

# A VIVID ILLUSTRATION *of* LEADERSHIP

## PRINCIPAL'S ACTIONS PROPEL STRUGGLING SCHOOL'S TURNAROUND

By Stephanie Dodman

**S**chool leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning, according to Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins (2008, p. 28). Research makes clear that leadership must be at the forefront when attempting to reform underachieving schools.

The question is: What kind of leadership? Not just any type of principal leadership will suffice for schools striving to build the instructional capacity necessary for student achievement. Rather, leadership that simultaneously leads a school forward while distributing power throughout the faculty is considered the path to creating not only a successful school as measured by achievement tests but also a learning organization. In a learning organization, stakeholders “assume internal responsibility for reform and maintain momentum for self-renewal” (Lambert, 1998, p. 3). School improvement becomes the job of vested insiders rather than outside experts.

When I studied a high-needs, high-poverty school that had made remarkable improvements in student achievement, I found the relationship between leadership, classroom teaching, and learning to be illustrated in vivid color. For this school, enhanced student achievement relied on leadership rather than better test preparation or a new curriculum.





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Principal leadership was the catalyst for an entire school transforming who they were and what they did. So what did this leadership look like in action? How did a school with limited internal capacity transform into a success when so many other schools have been unable to do so? What follows offers a glimpse into some of the steps a first-year principal took to turn his school into an organization that valued learning and embraced change.

### **THE CONTEXT**

Determined to document how underachieving high-needs schools improve, an area of surprisingly little research, I conducted a case study of one high-poverty, chronically underachieving elementary school. This school experienced great transformation in school culture and subsequently in student achievement.

The faculty of this school told a story of change that traced back two years to the assignment of a new principal. The principal leadership of the school exhibited characteristics aligned with those of Learning Forward's Leadership standard: developing capacity for learning and leading, advocating for professional learning, and creating support systems and structures. The work spurred by this principal's leadership resulted in the school achieving Adequate Yearly Progress for all student groups for the first time in the school's history.

### **IN THE BEGINNING**

It's important to understand the school context that the principal entered. Teachers who had been there for years were disconnected from the administration, and the administration had distanced itself from the teachers and students. There was a deep sense of complacency among the faculty as a whole in terms of their instruction. Those that naturally exhibited strong instructional practices and sought out opportunities for learning continued doing so. Those that did not already have such tendencies or skills did not develop them.

The principal described how "best practices ... such as the architecture of the minilesson weren't there [when I entered the school]. Teaching points weren't there. ... Flow of the day was not there. ... Differentiating instruction wasn't there. Some of those key practices that good teachers do weren't happening." He said he saw multiple opportunities for instruction that were wasted throughout the day. Teachers said that their approach to instruction was more moment-by-moment than intentional.

## LEADERSHIP ACTIONS

### Establish an urgent, common goal.

Coming aboard, the principal saw areas to address immediately. The first was to establish a sense of urgency. There was no evident urgency to the school's work, which seemed to hinder the staff in moving forward and contributed to their complacent teaching and learning behaviors. The principal used the school's stagnant achievement and assignment in the state's accountability scheme to bind them all together in a common goal for students.

The sense of urgency imposed on the school to meet AYP to avoid restructuring left no time to be wasted by excuses. Teachers had to meet students' needs, and they had to do it now. Participants indicated that if it were not for this common goal established so early in the principal's tenure, there might have been a great deal more resistance to his leadership. Setting a goal and posing a question to teachers — what can we do to move forward? — were crucial.

### Create relationships and establish instructional accountability.

Binding the staff together in a goal would not have been as effective if the principal had not also mobilized school leaders and established a like-minded leadership team of teachers and coaches who were influential among staff. "I surrounded myself with people who thought the way I thought, who wanted to work the way I work and move [us] forward," the principal said. "... I'm not going to surround myself with individuals who are negative or aren't team players or that [don't have] the best interests of kids at heart."

To learn who these individuals were, the principal immediately embedded himself in the life of the school. He was in classrooms, he was talking with students, and he was looking at student learning data. In a very short time, he learned the social dynamics of the school and the instructional practices of the teachers.

Knowledge of the faculty, however, was a means rather than an end. With this knowledge, the principal was able to establish expectations for instruction, most of which were district expectations that should have been in place long before. Because he was in classrooms so frequently and had such an influential leadership team with strong classroom ties, he knew when expectations were being fulfilled and when they were not, and he knew when teachers were struggling in certain areas.

### Use instructional knowledge for teacher learning.

Instructional accountability also created opportunities for professional learning. Participants noted the principal's practice of arranging professional learning based on what he had observed in classrooms and heard in grade-level meetings. Approaching the assistant principal or instructional coaches to ar-

range professional learning between teachers was commonplace. These included teacher-to-teacher observations and teacher-led professional learning. In fact, the master school schedule was arranged to maximize opportunities for peer observations.

The principal also trusted teachers to direct their own professional learning. When teachers had ideas for new instructional practices, he trusted in their abilities to make sound decisions for their students. One teacher said, "[The principal] said to me, 'I trust you as a teacher. I trust your judgment. If you need to veer from the pacing guide and you don't want to use your textbook and you think you can come up with better ways to teach your kids, go for it.'" This empowerment to change was always tied to data. The leadership team expected that teachers' new learning would be evident in new instructional practices and that the effects would be seen in student learning data.

### Use problems to build a community.

Pedagogical problems became the catalyst for building community among teachers. The leadership team redefined professional learning communities to focus on response to intervention. Administration and instructional coaches reviewed assessment data to find trends and outliers across a grade level. They then presented those findings to a professional learning community and solicited help from teachers. Teachers shared student data and relied on peer teachers and coaches for expert advice. The shared commitment to the learning of all students meant that faculty opened their classrooms to share data, problems, and successes. Student learning became everyone's responsibility, not just the responsibility of one assigned teacher.

One participant said, "I would say, 'I've tapped into everything I have got. Who has something else that they can give me? What can we [do]?' It was empowering in a way because I knew I was going to the experts at my school to help me. It wasn't just finding a program or putting them on a computer for x amount of minutes. I had my colleagues and my coaches saying, 'What about if I take [your student] and help him?'"

Fullan (2010) discusses this phenomenon in terms of "positive pressure," where transparent work and data analysis within a community of peers capitalize on peer pressure. As part of this internal accountability strategy, outcome data are not used punitively, but rather to identify "causal relationships between particular instructional actions and specific student engagement and learning" (p. 125). This is exactly what this school demonstrated. The leadership's "driven by data" approach within communities of learners created conditions of positive pressure, collective responsibility, and continuous problem posing that enabled teachers to strengthen their teaching.

### Take advantage of externally imposed initiatives.

Schools do not operate independent of a larger policy con-

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The Greece Professional Learning Center will continue to engage its policy board in evaluating professional learning and use a similar collaborative process to evaluate other types of professional learning, such as conferences and individualized job-embedded learning (i.e. peer coaching). The center has also shared its process at a statewide level to empower other Teacher Centers to analyze their data.

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## A vivid illustration of leadership

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text, and, as a result, this principal found himself having to lead his faculty in implementing several concurrent initiatives, some already in place and others just beginning. Response to intervention, Reading First, a partnership with a state university, and local district programs were just a few of the many initiatives needing to be implemented.

Leaders took advantage of the response to intervention model to build teacher community and professional accountability for student learning. Another initiative also stood out as especially noteworthy. The partnership with a state university allowed teachers at the school to attend graduate school with no tuition cost. The Teacher Leadership for School Improvement program at the University of Florida is an online graduate program for practicing teachers and administrators.

The program's courses included work focused on the dynamics of change. The principal said this involvement had a marked impact on his decisions, and other participants agreed that the communal involvement resulted in frequent use of program learning in school and team decisions. Five teachers and coaches participated. The shared professional learning by this group enabled stronger and quicker adoption of shared vision than perhaps could have occurred otherwise. It also created a model for continuous learning. The principal wasn't merely advocating for professional learning for teachers. He was participating, too.

## LEARN HOW TO CHANGE

While it was clear in the study that change was a whole-school effort, it would not have happened without the leadership of the principal. His leadership actions pushed teachers harder, raised pedagogical expectations, and illuminated new possibilities for teacher leadership.

If educators are serious about improving schools, they

could learn a lot from the work of principals like this. Learning Forward's Leadership standard is exemplified in such work, and it provides an example of how to help new principals in high-needs schools enact meaningful change and cultivate an organization focused on learning — for students and teachers.

While leadership is certainly more than just a principal, the importance of the principal's actions for student learning is striking. The principal of this high-poverty school shows that what is necessary for real improvement is to not just go through the motions (Baldrige & Deal, 1983; Fink & Stoll, 2005) but rather focus on developing the capacity to actually learn how to change.

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