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Leadership Matters

No longer is there a question about the effect of leadership on student achievement. Clearly, leadership makes a difference.

—Waters and Cameron (2007, p. 3)

Leadership matters. Principals make a difference. In fact, according to Linda Darling-Hammond, the leadership provided by an effective building principal is second only to the guidance provided by the classroom teachers in impacting student learning. In her study of the principalship, Darling-Hammond notes, “School leadership strongly affects student learning. Principals are central to the task of building schools that promote powerful teaching and learning for all students” (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 3).

EVIDENCE OF A PRINCIPAL’S IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

For more than 35 years, scholars have built an extensive body of evidence that supports the important role a principal plays in helping students learn. In summarizing their research in 2009, Matthew Militello, Sharon Rallis, and Ellen Goldring documented the extent to which the relationship between student achievement and effective principals has been carefully studied. Militello, Rallis, and Goldring reported that “the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed by the school principal to improve instruction have been extensively explored by Elmore, 2000, 2002, 2003;

Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005" (2009, p. 17). In each case, the authors cited strong support for the role leaders played in improving student achievement. Their conclusion was self-evident: *Leadership matters*.

But it is not just any leadership that matters. As our understanding of school leadership has evolved, other researchers have identified the "specific types of leadership behavior that had an impact on student achievement" (Militello et al., 2009, p. 17). (See also Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008.) Over the past three decades, we have come to understand that the *type of leadership* matters.

Other studies identified specific ways effective principals impact student learning. As Militello and colleagues reported,

Louis and Miles . . . talked about a close, cohesive internal network when describing the relationships among staff members in those high schools that successfully implement change. More recent studies have shown the importance of principal's role in leading professional learning communities or what Militello and Rallis referred to as "communities of practice." (2009, p. 17)

(See also Militello, Schweid, & Carey, 2008; Printy, 2008; and Supovitz & Christman, 2003.) Militello and colleagues found studies that documented the importance of principals

taking charge of initiatives centered on the core of teaching and learning . . . investigating policies such as student retention . . . and using data to develop new support mechanisms and to implement new teaching and learning strategies (see Coburn & Talbert, 2006; Militello, Sireci, & Schweid, 2008; Supovitz & Christman, 2003). (2009, p. 17)

The notion that certain types of leadership behaviors matter more than others was clarified in a meta-analysis conducted by Tim Waters and his colleagues at Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL). Their extensive review of the literature on school leadership identified a number of key responsibilities and behaviors that, when practiced by principals, were likely to "promote significant improvement in student achievement" (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).

HOW DO PRINCIPALS IMPACT STUDENT LEARNING?

The McREL meta-analysis identified 21 responsibilities that encompass 66 specific behaviors linked to a principal's impact on student learning. All the responsibilities and behaviors were shown to have a positive impact, but not all had the same magnitude of impact. Waters and Cameron (2007) pointed out, "Principals are asked to fulfill many and varied responsibilities that are important in running a school," but they made an important distinction when they observed that "not all of them, however, are essential to improving student achievement." (p. 18)

Waters and Cameron seemed to understand the complexity required in any effort to monitor 87 different dimensions of leadership, and they attempted to differentiate between what was *important* and what was *essential*. They explained, "Maintaining facilities, managing budgets, complying with regulations, and arranging transportation are all *important* aspects of running a school, but not *essential* to creating higher levels of student achievement" (Waters & Cameron, 2007, p. 18). What the McREL study suggested is something that many may have sensed intuitively for a long time—that not all of the responsibilities required of principals are essential to improving student achievement.

In fact, some leadership behaviors have a negative impact on student learning. Waters and Cameron wrote,

As important as these findings are, there is another finding that is equally important. That is, just as leaders can have a positive impact on achievement, they also can have a marginal, or worse, a negative impact on achievement. When leaders concentrate on the wrong school and/or classroom practices, or miscalculate the magnitude or "order" of the change they are attempting to implement, they can negatively impact student achievement. (2007, p. 5)

To summarize, Waters and his fellow researchers at McREL discovered that the leadership a principal provides makes a difference, but some behaviors matter more when the goal is improving student learning. According to their study, some leadership behaviors are positive, and some may be negative. However, even those that are positively correlated to student learning do not all have an equal impact on student achievement.

DIFFERENT FORMS OF LEADERSHIP IMPACT LEARNING DIFFERENTLY

John Hattie extended the notion that some leadership behaviors are more important than others. In his book *Visible Learning*, Hattie (2009) separated the research into two forms of leadership—instructional leadership and transformational leadership—and found that while both had a positive impact on learning, one form of leadership was more impactful than the other.

Hattie (2012) reported on the results of a 2008 meta-analysis conducted by Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe. In that study, the researchers found the impact on learning to have an effect size of .11 for transformational leadership and .42 for instructional leadership.

Hattie chose to use *effect size* to communicate the relative differences between various school improvement strategies reported in his work. According to Robert Coe, “Effect size is simply a way of quantifying the size of the difference between two groups. It is easy to calculate, readily understood and can be applied to any measured outcome in Education or Social Science” (2002, p. 1). Coe continues, saying, “It [effect size] is particularly valuable for quantifying the effectiveness of a particular intervention, relative to some comparison. It allows us to move beyond the simplistic, ‘Does it work or not?’ to the far more sophisticated, ‘How well does it work in a range of contexts?’” (2002, p. 1). Hattie’s choice of effect size allows educators seeking evidence of best practices to compare the relative impacts of different strategies on learning. In this case, Hattie clearly demonstrates the impact that different leadership styles have on learning, with instructional leadership being more powerful than transformational leadership.

Hattie suggests that principals are engaged in instructional leadership when they “have their major focus on creating a learning climate free of disruption, a system of clear teaching objectives, and high teacher expectations for teachers and students” (2012, p. 83). He defines transformational leadership as the behaviors principals engage in with their teaching staff in order to “inspire them to new levels of energy, commitment, and moral purpose such that they work collaboratively to overcome challenges and reach ambitious goals” (2012, p. 83). Hattie’s conclusion was that when the goal is higher levels of learning for all students, the activities associated with *instructional* leadership had a greater impact than those associated with *transformational* leadership.

Robinson linked the work of Waters and Hattie when she reported that “Although Waters, Marzano, and McNulty . . . did not use the distinction between instructional and transformational leadership in their meta-analysis,

the results show a similar pattern” (Hattie, 2009, p. 84). The implications for our practice are clear. As Robinson pointed out, “The more leaders focus their influence, their learning, and their relationships with teachers on the core business of teaching and learning, the greater their likely influence on student outcomes” (Robinson, 2008, p. 636).

LEADERSHIP MATTERS, BUT THE RIGHT KIND OF LEADERSHIP MATTERS MORE

A review of the literature on school leadership demonstrates that there is, in fact, “a substantial relationship between leadership and student achievement.” (Waters & Cameron, 2007, p. 10). After their review of the literature, Militello, Rallis, and Goldring (2009) came to a similar conclusion. In fact, beginning as early as 1984 with John Goodlad’s *A Place Called School* the importance of the principal’s role in improving student achievement has never been in doubt.

We have also learned that it is not just any kind of leadership that matters. Hattie’s analysis showed that some forms of leadership are more impactful than are others. He found that when the goal is improved student achievement, principals should focus on the attributes associated with an instructional leader as opposed to those of a transformational leader. The emerging view is that since some behaviors are more closely linked to higher levels of student learning than are others, principals need to be more discriminating and develop a discerning eye toward what they activities engage in during the day.

With a clear consensus emerging on the fact that a principal’s leadership impacts student learning and that different types of leadership behavior impact student achievement in different ways and to different degrees, how, then, do principals focus on the strategies that matter most?