

Many hands improve leadership

Without leadership, systems flounder. Genuine leadership is not about a particular person in a particular role. Rather, leadership is the process of influencing others to be their very best, to work in concert to accomplish goals to improve the system, and to ensure all members of the organization are appreciated for their efforts. Influence such as this occurs when individuals leverage their beliefs and behaviors to support others to accomplish goals to advance the organization.

However, a common myth about leadership, particularly within schools, is that only one person can be the leader — the principal. It is true that principals are legally responsible for their schools, the staff, and students. Yet it takes leadership in the hands of many rather than an elite few to ensure that the school will continue to meet the needs of its students and community.

When leadership reaches beyond the main office of a school, deep and sustained change can occur. Leaders can act more quickly to identify and address problems. They motivate, engage, challenge, and appreciate others' efforts. Leaders keep energy and effort focused on clear goals and provide markers for assessing progress. Leaders build a culture within which people commit to examining their own practice and to refining it. Leaders hold others accountable and responsible.

Schools with strong leadership, not just strong leaders, are places within which individuals work independently and interdependently to achieve defined

goals and advocate for one another. Within such schools, a high degree of trust exists because leaders' actions align with their words. Integrity and trustworthiness are hallmarks of leaders who are able to influence others.

Schools have both formal and informal leaders, as well as visible and invisible leaders. Formal leaders are those who have titles such as principal, assistant principal, and department chair. Informal leaders are members without titles or formal authority whose actions guide others. Visible leaders are those who take a stance publicly for a cause, an action, or a goal.

It is the invisible leaders whose actions serve as models for others that can sometimes be the most compelling influencers within a school. It is the teacher who interrupts the conversation in which teachers are complaining about students' lack of motivation with the question, "What would teaching look like if students were motivated?" It is the teacher who sees a struggling student and takes 10 minutes to talk with the student after school or at lunch. It is the teacher who provides some encouragement to a colleague at the end of a challenging day or week.

Some worry that an organization with too many leaders will be in chaos. Yet when those leaders share a common vision for student success, have clear goals and indicators of progress, and take time to reflect on where they are and how to adjust or refine their work, the organization is



Joellen Killion is deputy executive director of the National Staff Development Council.

LEADERSHIP

Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.

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better equipped to achieve its goals. It is, after all, the leaders who worry about results, who commit endless effort, and who have clarity about how to achieve the defined results.

What if every adult within a school were a leader? What would be the consequences and advantages? The advantages would far outweigh consequences. Energy would be high, people committed, and results would be increasing exponentially. People would take initiative. Issues would be addressed before they became problems. Staff members would encourage one another. High degrees of trust would exist. Within that kind of environment, people would be more comfortable experimenting with alternative practices to find those that work best.

The potential consequence is chaos, and that potential is significant if staff do not share a vision and goals. In schools, leaders ensure that those within a community have opportunities to contribute to developing the vision and goals for the school. When teachers within the school have an active and purposeful role in the process used to create the vision that specifies what the school strives to become and the goals that identify measurable markers toward that vision, they assume collective responsibility for realizing the vision and achieving the goals.

Teacher leadership is particularly important to schools' success. However, if teacher leadership continues old paradigms of leadership by placing leadership in the hands of a few, it will do little to change the culture within schools. York-Barr and Duke (2004), in a comprehensive review of the literature on teacher leadership, posit that teacher leadership is "the process by which teachers, individually or collectively, influence their colleagues, principals, and other mem-

bers of the school community to improve teaching and learning practices with the aim of increasing student learning and achievement" (pp. 287-288). In their literature review, they identify four benefits of teacher leadership, particularly when those leadership efforts are focused more intentionally on the classroom rather than the organizational level. Benefits include increased teacher participation, increased and shared expertise about teaching and learning, greater opportunity for accomplished teachers to receive recognition and undertake additional professional challenges, and increased student learning.

Teacher leadership influences teachers' sense of professionalism, including their empowerment, commitment, and view of their work as a profession rather than a job, say Killion & Harrison (2006). "In addition, teacher leadership influences the school's culture, including the degree to which teachers engage in collegial professional learning and have a strong sense of internal accountability" (pp.17-18).

Leadership matters. Schools filled with leaders who have developed a shared vision and goals have greater potential for exponential change and sustained improvement than schools led by a single leader.

References

Killion, J. & Harrison, C. (2006). *Taking the lead: New roles for teachers and school-based coaches.* Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

York-Barr, J. & Duke, K. (2004). What do we know about teacher leadership? Findings from two decades of scholarship. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(3), 255-316. ◆

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