

# CHAPTER ONE

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# CHAPTER › ONE

## Outmoded



The learning fates of principals, teachers, and students are intimately interrelated—and in the past decade, the conditions for mutual learning in schools have been seriously eroding. Students are bored, to put it mildly. Two-thirds of initially happy kindergartners become alienated from schooling by the time they reach grade 9 (Jenkins, 2013). Teacher satisfaction has declined 24 percent since 2008, when 62 percent of them reported feeling “very satisfied”; within five years, only 38 percent were saying that (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2013). Meanwhile and not unrelated, 75 percent of principals feel that their job has become too complex, half of all principals feel under great stress “several days a week,” and the percentage who say they are satisfied in their work has dropped from 68 to 59 since 2008. In other words, students, teachers, and principals are keeping pace with each other, but unfortunately *in the wrong direction*.

Ask teachers what school they would most like to teach in, or whether they want to stay in teaching at all, and you will hear of two criteria that top their lists: the quality of their colleagues and the quality of school leadership. Insofar as principals choose or seem to choose their teaching staff, the principal alone is often held responsible by districts and others for the collective plummeting of morale. Even among themselves, 90 percent of principals think that they are the ultimately accountable person (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2013). If you happen to be a principal yourself, you most likely feel a huge burden of accountability. But as we shall see, many of the current solutions to the problems I’ve noted here not only don’t help—they make matters worse.

## Gasp!

Principals' responsibilities have increased enormously over the past two decades. They are expected to run a smooth school; manage health, safety, and the building; innovate without upsetting anyone; connect with students and teachers; be responsive to parents and the community; answer to their districts; and above all, deliver results. More and more, they are being led to be direct instructional leaders, and therein lies the rub. How is this for a shocker: the principal as *direct* instructional leader is not the solution! If principals are to maximize their impact on learning, we must reconceptualize their role so that it clearly, practically, and convincingly becomes a force for improving the whole school and the results it brings. I will show that the latest conceptualizations of the principal's role inhibit the influence that principals could have over instructional improvement in the school, and for that matter in the district and beyond.

The heart of this book is to reposition the role of the principal as overall instructional leader so that it maximizes the learning of all teachers and in turn of all students. In the meantime, the role has become more and more problematic. The current concept of what principals should do is either confusing (What exactly does instructional leadership mean anyway?), too narrow (What is being neglected as we become preoccupied by classroom instruction?), too tedious (checklists, checklists, checklists), or impossible (How do I reach all those teachers, or how can I be an expert in every subject?).

The new Common Core State Standards (CCSS) curriculum will make these tensions unbearable because so much more will be expected of schools and their principals. We have

put the principal on a pedestal, and now we expect miracles; a few can pull it off, but mere mortals have little chance. Under these conditions, the idea of principal as instructional leader cannot survive on any significant scale. There is an alternative that I will lay out in the coming chapters. This repositioning of the principal will yield learning results that are wider and deeper, and eminently more doable in the bargain. The future for the principal can be exciting and profoundly significant for school and system improvement. By re-centering the role of the principal, we bring the ideal of principal as key change agent within our grasp.

New, rapidly emerging change dynamics almost organically favor a different and more powerful role for principals, and really for all—students, teachers, parents, administrators, and policymakers. Tensions are growing between, on the one hand, an urge to tighten the focus around standards and, on the other hand, a tendency to allow digital innovations to flourish. The capacity to navigate, indeed to help others navigate these troubled waters will require a new kind of leadership. We will see that this new view of leadership has the advantage of being more in harmony with the human condition. Humans are fundamentally motivated by two factors: doing things that are intrinsically meaningful to themselves, and working with others—peers, for example—in accomplishing worthwhile goals never before reached. If principals can get the knack of stimulating and enabling these organic forces, then fundamental changes will occur in rapidly accelerating time frames, transforming stodgy or moribund school systems into dynamic learning environments. This is not an abstract, theoretical statement. All of my work is based on “practice producing better

theory,” rather than the reverse. Put another way, in my work with schools and districts, I am already seeing new theories of change in action that motivate students, teachers, and administrators to do things collectively that they find more engaging and more productive for learning.

Consider an analogy to epidemiology. Health scientists try to detect and understand the sources of rapidly spreading diseases. Such diseases have a life of their own. The goal of the scientists is to figure out how to stop disease from spreading. This is often very hard to do, but possible. But let’s flip the issue. What if the phenomenon’s spreading were a good thing contributing to better health and well-being? It would still be hard to stop, but the leader’s job would be different than the epidemiologist’s. The leader would have the exciting role of facilitating the spread of the disease, so to speak. To ensure rapid spread, the leader would recognize and uses forces within the “germ” itself. The leader would thus become a curator of positive contagion. Enough fancy talk. Let’s get down to the realities of what this would mean in practice.

## Leading Learning

In this book, we will sort out the details of what is problematic about the current role of the principal and how it can shift to that of an agent of contagion and fundamental change. In another recent work, I called this type of role “motion leadership,” meaning the kind of leadership that causes positive movement forward (Fullan, 2013b).

Until now, no one has sufficiently clarified the new role of the principal and given principals the detailed attention required



in order to enable schools to thrive under the new conditions. Aspects of the new role of the principal have been around for a while in the work of those of us focusing on collaborative cultures, learning communities, and capacity building (DuFour & Marzano, 2009; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Fullan, 2010a; Leithwood & Seashore Louis, 2012). Hargreaves and I (2012) went further with our concept of “professional capital of teachers.” Further offshoots of a deeper role for school leaders are occurring as my colleagues and I foster the *new pedagogy* (defined as students and teachers working together as learning partners) merging with the *digital world* (Fullan, 2013b; Fullan & Donnelly, 2013; Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). Ironically, these developments, old and new, are being undercut by recent, intensified, wrongheaded conceptions of the principal as instructional leader. We will get to this, but first let’s frame the new role of the principal as I see it emerging.

I have been using the word “role,” but what I really have in mind is a trio of parts, the most central of which is *learning leader—one who models learning, but also shapes the conditions for all to learn on a continuous basis*. The term “learning leader” isn’t new, but for our purpose, I will endeavor to make it precise, memorable, and “sticky”—a draw for clear action. Call it also “leading learner” or “lead learner” if you like. Flanking that part of the role, at this stage of our redirection, will be two others: *system player* and *agent of change*.

## Maximizing Impact

So this book focuses on what principals should do if they want to lead learning in ways that clear the path toward improving student achievement in demonstrable ways. In it, I will make no

claims for the role of leading learning that cannot be linked to *measurable impact, deep and wide*.

My colleague Ken Leithwood coined a statement you've likely heard more than once by now: "The principal is second only to the teacher in terms of impact on student learning" (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 5). But if the principal is that crucial, and I for one concede this point, the questions it begs are surely *what* impact can principals have, and *how* can they maximize that impact? As answers, lots of proposals crop up in the massive literature on the principalship, but there is also a great deal of noise. My goal is to make simple but powerful sense of the role of the principal in leading learning. The idea is that if you are a principal or aspiring to become one, after reading this book you will know what to focus on in order to make the biggest difference. And those of you who are system leaders will know how to best take advantage of, leverage, and support lead learners like yourself.

In the same way that we can become mere tenders of floods of information, principals can fall to the mercy of myriad expectations. So in this book, let's boil the task down to the smallest number of big levers and liberate the system by liberating the principal—not as a free agent, but as an ensconced player who makes good things happen. If the principal really is the second most important factor in student learning, let's see how we can enable him or her to function as such—with maximum results.

## This Watershed Moment

A quarter of a century ago, I published *What's Worth Fighting For in the Principalship?* (Fullan, 1988). It turns out that 1988

was a watershed year for principals. Although it wasn't entirely clear at the time, 1988 was almost literally the beginning of what we might call the "instructional" period; that is, it was in this period that schools began to shift from a focus on the individual autonomy of the classroom and the isolation of the school toward a focus on specific instructional practices that directly affected student learning and achievement. The very first large-scale districtwide instructional initiatives occurred in the 1988–1996 period in District 2 in New York City with Tony Alvarado, and in Toronto with our Learning Consortium. Several of us began to focus systematically on instruction across all schools in the district, with the principals as key players. The role of the principal shifted dramatically toward an instructional focus, but it was also the case that the system was throwing the principal off kilter with enormous demands. *What's Worth Fighting For* focused on what you as a leader could do to empower yourself and those around you to take action that made a difference in the lives of students under your watch. I cited a survey from Ontario in 1984 that asked principals what were the most significant new responsibilities that had been added to their roles in recent years. The two most frequently named additions as of 1984 were teacher performance review, and curriculum implementation! Déjà pre-vu! In any case, the role changed, and principals have been working their way through the new role as instructional leader for the past twenty-five years.

Today we are at another watershed moment. The recommended detail-specific instructional role of the principal (what I call micromanaging) is turning out to be ineffective for creating change at any significant scale. The flip side of this current narrowness—the knee-jerk reaction perhaps—has

been to afford the principal greater autonomy in exchange for high-stakes accountability: “polish or perish!” This book attempts to cancel that dysfunctional tug-of-war and locate a substantially more powerful lead learner role for principals that, as you will see, centers on fostering what Hargreaves and I call the professional capital of teachers in highly specific ways. I present not a broad solution but a precise one. It will require great leadership skills, but ones that can be learned by any good educator.

I will also try to take into account two major changes of circumstance represented by the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and continuing digital innovation. With these, the stakes and demands have become greater. CCSS is blanketing most of the United States with a very complex set of demands, and technology is running wild. Both of these phenomena represent great opportunities within themselves, but they are also very challenging and in many ways have unclear implications for implementation. Once again, in this book we look to school principals to play a leading role, positioning them as central players. This opportunity to recast the role of the principal should not be missed. Although it is true that a prime quality of today’s principal will be the ability to handle ambiguity, I can guarantee that the new role will be engaging, achievable, and ultimately more clear and more fulfilling. Best of all, it is learnable and brings with it the deep satisfaction of maximizing learning for scores of students who are not now being served by the school system. The principal as lead change agent could become one of the most prized educational roles around.

## The Chapters That Follow

Chapter Two reflects on how, frustratingly, the greater the sense of urgency, the greater the anxiety and the worse the attempted solution. It also examines how and why we keep “getting it wrong,” and ends on a promising note that new virtues are around the corner if we focus on them and take action.

Chapter Three seeks to capture the essence of the new “leading learning” role as it plays out within the school, guided by the concept of building the school’s *professional capital*. We will see what this asset looks like and how it’s amassed, and indicate why developing teachers’ professional capital, individually and collectively, is an increasingly powerful alternative. Chapter Four shows why it is crucial—for one’s own school and for the district—that principals become district players, valuing peers as much as themselves and keeping an eye out for the system as a whole. Again I make the case that this is both doable and effective. In Chapter Five, we zero in on the principal as change agent in order to identify the core competencies of the new leadership. These elements of the change agent in action, or “motion leadership”—the kind of leadership that moves individuals, organizations, and systems forward—have the virtues of being succinct in number, practical to implement, and efficient in the sense that any one element serves two or more skill sets.

Chapter Six—“The Future Is Now”—provides an exciting ending, showing how the principal’s role is likely to change for the better because it is part of a system dynamic. Because the current system is boring for students, alienating for teachers, and frustratingly unproductive for policymakers and the public

(these elements constituting what I call the “push factor”), and because the new pedagogy, the digital world, and the change dynamics of positive contagion (the “pull factor”) are unstoppable, it is a dead certainty that new opportunities will present themselves in numbers. The chapter takes the increasing presence of new technologies of the digital world as one new challenging theme and the CCSS as another. Both will require skilled principals who can think independently as well as act as part of the team and the system.

## Still Worth a Struggle

The period we are entering will not be simple. There are many ways to go wrong. I can only guarantee that it will be dynamic and that the qualities of lead learners will be the order of the day.

This time around, what’s worth fighting for is to lead learning and to maximize impact whereby *the system as a whole dramatically (and I do mean dramatically) improves*. The rest of the book will help you as a principal do this, and it will make clear how district and system leaders should work with school leaders to make this happen.

# Action Items

- ☐ Rate your work satisfaction right now compared with prior years. Ask your teachers how they rate their own.
- ☐ What signs (subtle or strong) do you see among your more advanced students of growing love or dislike of school?
- ☐ What percentage of your students do you think are heading toward dropping out in the future?
- ☐ As a principal, for what do you consider yourself accountable? Are you “in charge” in those respects?
- ☐ How much of your time now goes to direct instruction? Where else does it go?
- ☐ What roles do you play now as principal?

# Discuss with Colleagues

- Where are your schools headed right now, and what implications does this have for how teachers can work together more effectively?
- How effective has the principal's involvement in direct instruction been at changing the school as a whole?
- What watershed moments have you experienced as an educator?