LEADERSHIP

Support and structures make the difference for educators and students

By Kyla L. Wahlstrom and Jennifer York-Barr

"Everyone has a stake in the education of our children … [and] people who work in schools and people who study schools know that leadership makes a difference" (Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010, p. 32).

The critical role that leadership plays in student learning is documented in a six-year research study funded by The Wallace Foundation that examined the effect of leadership on learning (see Louis et al., 2010). From that research, professional development emerges as a primary vehicle for authentic and sustainable school improvement. The voices in interviews of nearly 900 teachers, principals, and district staff in 167 schools across the U.S. tell the story of the actions that effective school leaders take to develop and support the context and processes leading to increased student achievement.

Learning Forward's Leadership standard has three key contextual concepts that clearly link with the Learning From Leadership findings: building capacity, providing support, and distributing responsibility. From all the data in the national leadership study, it was clear that context matters. When leaders attend to the context in which others around them learn, they strive to put in place structures and supports that are likely to be effective. This is true whether the leadership comes from the district level, or from a principal working with teachers in her school, or a teacher leading among his peers or with his students. High-quality leadership has no substitute, and high-quality professional development depends on such leadership.

Building capacity appears most evident in the actions that leaders take to build self- and collective efficacy among those being led. Self-efficacy is the belief that one is capable

Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students **requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.**

of undertaking a task. Collective efficacy is the belief that as a collection of individuals, a group such as a school staff has the capacity to address the needs of all the students in the school (Bandura, 1982,1997). Developing a sense of efficacy plays a key role in one's willingness to persist in a difficult task, despite obstacles and others' perceptions that the task is insurmountable. Developing and sustaining a sense of efficacy, therefore, is an essential capacity for fueling high engagement in continuous learning that expands and deepens educators' knowledge and skills, striving to ensure that all children learn well. Leadership for effective professional development never loses sight of capacity building, understanding the belief in the power of personal growth.

When a leader develops capacity, he or she is also enhancing others' sense of influence. Essentially, leadership is about influencing others in positive and productive ways around organizational purposes. Those who work in schools know that influence happens at every level of the system, with collegial influence being perhaps, the most powerful means of aligning and accelerating effort for the good of the children (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Powerful learning occurs when teachers can witness and engage in reflection about practices that positively impact students who are "just like my students." Individual expertise can evolve to become cornerstones of collective practice that result in greater degrees of coherence for the adults and students in schools.

Each person is a source of influence, whether realized or not. Choices of attitude, language, behavior, and how to direct one's energy contribute enormously to the culture and the conditions of teaching and learning in schools, for better or worse. The decentralized, layered structure of schools requires influence at the most local level of practice, the classroom, if continuous learning and improvement is to be our reality. Building influence, therefore, is about building capacity.

The concept of providing support is the logical next ingredient for leadership in professional development. Findings from Learning From Leadership revealed that supporting the professional development needs of both principals and teachers were most thoroughly addressed in the highest-performing schools. In those cases, districts had developed an intentional, coherent system of professional development for all professionals in the system. Support came in the form of creating professional learning communities for all, as well as allowing for individualized adaptations for the unique needs of each school.

Again, context comes into play. Every school is the same, yet every school is different. The same could be said for every grade level or subject area, every team, every class, every teacher, and every student. Providing support does not mean that the same kinds of supports are needed in every school or for every person. Still, some key elements uncovered in the research were nonnegotiable, such as the use of student work as data to inform practices and the importance of reflective conversations as a means of professional growth. To address the challenge in providing effective support requires engaging in the conversation about

differentiated allocation of district resources among schools. Another dimension of that conversation is determining ways by which the progress of individual schools is evaluated in light of resources provided. For example, using only annual student test scores is an insufficient evaluation measure in any district that has variation in student performance among its schools.

Effective leaders link support with structure, as together those concepts create a stable base from which to move forward. Providing both simultaneously can go a long way toward supporting implementation for real change. There are big structures, such as regularly scheduled time for teams to meet, and small structures, such as group and intergroup learning protocols. Some schools create an annual calendar that clearly delineates learning blocks for staff, including team times and whole-school professional development. School and team goals determine the learning focus within each block. Educators sketch out specific adult learning targets for a semester or sometimes an entire year. The calendar is posted on a wall, and school learning leadership teams review progress is regularly. Adult learning targets are refined or learning time extended as needed. Small structures guide group processes and intentionally support development of conversational norms that support reflective practice. Learning leaders realize that intentionally designed structures are as essential for adult learning as they are for student learning.

As we seek to improve practice in specific classroom contexts, the past 30 years of educational research have yielded enormous amounts of information about what works. We have a more explicit map of the instructional landscape and have become more focused on high-leverage strategies. The problem arises when moving from declarative knowledge — the "what" — to procedural knowledge — the "how." We know about a lot of "whats"; however, we know less about how to do them. Support for closing the implementation gap requires harnessing and directing the energy of teachers through job-embedded professional learning explicitly directed at the classroom context to figure out exactly when, where, and how to introduce new practices into instructional routines, followed by many opportunities to practice, reflect, and refine.

As essential as structure is, it is not sufficient for supporting high engagement of adult learners in schools. Both structure and nurture are necessary. The Nike slogan, "Just Do It," may work for aspiring runners, but it falls short as a means of nurturing acquisition of new instructional practices. This is where effective leadership for professional development becomes highly nuanced. From the perspective of an individual teacher, any new expectation is perceived as coming from the outside. Effective ground-level leadership, often taking the form of teachers leading and learning side-by-side with colleagues, requires balanced amounts of structure and nurture that result in outside practices becoming inside practices. This happens through leadership that supports teachers in understanding the new practice

and how it supports student learning. Teacher engagement in this process builds ownership and, ultimately, commitment.

In the end, it is about distributing responsibility that allows the first two concepts in effective leadership, building capacity and providing support, to fully enact change. Recent research and research reviews have explored the dimensions of distributing or sharing leadership, and all have concluded that distributing leadership not only builds capacity and supports change, it expands the degree of change possible (Leithwood & Riehl, 2005; Louis, 2006; Spillane, 2006; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Distributing responsibility is not about reducing the administrator's workload. Rather, it is having a common understanding that improved student learning is the result of collaborative endeavors, with different initiatives in the school or district having different persons leading the range of efforts. In fact, there is not one single pattern of leadership distribution that is consistently associated with a type of shared teacher leadership in implementing changes or with improved student learning, and it is also proven that without shared leadership, gains in student learning are not as significant (Louis et al., 2010).

As isolation, a dominant characteristic of traditional school culture, continues to give way to collaboration, educators are discovering the wealth of expertise available right down the hall. While we acknowledge that both external and internal resources are essential, our current tendencies for seeking expertise focus much more heavily on outside sources of knowledge. We need to tap and grow the expertise from within, with the distinct advantage of internal expertise being readily available and contextually valid. The pathway for both generating and sharing local expertise is empowering teachers to be partners in the work of instructional leadership.

Distributed leadership is grounded in defined goals, along with agreement about sources of data that will be used to monitor progress. The concept and practice of distributed leadership stem from recognition that leadership is present throughout schools and school districts. With distributed responsibility comes distributed accountability. A clear delineation of the structures and expectations enables the distribution of responsibility to become a road map for staying on course together.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

If we are not satisfied with our student learning results, we must examine our systems and structures. The work of leadership is to create the conditions that support continuous professional learning that results in improved classroom practice such that students engage and learn at high levels. Are structures and resources aligned to support job-embedded learning so that teams of educators have opportunities to learn from research-based teaching practices? Do these teams serve as an ongoing support for daily implementation and reflection on practice? Is individual support available in particularly challenging practice

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contexts? Is leadership sufficiently distributed so that all stakeholders have the expectation, perceptions, and belief that it is only through collaboration that effective and successful change can be enacted? These are the essential questions that leaders of professional learning must address.

Learning leaders live the value of reflective practice. Where there is no reflection, there will be no learning. Supporting the continuous development of individual and collective expertise emerges from engaging with new ideas and from reflecting on daily practice. Reflective educators expand their repertoire, deepen their expertise, and remain energized in their work. Professional learning creates energy and enthusiasm for improving practices that build efficacy and result in improved outcomes, not only for students, but for the professionals as well.

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