



CHAPTER ONE

LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING

The Critical Connection

Education is widely held to be crucial for the survival and success of individuals and countries in the emerging global environment. U.S. politicians of all stripes have placed education at the center of their political platforms, and education has been at the center of many European and Asian policy agendas. Comparable agreement is also evident about the contributions of leadership to the implementation of virtually all initiatives aimed at improving student learning and the quality of schools. It is therefore difficult to imagine a focus for research with greater social justification than research about successful educational leadership. That was the broad focus for the five-year study on which this book is based, a study generously funded by the Wallace Foundation. We aimed to identify the nature of successful educational leadership and to better understand how such leadership can improve educational practices and student learning.

More specifically, we sought to do the following:

- Identify state, district, and school leadership practices that directly or indirectly foster the improvement of educational practices and student learning.
- Clarify how successful leadership practices directly and indirectly influence the quality of teaching and learning.
- Determine the extent to which individuals and groups at state, district, school, and classroom levels possess the will and skill required to improve student

learning, and the extent to which their work settings allow and encourage them to act on those capacities and motivations.

- Describe the ways in which, and the success with which, individuals and groups at the state, district, school, and classroom levels help others to acquire the will and skill required to improve student learning.
- Identify the leadership and workplace characteristics of districts and schools that encourage the values, capacities, and use of practices that improve student learning.

The Educational Leadership Effect

Although leadership is widely thought to be a powerful force for school effectiveness, this popular belief needs to be justified by empirical evidence. There are five types of such evidence, each offering its own estimate of the size of leader effects.

One type is evidence from *qualitative case studies*. Studies providing this type of evidence typically are conducted in exceptional school settings, selected as exemplars of effectiveness.¹ Some studies report large leadership effects—on student learning and on an array of school conditions. Other qualitative studies focus on “typical” schools rather than outliers; these studies often produce complex pictures of how leadership operates in different settings.² Many educators and scholars find the descriptions provided by case studies to be interesting and informative. But descriptions of a small number of cases do not yield explanations of leadership effects for a more general population of schools.³

The second type of evidence has been derived from *large-scale quantitative studies of leadership effects on schools and students*. Evidence of this type, as reported and reviewed since about 1980,⁴ suggests that the direct and indirect effects of school leadership on student learning are small but significant. Leadership explains 5 to 7 percent of the variation in student learning across schools (not to be confused with the very large within-school effects that are likely). Five to 7 percent, however, represents about one quarter of the total across-school variation (12 to 20 percent) explained by all school-level variables, after controlling for student intake or background factors.⁵ Classroom factors explain more than a third of the variation. To date, research of this sort has done little to clarify how leaders achieve the effects in question, and the implications for leadership practice are therefore limited.

A third type of evidence arises from studies (also large-scale and quantitative) focused on the *effects of specific leadership practices*. Some evidence of this sort can be found in the research just summarized. But a meta-analysis conducted

by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2003) extends our understanding of the explanatory potential of this type of research. Marzano et al. identify twenty-one leadership “responsibilities” (behaviors) and then calculate an average correlation between each responsibility and the measures of student learning used in the original studies. From these data they calculate estimated effects of the respective responsibilities on student test scores. For example: there would be a 10 percentile-point increase in student test scores resulting from the work of an average principal if she improved her “demonstrated abilities in all 21 responsibilities by one standard deviation” (p. 3). Extending this line of inquiry, Marzano and Waters (2007) provide a comparable analysis of research on district-level leadership, identifying five broad categories of superintendent leadership. Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) have provided a more recent meta-analysis of evidence identifying specific school-level leadership practices along with estimates of their independent contributions to student learning. Robinson’s work may be distinguished from Marzano and colleagues in two ways: first, the quality screen used for inclusion in the analysis was more stringent; second, the purpose was to locate a smaller number of factors (five) that had the strongest evidence, across multiple studies, for achievement effects.

A fourth type of evidence has been provided by studies of *leadership effects on student engagement*, as distinct from effects on student learning; some evidence suggests that student engagement is a strong predictor of student learning.⁶ Recently, at least ten large-scale, quantitative studies, similar in design, have assessed the effects of leadership behavior on student engagement, and all have reported significant positive effects.⁷

Finally, a different but quite compelling sort of evidence about leadership effects comes from research on leadership succession. Unplanned principal succession, for example, is a common source of adverse effects on school performance, regardless of what teachers might do. Studies by Macmillan (2000) and Fink and Brayman (2006) demonstrate the devastating effects of rapid principal succession, especially on initiatives intended to increase student learning. And rapid succession is very common. Clearly, leadership matters.

In developing a starting point for this five-year study, we claimed, based on a preliminary review of research,⁸ that leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning. After five additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim. To date we have not found a single documented case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership. Why is leadership crucial? One explanation is that leaders have the potential to unleash latent capacities in organizations. Put somewhat differently: most school variables considered separately have only small effects on student learning.⁹ To obtain large effects,

educators need to create synergy across the relevant variables. Among all the parents, teachers, and policy makers who work hard to improve education, educators in leadership positions are uniquely well positioned to ensure the necessary synergy.

Meanings of Leadership

Leadership can be described by reference to two core functions: *providing direction* and *exercising influence*. Whatever else leaders do, they provide direction and exercise influence. This does not imply oversimplification. Each of these two leadership functions can be carried out in different ways, and the various modes of practice linked to the functions distinguish many models of leadership.

In carrying out these two functions, leaders act in environments marked variously by stability and change. These conditions interact in complementary relationships, and while stability is often associated with resistance and maintenance of the status quo, it is in fact difficult for leaders and other educators to leap forward from a wobbly foundation. To be more precise, stability and *improvement* have a symbiotic relationship. Leaping forward from a wobbly foundation may well produce change, but not change of the sort that most of us value: falling flat on your face is the image that comes to mind. Wobbly foundations and unwise leaping may help to explain why the blizzard of changes adopted by our schools over the past half century has had little effect on the success of our students. School reform efforts have been most successful in schools that have needed them least.¹⁰ These have been schools with well-established processes and capacities in place, providing foundations on which to build—in contrast to the schools most often of concern to reformers, those that are short on essential infrastructure.

How do these concepts come together in a clarification of *leadership*? Leadership is all about organizational improvement. More specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions. Our general definition of leadership highlights these points. Leadership is about direction and influence. Stability is the goal of what is often called management. Improvement is the goal of leadership. But both are very important. One of the most serious threats to stability in a school district is frequent turnover in the ranks of superintendents, principals, and vice principals. Instability at the school level often reflects a failure of management at the district level.

Alternative Models of Leadership Reflected in the Literature

The broad literature on leadership includes an extensive set of models and approaches, many of which overlap. But this full array of models and approaches is only partly reflected in the educational leadership literature, and it has its own models and approaches purpose-built for leadership in school contexts.

Leadership in Nonschool Contexts

Research on leadership in nonschool contexts is frequently driven by theories described by one of our colleagues as “adjectival leadership models.” A recent review of such theories identified twenty-one leadership approaches that have been objects of considerable theoretical and empirical development.¹¹ Seventeen have been especially attractive, and some of them have informed research in school contexts.¹² Here are some examples.

- *Contingent Leadership*. Encompassing research on leadership styles, leader problem solving, and reflective leadership, this two-dimensional conception of leadership explains differences in leaders’ effectiveness by reference to a task or relationship style and to the situations in which leaders find themselves. To be most effective, according to this model, leaders must match their styles to their settings.

- *Participative Leadership*. Addressing attention to leadership in groups, shared leadership,¹³ and teacher leadership,¹⁴ this model is concerned with how leaders involve others in organizational decisions. Research informed by the model has investigated autocratic, consultative, and collaborative sharing styles.

- *Transformational and Charismatic Leadership*. This model focuses on how leaders exercise influence over their colleagues and on the nature of leader-follower relations. Both forms of leadership emphasize communicating a compelling vision, conveying high performance expectations, projecting self-confidence, modeling appropriate roles, expressing confidence in followers’ ability to achieve goals, and emphasizing collective purpose.¹⁵

Leadership in Education

Leadership research also has been informed by models developed specifically for use in school and district level settings. Of these, models of “instructional leadership” are perhaps the most well known. These models bear some resemblance

to more general, task-oriented leadership theories.¹⁶ The instructional leadership concept implies a focus on classroom practice. Often, however, the specific leadership practices required to establish and maintain that focus are poorly defined. The main underlying assumption is that instruction will improve if leaders provide detailed feedback to teachers and include suggestions for change. It follows that leaders must have the time, the knowledge, and the consultative skills needed to provide teachers in all the relevant grade levels and subject areas with valid, useful advice about their instructional practices. Although these assumptions have an attractive ring to them, they rest on shaky ground at best. The evidence to date suggests that few principals have made the time and demonstrated the ability to provide high-quality instructional feedback to teachers.¹⁷ Importantly, the few well-developed models of instructional leadership posit a set of responsibilities for principals that goes well beyond observing and intervening in classrooms—responsibilities touching on vision, organizational culture, and the like.¹⁸

In addition, studies of school leadership are replete with other adjectives purporting to capture something uniquely important about the object of inquiry; for example, learning leadership,¹⁹ constructivist leadership,²⁰ and change leadership.²¹ Few of these conceptions, however, are the products of a sustained line of inquiry yielding the sort of evidence needed to justify their claims. This observation influenced our approach as we began our study. Eschewing any particular model of leadership, we examined the actual practices across models for which there was significant evidence of desirable effects.

Overview of the Book

Results of our five-year study reported in the two Parts of this book focus on leadership at the school and district levels. Our evidence about state-level leadership can be found in our final research reports. The five chapters in Part One are about school-level leadership in particular. Chapters Two, Three, and Four summarize our evidence about several forms of, and approaches to, shared school leadership and the effects of such leadership on teaching and student learning. Two Chapters (Five and Six) describe in some detail those individual leadership practices with the greatest influence on schools and students.

Part Two of the book is about district leadership and its relationship with school and state leadership. Chapter Seven describes ways in which districts engage parents and the community in their school-improvement efforts and explores the impact of such engagement on students. Chapters Eight and Nine are about leadership efficacy or confidence—its contribution to school improvement

and what districts do to develop it. Evidence described in Chapter Ten clarifies the mostly negative effects of rapid principal succession and offers advice to districts about how to ameliorate such effects. Chapter Eleven is about data-use practices in schools and what districts do to help make those practices useful for instructional improvement. Chapter Twelve paints a broad and integrated picture of district approaches to improving leadership, teaching, and learning; Chapter Thirteen unpacks the relationship between district and state-level leadership. We conclude the book with a selected summary of key findings from our study and draw attention, in particular, to key features of successful school leadership.

