventing people from fully embracing its potential: (1) a misunderstanding of what is meant by a “purposeful community;” and (2) misconceptions of the term “leadership.” Related to the first issue, the phrase “purposeful community” is used interchangeably with other terms commonly used within the literature such as; “collective culture of efficacy” (Fullan, 2014); or “developing group potential” (Garmston, 2012). People often associate those terms with positive relationships amongst staff members.
(including positive relationships with the principal) and wrongfully assume having positive working relationships with one another automatically translates to positive academic outcomes for students (Robinson, 2011). While it is important staff have positive working relationships with one another and with the school leader, the importance lies in strengthening those relationships through collectively doing the hard work of improving students outcomes. Subsequent sections of this white paper will continue to emphasize the important and integrated role of positive relationships connected to an intentional focus on leadership behaviors.

The second issue preventing people from embracing the potential positive impact of a purposeful community exercising their joint leadership in supporting student outcomes involves misconceptions of the term “leadership.” People commonly associate “leadership” with individuals who have formal authority over others. While, this is one source of leadership, it is a very narrow interpretation of the term and contains many misconceptions that must be dispelled (Robinson, 2011). “Leadership” in essence, is the ability to influence others. Doing so, there are a variety of sources of influence that are open to any individual to exert leadership. Things like expertise and relevant knowledge, character, and personality are a few examples of sources of influence. This means that leadership by its very nature can and should be distributed amongst a variety of individuals. Given this fact, the areas for leaders to focus attention outlined in the next section are applicable for anyone within a school who seeks to expand their source of leadership influence (e.g., teachers as leaders, principals, assistant principals).

**Focusing Leadership: Defining the “What”**

Over the past two decades, the emphasis on an “instructional leadership” theory ushered in a whole new wave of research with a focus of demonstrating the impact of leadership theory on improving student outcomes. Statistical methods such as meta-analysis, have been used to compute an overall average effect size of school leadership on improving student outcomes. Meta analyses have also further defined the effect sizes of specific leadership practices within the school leadership construct that have a positive effect on student outcomes. When interpreting an effect size there are no hard-fast rules in educational research (Robinson, 2011). Typically an effect size of .20 is usually considered small; .40 is considered moderate; and an effect of .60 and above is considered to be a large effect (Hattie, 2009).

Some of the unintended consequences of people’s interpretations of effect sizes have resulted in sweeping statements about which educational innovations (practices, programs, strategies, etc.) to consider implementing that fall above the thresholds for moderate (.40) and high (.60) effect sizes. While it is important to pay attention to innovations that have the greatest likelihood of resulting in high outcomes, researchers such as John Hattie have cautioned against completely ignoring innovations that fall in between the small (.20) to moderate (.40) range. Instead of ignoring those innovations completely, people are advised to take a closer look at whether the benefits for selecting innovations with small to moderate effects are worth the costs associated with implementation (Hattie, 2009). It is also important to note effect sizes across meta analyses will vary based on the number of research studies that met the researcher’s established criteria to be included in the analysis. Complicating matters, out of the thousands of research studies that focused on principal leadership only a scant amount of those studies were...
designed to analyze the relationship between principal leadership and student outcomes. This means, the effect sizes calculated for the school leadership construct and specific principal practices are based on a relative small number of studies compared to other educational innovations.

The meta-analysis conducted by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) was the first of its kind to calculate effect sizes for overall school leadership and specific leadership practices that they referred to as “leadership responsibilities.” They also conducted some additional statistical analyses to determine if there was a difference in the types of leadership responsibilities school principals needed to demonstrate more of, depending on how staff perceive the magnitude of the change they are working to implement. Marzano and his team found overall school leadership had an effect size of .25 on student achievement with effect sizes for each of the 21 leadership responsibilities ranging from .33 to .18. Although the ranges of these effect sizes are generally considered small, there is agreement from Marzano and his research team as well as others who have followed them, that the actions of school leaders improve teaching in ways that are reflected in improvements of student learning (Hattie, 2009; Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe 2008). Finally, Marzano and his team also concluded leaders should increase the frequency with which they demonstrate seven of the 21 leadership responsibilities if staff negatively perceive the change school is collectively working to implement.

Since Marzano, Waters, and McNulty’s work, several other bodies of research have emerged that shed greater light on areas principals need to attend to in order to improve student outcomes. Viviane Robinson’s research team has been the most notable as of late and is often cited by many who are considered leadership experts. Her research is also easily integrated with other frequently cited bodies of work that are commonly understood by practicing and future school leaders; including the newly revised Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards. Robinson’s meta-analysis delineates what leaders need to focus time and attention; referred to as the “Five Domains of Leadership.” It also teases out how leaders can successfully demonstrate each of the domains; referred to as the “Leadership Capabilities” and sheds light on how to distribute leadership practices across school staff. For all of these reasons, the meta-analysis conducted by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) is the primary source used to anchor the critical features of leadership outlined in this white paper for a few reasons.

Summary:

The past two decades have increasingly focused on whether leaders make a difference in improving student outcomes. Fortunately, we now know considerably more about what leadership practices make the most difference for student outcomes, who can and should demonstrate them beyond the school leader, and what competencies are needed to demonstrate the practices with good effect (Robinson, 2011; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins, 2006; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004). For these reasons, the critical features of leadership that have been identified are intentionally organized into three areas: (1) Leadership Practices (What), (2) Leadership Competencies (How), and (3) Responsibility for Leadership (Who). Although there are eight critical features for leadership, they are very interconnected. Selecting some over others
for the sake of reducing the number of critical features would likely misrepresent the body of research from experts in the field. The critical features of leadership include:

**Responsibility for Leadership: “Who”**
1. **Distribute leadership:** All teachers have a responsibility to demonstrate instructional leadership outside of their own classrooms to ensure high quality teaching and learning for improving student outcomes. Everyone needs to have a minimal level of knowledge about the leadership practices (“what”) and the leadership competencies (“how”) with principals needing to focus their efforts more heavily on some of the practices and competencies over others. Team structures like School Leadership Teams, Grade-Level Teams, and Cross-Department Teams lend themselves to distributing leadership responsibilities; as do the identification of key staff such as, school-level coaches or department chairs to assist principals with the coordination of the instructional program and data analysis.

**Leadership Practices: “What”**
2. **Establish priorities and defined goals:** Relevant data are analyzed to identify priorities and monitor progress on achieving the priorities. Consensus is developed for the priorities. Leaders assess people’s capacity to achieve the priorities to determine if the goals that will be collectively developed will be a *learning goal*, focused on staff learning how to what will be implemented to address the priority or a *performance goal*, focused on the achievement of the outcome. Regardless of the type, goals need to written so they are specific, measureable, attainable, realistic, and timely (S.M.A.R.T.) Consensus needs to be built around attaining the goals, and they need to be communicated to all individuals and groups who have a stake in achieving the goals. Relevant data are frequently analyzed to monitor progress on attaining the goals and adjusted accordingly. Whenever possible, priorities and goals should be integrated into the school improvement process to avoid the perception of parallel plans that are both focused on similar outcomes.
3. **Align existing resources to priorities:** Existing resources (e.g., time, personnel, materials, and money) are allocated to support the attainment of the priorities and goals. Careful analysis of whether resources like programs and materials were designed to: address the priorities, align with existing implementation efforts, and the resources also are adequate to implement as intended; have empirical evidence demonstrating good effect in multiple implementation sites with similar school demographic characteristics; include access to expert technical assistance / implementation support; and staff capacity to implement the resources can be developed and measured through collectively establishing performance goals.
4. **Coordinate instructional program:** The leader monitors the core components that are instrumental to the instructional programs or practices identified to address the priorities and goals to: (1) manage risks that might threaten collective implementation efforts; (2) opportunities for strengthening implementation effects; (3) resource allocation (4) and gather fidelity data and student outcome data for the staff who are supporting the
attainment of school-wide priorities to review to help determine the impact of implementation efforts.

5. **Lead teacher learning:** High quality professional learning opportunities are provided to staff to develop their capacity to implement the evidence-based programs, practice, or initiatives that have been selected to address the priorities and goals. The professional learning sessions provide worthwhile content that is designed to provide teachers with a combination of theory and practice relative to what they are being asked to return to the classroom to implement. The school leader participates with teachers in professional learning to understand the core components of the program being implemented, anticipate potential challenges, and develop proactive strategies to eliminate or reduce the potential challenges implementer’s will experience.

**Leadership Competencies: “How”**

6. **Acquire and apply important knowledge:** Acquire current information (e.g., research on evidence-based practices, programs, instructional methods, understanding of assessment data) in an on-going way from individuals and / or resources with expertise in the subject area who are either internal to the school / district or from an outside agency. Apply this knowledge when making decisions such as, resource allocation and selection.

7. **Solve complex problems:** variety of problems resulting from program / practice implementation challenges (e.g., resource issues, staff perceptions) that require the leader to: (1) understand the core features (requirements) of the program, practice, or initiative; (2) listen intently to staff comments and statements of concern; (2) create a solution that as much as possible will both satisfy the program, practice core features and under scrutiny, will still be considered a valid and reasonable solution.

   a. **Program / practice implementation challenge example:** School has decided to intentionally provide stakeholders (district, board of education, families), a student assessment data report twice per year. The core feature of this initiative is on-going communication of collective school progress. The principal listens to staff comments and statements of concern: e.g., “These data reports will be used punish teachers.” The solution the principal develops that will still satisfy the core features of the initiative is: “protect teachers from any misuse of the data report by making sure the school interprets the data and shapes the message around the data report.”

8. **Address personnel issues while maintaining trust:** Four qualities are at the core of relational trust: (1) valuing the ideas of others; (2) caring about the personal and professional lives of colleagues / coworkers; (3) care about people’s competence; (4) maintain high integrity by following through on commitments. Leaders should tackle tough issues while still being able to maintain trust through an open-to-learning approach. The goal is to gather valid information from the seemingly resistant staff as opposed to making assumptions without trying to validate if the leader’s assumptions are correct. The steps the leader takes for engaging staff in an open-to-learning dialogue (Robinson, 2011) include:

   o Describe point of view without making an assumption it is truth (“I am not sure if I am right about this, but I was worried when _____”)
- Describe the basis for the point of view ("My reasons for being worried were ____.")
- Ask for the other person’s point of view ("Do you see things differently?")
- Paraphrase after hearing their point of view to check for accuracy in understanding ("I heard ____ things based on what you said. Did I capture those things well?")
- Listen for and check important assumptions (e.g., "What would be an example of that?")
- Find common ground ("We both define the problem the same and seem to want to address it differently.")
- Make a plan to try to get a solution that would satisfy both parties ("How would you like to learn more about this particular strategy, program, or practice?")
References


