



TEACHERS RALLY AROUND WRITING

SHARED LEADERSHIP TRANSFORMS LOW-PERFORMING COLORADO ELEMENTARY

By Dana Frazee, Kay Frunzi, and Heather Hein

Emerging leaders across the country accept principal positions with courage and conviction about what’s right for their teachers and their students, and they quickly learn that the task at hand cannot be accomplished alone.

To improve the quality of instruction and the achievement of all students, effective school leaders

“develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning,” according to the Leadership standard of Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). Creating a team of teachers to share leadership — a dynamic process of mutual influence, responsibility, and accountability for achieving collective goals — is essential.

This was the task of a first-time principal and his staff

at Sedalia Elementary in Sedalia, Colo., south of Denver. Situated in Douglas County, a flourishing, mostly suburban area with one of the highest-performing and wealthiest school districts in the country, Sedalia Elementary faces challenges most of its peer schools don't: A third of its students in 2010 received free/reduced lunch, a quarter were English language learners (ELLs), and the mobility rate was higher than average. In 2010, the school scored below the district average across the board, and at or below the state average in grades 3-6.



George Boser

Teachers at Sedalia kept to themselves and did things their own way. They are dedicated to their students and work hard, but until recently, they hadn't been focused as a staff and didn't hold themselves accountable for how well — or poorly —

their students perform.

All of that changed when George Boser became principal in 2010. Intent on making a difference, Boser accepted the position because it was a low-performing school where achievement was stagnating for some students.

He brought with him strong beliefs about school improvement and an ambitious plan for how to do it: He planned to get to the root causes of the achievement gap at Sedalia, and then make the necessary changes in a sys-

tematic and systemic way. He wanted to transform the culture of the school into one of high expectations and shared responsibility, aligning all professional learning to a continuous improvement process.

First, Boser had to convince staff the importance of sharing leadership — and that they, not the students, needed to change. “To continue teaching the same way while expecting student achievement to improve is not feasible,” he told them.

SHARING LEADERSHIP

Boser asked teachers about their hopes and dreams for students. Together, they identified barriers to achievement progress and then categorized concerns and challenges into three types: school processes, perceptions, and student learning. Examples included everything from lack of student motivation and cultural awareness to inconsistent instructional strategies and a large number of individualized educational plans.

Boser asked staff to think about addressing these barriers with questions such as: How are we going to align instructional practices with our goals? How can we hold high expectations for all students and for one another? How will we effectively work with our growing ELL population?

The next step was to assemble a leadership team — something Sedalia hadn't had before. Boser believed in fostering the strengths of the staff in order to develop a



Sedalia Elementary School
 Sedalia, Colo.
 Grades: **K-6**
 Enrollment: **274**
 Staff: **42**
 Racial/ethnic mix of students:
 White: **62.2%**
 Nonwhite: **36.8%**
 Limited English proficient: **19%**
 Languages spoken: **English, Spanish**
 Free/reduced lunch: **50%**
 Special education: **14%**
 Mobility rate: **31%**
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Sedalia Elementary School in Sedalia, Colo., experienced a revolution in leadership from traditional to shared.

TRADITIONAL VS. SHARED LEADERSHIP

TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP	SHARED LEADERSHIP
Leadership is defined by position. The principal is the leader.	Leadership is defined by people’s acceptance of mutual responsibility and accountability. People take on leadership roles, depending on the situation and their strengths.
The leader solves problems and provides answers for others.	People work together to solve problems, find answers, and improve results.
The leader is seen as independent of followers. There is an emphasis on the differences between leaders and followers in terms of skills and other characteristics.	There is a sense of interdependence and recognition that all staff members have strengths and expertise that contribute to their leadership ability.
Communication tends to be formal and focuses on transmitting information from the leader to followers. Information flow is often restricted.	Communication is two-way and focused on developing shared meaning. There is an emphasis on open and honest communication and free flow of information.
The leader develops the vision; others must buy into it.	Everyone is responsible for promoting a common sense of purpose and a focus on collective goals.
The leader may or may not solicit input, depending on the situation, before making a decision. The leader bears responsibility for all major decisions.	Decision-making processes are clearly defined. Those affected by a decision are involved in making it. Everyone has a stake in making effective decisions and producing positive outcomes.
The leader is responsible for leading and managing change initiatives and their effects on stakeholders.	The leader is responsible for leading and managing change initiatives and their effects on stakeholders.
The leader monitors the quality and results of instruction.	Everyone shares responsibility for collaboratively monitoring the quality and results of instruction.

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can-do attitude toward achievement, and he wanted the leadership team to reflect that belief.

The first step in developing shared leadership is to identify a process and criteria to select a school team that represents the rest of the school staff. This ensures that the leadership team members are highly respected in the school and have the capacity to lead. Teams are generally multigenerational and reflective of a school’s cultural makeup, usually with a cross-section of experience and skill level.

The school improvement leadership team at Sedalia included one teacher from each grade level, a special education teacher, an ESL teacher, and a librarian-teacher. Having a teacher from each grade made the team unusually large, but the concept of shared leadership was unusual for Sedalia, whose independent teachers were comfortable with traditional leadership roles and were skeptical of the concept of shared leadership (see table above).

FINDING THE RIGHT MODEL

To harness the talents of his novice leadership team and make teacher-led change a reality, Boser realized he would need the right structures and processes to guide them.

Boser selected a continuous improvement model, Success in Sight, developed by McREL, a nonprofit education research, development, and service organization based in Denver. Sedalia became a demonstration school for Success in Sight, and professional learning led by a McREL consultant began in August 2010.

First, the group clearly defined the leadership team’s roles and responsibilities. The team’s primary role was to lead the school forward in student achievement, and team members were responsible for leading the development, implementation, and monitoring of the school improvement plan.

Using this plan as a guide, the team was to lead the staff in carrying out manageable improvement initiatives that would improve educator effectiveness and student results immediately

and lead to larger, more significant change initiatives over time.

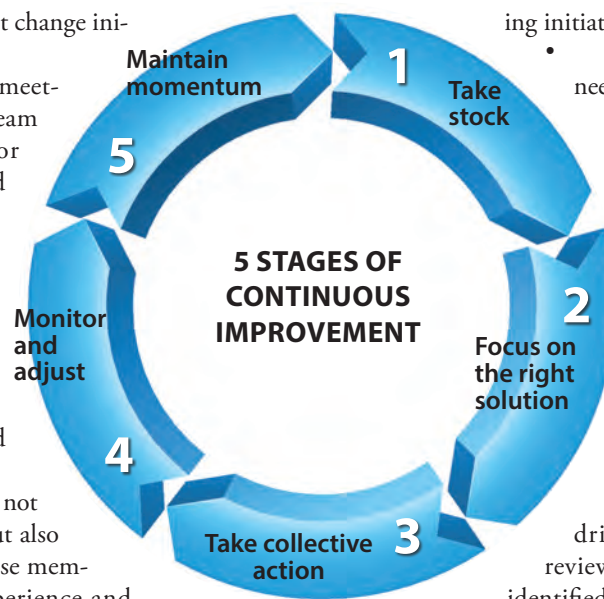
At one of the group’s initial meetings, Boser and the leadership team developed operating norms for meetings. These norms helped develop members’ expertise in working together and building shared vision for collective action. While such operating procedures are nothing new, they are more flexible than norms of the past — teams regularly monitor and adjust them as needed around commonly understood terms.

Norms are particularly helpful not only for novice teacher leaders but also for multigenerational teams, whose members have differing levels of experience and expertise. For example, if one norm is “we always respect each other,” the team discusses exactly what that means and what actions demonstrate respect and disrespect as well as what happens if the norm is not honored. Such a discussion may lead to a larger discussion about checking assumptions and how that applies to other norms.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The continuous improvement process that the Sedalia team adopted includes structured professional learning, site-based leadership team development, and staff development — while at the same time identifying and solving instructional issues identified by student, staff, and district data. The process guides all school improvement initiatives and includes the following components:

- Use data to identify areas for improvement;
- Establish school goals for achievement;
- Align professional learning with goals;
- Take collective action by implementing targeted learn-



ing initiatives; and

- Monitor and adjust initiatives as needed.

Each improvement initiative follows five stages: Take stock, focus on the right solution, take collective action, monitor and adjust, and maintain momentum.

The leadership team applied this process to a manageable, systemic improvement experience that includes all the parts of a major school improvement initiative.

1. Take stock.

The leadership team used a data-driven decision-making process to review the school’s assessment data and identified the area of most pressing need for improvement. The team identified writing as the area it wanted to address and set a nine-week timeline with schoolwide and grade-level measurable goals for writing achievement.

2. Focus on the right solution.

The leadership team identified and prioritized possible causes for students’ writing problems. Team members brainstormed strategies to address the problem. After researching the best models available, the group chose the Writing Workshop method of instruction and focused its first initiative on helping students improve word choice in their writing.

3. Take collective action.

The leadership team developed a comprehensive plan to implement its strategy for helping students improve word choice in their writing. The team used specific steps in teaching academic vocabulary, identified as Tier 2 in the Common Core State Standards, and made an implementation timeline.

10 STEPS FOR INITIATING SHARED LEADERSHIP

1. Assemble a representative team of teachers and support staff as your leadership team.
2. Decide on the team’s key areas of responsibilities.
3. Set norms for working together.
4. Decide how the team will make decisions.

5. Schedule team meeting dates.
6. Establish roles for each meeting: facilitator, timekeeper, recorder, and process observer.
7. Use an agenda template that includes: the team’s norms, the team’s responsibilities, the meeting roles, and outcomes for the meeting.
8. Use a timed agenda.

9. Set up a communication chain: Each team member is responsible for communicating to a certain group of staff members all the decisions made in the meeting and for seeking input from that same group for future agenda items.
10. As a team, present all the decisions made in steps 1-9 to the entire staff.

To ensure schoolwide buy-in, the team planned how to involve the entire staff in developing and agreeing on the implementation plan.

Recognizing the need to support staff in teaching academic vocabulary explicitly and with fidelity, team members asked the McREL consultant to provide professional learning on research-based vocabulary instruction. Then they taught the rest of the staff what they learned during professional development days. This train-the-trainer model empowered the team in leading initiatives and sustaining change.

“The best professional development is that which shows teachers how to effectively make a change or implement a strategy and what the change or strategy actually looks like in the classroom,” said Boser. “Who is better to do that than those who teach in your school to your students?”

4. Monitor and adjust.

As teachers began implementing the model, the leadership team conducted walk-throughs and collected observational data on which components of vocabulary instruction the teachers were doing well and ones they needed to reteach to ensure fidelity and consistency. Team members also videotaped themselves using the model so staff could discuss the practices in the video to improve their instruction.

The leadership team collaborated with staff to create writing rubrics based on the Common Core State Standards. Schoolwide writing assessments were put in place to help monitor student progress, and teachers came together to score writing prompt tasks, focusing their scoring on word choice.

5. Maintain momentum.

Based on internal school writing prompt data, students’ word choice skills increased, generating a quick win for everyone. “I have learned how powerful it is to be aligned as a school community,” said leadership team member Emmie Rooney, a 2nd-grade teacher. “Nothing works in isolation — no more closing our doors and having a ‘this works for me’ attitude,” she said.

At the end of the nine-week timeline, the leadership team celebrated with the staff for their collective efforts in meeting the goal. The leadership team led staff members in planning how they would sustain the word choice writing initiative.

Teachers saw that even minor changes in how they taught improved student achievement significantly, which helped them feel more confident about what students were capable of learning and motivated them to continue the changes in their teaching. Other team members echoed Rooney:

- From a 3rd-grade teacher: “Private practice needs to be a way of the past. We need to evaluate what about us is of value to keep and what needs to change.”
- From a 5th-grade teacher: “This continuous improvement model has allowed fellow educators to begin to clarify the

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— George Boser

importance and effectiveness of research-based pedagogical approaches and alignment of expectations and common language to positively impact the learning of children.”

- From an ELL teacher: “I have developed a much greater respect for and understanding of the process of analyzing and interpreting data and using such data as a tool to implement research-based instructional strategies within the classroom.”

RESULTS FOR STUDENTS

Student results demonstrate the impact of shared leadership. In one year, students in grades 4-6 showed improvement in their proficient or advanced scores on the state writing assessment. For 4th graders, scores increased from 44% to 51%; for 5th graders, from 56% to 64%; and for 6th graders, from 53% to 72%.

The leadership team continues to learn how to monitor the implementation and effectiveness of improvement strategies, and the staff continues to implement writing initiatives. Three years after Boser became principal, professional learning, shared leadership, and continuous improvement have become part of daily life at Sedalia.

“We now believe we can and will get better,” said Boser. “We’ve come together as a purposeful community focused on achievement, which allows us to move from being individually good to collectively great.”

The school plans improvement initiatives in research-based instructional strategies and strategies specific to English language learners and literacy in the content areas. By sharing leadership for continuous improvement, high expectations, and shared responsibility for student achievement, Sedalia is well on its way to becoming the kind of school its principal and teachers want it to be.

REFERENCE

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Author.

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