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A Teacher-Centered Approach

A teacher-centered approach? Wait a minute. I thought that schools should be student centered. It's "all about the kids." Isn't that what we are supposed to say? A safe guess is that schools should be about both, but with an important corollary: All of the learning and all of the support we want students to experience depends in large measure on the support that teachers receive. This support not only includes the nitty-gritty working conditions of teachers (for example, salary, access to a telephone, adequate materials, time for lunch, a clean and comfortable work environment, respectful students, and discipline policies that work) but the opportunities that teachers have to work together with colleagues, to learn more about their craft, to make important decisions about teaching, learning, and other professional matters. All of these conditions and opportunities count. They count so much that unless we look after them schools will not work as effectively as they can for students. An important truism is that as the principal goes, so goes the school. But the corollary to that statement is also true. As the teacher goes, so goes the student.

Roland Barth's now-famous homily reminding us to heed the advice routinely given by airline cabin attendants at takeoff makes sense: "In the unlikely event that an oxygen mask is needed and you are accompanied by a child, first put the mask on yourself and then on the child." Teachers are best able to serve students when they themselves have been adequately served. But let me back up for a

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moment and examine the larger picture linking the effects of school-level variables, teacher-level variables, and student-level variables on student achievement.

What Counts

As a result of his research and his analysis of the research of others, Marzano (2000) concludes that school leadership ranks seventh in a field of eight school-level factors that contribute to student achievement. The first six factors, in order, are opportunities for students to learn, amount of time students spend learning, monitoring of student progress, providing a reasonable amount of pressure for students to achieve, parental involvement, and a supportive school climate. Only cooperation was rated lower than leadership. But things may not be as they seem. Leadership plays by different rules. It has, for example, many lives. One of its lives is to stand alone as a factor that contributes directly to student achievement. Its other lives, however, serve to fuel and enhance school-level and teacher-level variables in ways that help these variables influence student achievement.

Marzano (2000) notes, for example, that as a group the school-level variables account for only about 7 percent of the variance influencing student achievement. Teacher-level variables such as instructional strategies, curriculum design, and classroom management accounted for about 13 percent of the variance. Student-level variables—home atmosphere, prior knowledge, and motivation, aptitude, and interest—account for 80 percent of the variance with home atmosphere having the most powerful effect on student achievement.

Compared to student-level variables the effects of school-level and teacher-level variables seem not to count very much. But they do. Marzano notes, for example, that “The finding that schools account for only 10 percent of the differences in student achievement translates into a percentile gain of about 23 points. That is,

the average student who attends a 'good' school will have a score that is 23 percentile points higher than the average student who attends a poor school. From this perspective, schools definitely can make a difference in student achievement" (cited in Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003, p. 1). Still, in a comparative sense, if we assume that leadership has to have direct effects on student achievement to count, then probably it doesn't count much. But if we take the indirect effects leadership has on teachers, students, and school-level variables into account, then we get a different picture. Leadership emerges as a powerful force that provides the conditions and support schools need to succeed and teachers need to be effective. With the right kind of leadership, teacher effects on student achievement are likely to be higher.

In a recent meta-analysis, for example, McREL researchers Waters, Marzano, and McNulty found that "for an average school, having an effective leader can mean the difference between scoring at the 50th percentile on a given achievement test and achieving a score 10 percentile points higher" (Viadero, 2003). The variable making the most difference on a school's test scores was the extent to which the leader understood the details and the undercurrents of running a school and used this knowledge successfully. This effect is indirect. The McREL study is described in more detail in Chapter Eight.

These assertions are supported by a series of authoritative papers written by Hallinger and Heck (1996a, 1996b, 1999). These papers document the importance of principals' indirect leadership in improving student achievement. In short, Hallinger and Heck find that principal leadership does not provide a measurable direct effect but does provide a measurable indirect effect.

In sum, Marzano's work and that of others strongly suggest that leadership is often less visible in practice and thus less likely to show its impact statistically. Nonetheless, leadership is an important precursor to success (Marzano, 2003). Virtually every variable that affects student achievement in schools is itself likely to be affected

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by leadership. As leadership grows in quality and quantity, school effects and teacher effects grow in robustness, becoming better able to influence student learning and school achievement in positive ways. For this reason, any effort designed to improve teacher quality as a means to increasing student learning must include leadership in its equation. This view is echoed by Kent Peterson, a distinguished researcher at the University of Wisconsin, who has spent twenty years studying the principalship. He concludes “for schools to be effective centers of learning strong principals are critical for shaping the culture and climate” (Peterson, 2002, p. 6).

A Two-Bridge Approach

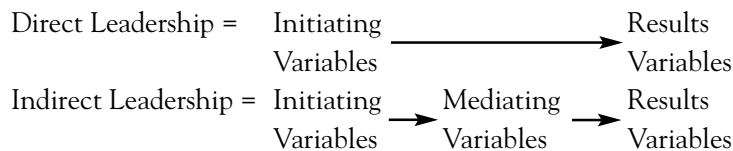
One of the reasons for the success of Stevenson High School and Gompers Elementary School (see Chapters Four and Six) and for the success of many other schools is their ability to organize around and to successfully use collaborative cultures. These cultures are the backbone of dynamic learning communities that bring leadership and learning together. This joining of the two is the strategy successful schools use for working together day by day, for launching change initiatives, and for continuous improvement.

Scratching the surface of this strategy reveals that schools and districts that have the most success in enhancing student achievement take a two-bridge rather than a one-bridge approach. To understand the difference, it's necessary to think in terms of initiating, mediating, and results variables. Gains in student achievement, for example, are *results* variables. What teachers, administrators, and others actually do in trying to get results are *initiating* variables. In between are the *mediating* variables. These mediating variables respond or react to the initiating variables in ways that enhance results, have no effect on results, or have negative effects on results. In the jargon of research, mediating variables exhibit indirect causation.

Principals and teachers, for example, might take learning walks together or principals might manipulate schedules to allow teachers more opportunities to visit each other's classrooms and to share

lesson plans with each other (initiating variables). If teachers learn more as a result and develop stronger collegial ties with each other (mediating variables), they are more likely to be successful in improving student achievement (results variables). If principals create schedules that encourage teacher isolation, we might get a negative reaction and less effective teaching and learning.

The message for strategy here is that if you want positive results, calibrate your leadership in a fashion that is aimed at changing the mediating variables for the good. If you have been successful, then the mediating variables will do their work in improving student learning. In contrast, trying to directly link what principals, superintendents, and other leaders do to student achievement (going from initiating variables directly to results variables, thus ignoring mediating variables) is like “trying to paint a portrait with a brush a yard long.”¹ In sum, we can choose a one-bridge or two-bridge approach as follows:



The one-bridge approach seeks to directly influence student achievement results. But the “single span” between the two seems to lack the proper supports for change. Further, the distance between initiating variables and results variables is too long for leaders to accurately read the situational and contextual issues they face and to accurately respond accordingly. And finally, those leaders who are at the initiating variable end often lack the technical knowledge to positively influence results in a direct way. What they know how to do is to enhance the mediating variables. They know how to build strong, focused, and helpful learning cultures,

¹ Attributed to Tom Sobol.

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how to provide opportunities for teachers to lead, how to move expertness around the school so that it is in the right place at the right time, how to listen to others, how to help build confidence, how to teach the school's culture to newcomers, how to repeat and repeat what the school is about, how to use the school's idea structure as a source of authority for what is done in the school, how to manipulate schedules so that they are teacher-learning friendly, how to engage in learning walks to ensure that shared ideas are being embodied in classrooms, how to take over a classroom for a couple of hours so that the teacher can help a colleague who is having a problem, and how to share leadership with others when they are entitled to have it.

Thus, the two-bridge approach focuses more deliberately and with more precision on what leaders actually do and what effect their actions have on such things as developing collaborative cultures, enhancing student learning, building a covenantal community, providing in-class and on-the-job professional development experiences, working on ensuring a safe environment characterized by caring and respect, providing the resources and amenities that teachers need not only to work more effectively but to view their jobs more favorably. As these mediating variables and the others described in the preceding paragraph increase, so will student-learning results increase.

What About Students?

How do students fit into this equation? Where are the student concerns within the mediating variables? If a principal's attention is not directly on students, then how can the school be a student-centered place? It probably can't if we looked at things in the same way. But if we can see that student-centeredness is *embedded within* teacher-centeredness, then not being student centered in a direct way may be a plus. A hyper-student-centered school, one where all that matters is student achievement and all of our efforts are concentrated on this goal, simply will not work over time anyway. Focusing on the mediating variables helps us make the school more of a teacher-centered

place first and this may be a better strategy. Once the school achieves this goal then teachers will be better able to serve students and desired results will be achieved.

To be teacher centered first is to place a high priority on helping teachers learn, helping them to be more successful in the classroom, helping them to be more committed to school standards and values, to find their jobs intellectually stimulating, to be able to collaborate with colleagues, to find sense and meaning in their work, to be more committed to self-supervision and self-evaluation, to be more receptive to other forms of accountability, and to help teachers be more effective instructional leaders. Teacher-centeredness also means that teachers need a respectful place to work, decent working conditions, better pay, and more discretion to make better decisions for their students. And finally, a teacher-centered approach acknowledges the link between teacher quality and student learning in both its talk and action (see Table 5.1 at the end of this chapter for a summary of recent studies that link teacher quality with student achievement). As Lieberman and Miller (1999) see it: "The strong connection between students' learning and teachers' workplace conditions cannot be ignored. In schools that do not find the balance, trouble looms ahead. In schools that focus primarily on teachers' workplace conditions, the outside community often responds, 'What does all this have to do with the children?' In schools that focus primarily on students' learning, teachers often feel overwhelmed and under appreciated." (p. 12). And further, "If change is to have meaning, it must be related to students and their success in schools; and it must acknowledge the needs and concerns of teachers as they change the way they work" (p. 11).

Providence as an Example

Since 2000, Providence, Rhode Island, has been involved in a districtwide initiative to improve its schools.² Providence provides an example of how inescapable a teacher-centered approach is to any school improvement effort that includes increasing levels of

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student achievement. Providence's plan, *Rekindling the Dream*, has three major goals:

- Improve student achievement results by focusing on teaching and learning with teachers playing key roles
- Build capacity among the faculty for continuous learning
- Strengthen parent involvement

To achieve these goals, Anderson and Togneri (2003) note, Providence adopted five core strategies:

1. Create a common focus for improvement.
2. Build school-level leadership capacity.
3. Hold leaders accountable for results.
4. Emphasize professional development over curriculum development.
5. Create a balance between central direction and site-based needs.

The Stealth Quality of Leadership

Each of the strategies seeks to help Providence achieve its student learning goals, but none of the strategies involve a direct link between leadership and student achievement. The first strategy that

² The primary source for this discussion is Steven Anderson and Wendy Togneri's 2003 paper, "Building Instructional Leadership: A Case Study of the Providence Public School Department." Initial leadership for the Providence reform effort was given by Diana Lam, who served as superintendent from 1999 through 2002. Melody Johnson has been at the helm since. I am grateful to Superintendent Johnson, Mary Kay Schnare, and all the Providence principals and "aspiring principals" I met in the fall of 2002 for insight into how things work in Providence. At root, the Providence approach is based on the work of Lauren Resnick and her colleagues at the Institute for Learning in Pittsburgh. Key to her work was the identification of nine principles of learning and the development of strategies for their implementation. Many of Resnick's ideas were initially developed and tested in New York City's District 2 during the Anthony Alvarado and Elaine Fink years. The nine principles of learning appear in Chapter Seven.

sought to improve the effectiveness of schools (results variables) was led by the central office and aimed at developing a school system with a focus on student performance, particularly in the area of literacy (initiating variables). The intent was to help teachers be more competent and confident and to increase their commitment to reform efforts (mediating variables). The second strategy sought to improve the instructional leadership capacity of principals and teachers at the building level by adopting a “distributed leadership” perspective that sought to share leadership with central office, principals, and teachers in areas where they were best suited to influence results. The theory here being that as leadership capacity builds, teaching and learning effectiveness increases and student achievement will rise.

The third strategy, being accountable for results, was particularly important. “District leaders spoke of ‘two-way accountability’ between teachers and principals, principals and district office personnel such that all parties were mutually accountable for carrying out their respective responsibilities” (Anderson and Togneri, 2003, p. 5). This strategy relied on the resurrection of reciprocal role relationships—the establishment of rights and obligations that link two roles together; and the resurrection of role sets—bundles of role relationships that represent friendly networks of individuals linked together by mutual expectations, rights, and responsibilities (see Chapter Three). Thinking in terms of roles and talking about reciprocal rights and responsibilities leads to the principles of subsidiarity and mutuality discussed in Chapter Four. The first principle places faith and responsibility in local rights and initiatives. And the second requires levels of intimacy characterized by trust and respect. Mutuality also depends upon parity. Both principles are champions of a more teacher-centered environment for schools.

The fourth strategy, emphasizing professional development over curriculum development, shifted the focus away from developing curriculum toward understanding and using the new state standards. In part the intent was to create a new instructional coherence

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that let students know what is expected of them and that forged learning networks of teachers who work together on how to help students reach the standards. Without intensive professional development support this strategy would merely exchange one script (the required scope and sequence) for another (the required standards). Together teachers worked on the standards, developed and shared lesson plans that were aligned with the standards, and developed common assessments. The professional development focus was on both “what would I like to learn or what should I be learning given my strengths and weaknesses” and “what must all of us be learning and learning together in order to more effectively prepare students for success.” Again, teachers were placed at the center. And district investment in their learning was viewed as a key to success.

The fifth strategy, balancing central direction with school-based needs, broadened the context within which teachers usually live in schools. If this “balancing” was one way with the district providing mandates and oversight for aligning professional development with literacy goals, then teachers would remain on the bottom of the heap, required to do what they were told to do. But if this balancing was the way the central office and school would forge new partnerships for mutual learning and support, then we would have a different result. Providence sought the latter approach, recognizing that all district priorities needed to be adjusted and adopted to student-level needs and to the needs of teachers who were working in specific contexts and situations. The district was committed, for example, to a school-based, job-embedded approach to professional development that prized collegiality not just in the school but beyond. Teachers were at the center of emergent communities of practice that included consultants from the central office, principals, and even the superintendent herself—a strategy that honored teachers and their learning.

Clearly Providence is not the only district in America to recognize more and more that student-centeredness works best when it is embedded in a culture that prizes teachers and their learning.

Deep and Lasting Improvement

Susan Fuhrman (2003) argues that reform may be the wrong metaphor for gauging changes that matter in schools—changes that actually affect teaching and learning in a deep and sustained way. We have tried reform, she notes. We have reorganized schools in various and seemingly endless configurations as if we were preoccupied with structure—with changing the way things look in schools but not improving the results that schools are getting. In her words:

So, if “reform” is not the answer, what is? Perhaps we need to shift the metaphor from “reform” to “improvement.” Reform is a matter of policies swooping down from on high. Improvement is a matter of continued attention to the basics of teaching and learning—the heart of schooling. Improvement is slow, unending, not particularly glamorous, hard work. It involves deep investment in teacher quality and knowledge, through recruiting, compensating, and developing teachers. It involves thoughtful, well-funded professional development that is intensive, extensive (over a period of time), focused on the curriculum that teachers are teaching, and followed up by coaching and other on-site support [p. 10].

Teacher quality is important, and recent efforts to reform schools by emphasizing teacher learning and the development of professional learning communities are helpful. But are they helpful enough to trigger the turnaround needed to make schools intellectual environments for teachers and students and to result in deep and long-lasting improvements? Cohen and Sheer (2003) say no. Deep and lasting improvements will be achieved, they argue, only when teachers are placed at the center of attention and when everyone else and everything else is placed at the periphery. Though students and parents, testing and accountability policies, and

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bureaucratic and managerial requirements have important roles to play in schooling, teachers should be at the center. As Cohen and Sheer see it, improvement will happen when schools are redefined as intellectual centers. Cohen (2002) states, for example, “For a school to be an intellectual center, for it to have the ethos, the sense of community, and the ‘spirit’ that so many parents and administrators seek, it must celebrate the work of its teachers in a way that is rarely seen in public schools. It must attend to the needs of teachers, it must accommodate their sensibilities, and it must treat the teachers’ contributions with as much genuine concern as it does those of any other constituency” (p. 533).

Cohen and Sheer’s views are echoed by Bunting (2003) as follows:

Experts do much good, but when they are used as stand-ins for the thinking teachers must do for themselves, damage is done. This is because the important work of the teacher really is to think about teaching, to think about it all day, every day, and through the thinking to get better at the doing. No new program can achieve this for teachers, no new theory, no latest fix. The work is just too complex to be captured this simply. The work has its own way—a slow, hard, and persistent way that is best described as “mindfulness”. . . . But mindfulness goes deeper. It digs into the nooks and crannies of all school life, drawing strength from the intellectual context teachers build for themselves and for one another. Formal learning helps: the workshops teachers attend, the conferences they go to, the advanced degrees they earn. But the layering of a school’s intellectual context is far more intricate, far less amenable to planning and scheduling. It builds from questions teachers raise as they talk in hallways. It grows from practices observed as another’s and wisely adopted as one’s own. It feeds significantly from stories teachers tell one another about teaching, and thrives on helpful advice and shared confidences between teachers [p. 41].

The arguments of Cohen, Sheer, and Bunting are compelling enough to deserve careful consideration and broad discussion—but are we giving away the store? Are not there dangers in placing teachers at the center? Is it a good idea to redistribute power in this way? Wouldn't principals and superintendents, their boards and parents have less say? After all, teacher-centeredness may not be as altruistic as Cohen, Sheer, and Bunting say.

These are valid concerns. But informed opinion suggests that empowering teachers, supporting their work, and improving their working conditions does not dilute but thickens the amount of power and authority that is available for everyone else. Think back to the work of Arnold Tannenbaum (1968), summarized in Chapter Two. Tannenbaum found that designated leaders such as principals and other administrators actually increased their control over achieving school purposes by giving up power. Further, he noted that the total amount of power that existed across ranks in an organization was a better predictor of both satisfaction and performance than was the relative amount of power held by one group (administrators, for example) as compared with another group (teachers and students, for example).

Accountability

The bottom line is that principals, superintendents, and boards are accountable for ensuring that schools are not only effective but keep getting better. It is deep and lasting improvement that the public wants. If teachers are able to work more productively at teaching and learning, principals, superintendents, and boards are going to be more successful. If teachers are not able to work more productively, then schools will not be as effective as they must be. A teacher-centered approach, so it seems, helps everyone become a winner at the game of accountability for effective teaching and learning. Teachers get the support they need to be successful. Students learn more. And the schools' leadership measures up to the public's demands.

Table 5.1. Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Summary of Recent Research

<p>In his study of nine hundred Texas teachers, Ferguson found that teacher expertise as measured by scores on licensing examinations accounted for 40 percent of the variation in reading and writing achievement for students in Grades 1–11. Teacher expertise was more important than any other factor. Ferguson noted that every dollar spent on enhancing teacher quality resulted in greater student achievement than did investing that same dollar in other factors.</p> <p>After reviewing the research, Linda Darling-Hammond concluded that while demographic characteristics are related to student achievement, they are not as influential in predicting student achievement as are quality of teacher variables.</p> <p>Steven Rivkin and Eric Hanushek found that when compared with least-effective teachers, more-effective teachers managed to get one additional year's worth of learning from their students. Research in Texas, for example, found that having a very good teacher instead of an average teacher for four years in a row could close the achievement gap in math between high-income and low-income students.</p>	<p>Ferguson, R. "Paying for Public Education: New Evidence on How and Why Money Matters." <i>Harvard Journal on Legislation</i>, Summer 1991, 28(2), 465–498.</p> <p>Darling-Hammond, L. "Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence." <i>Educational Policy Analysis Archives</i>, 2000, 8(1), 1–50.</p> <p>Rivkin, S., and Hanushek, E. Cited in "To Close the Gap, Quality Counts." <i>Education Week</i>, Jan. 9, 2003, p. 10.</p>
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William Sanders and Sandra Horn concluded that differences in achievement between students with high-quality teachers for three consecutive years and students with low-quality teachers for the same period was 50 percentile points on standardized tests.

S. Paul Wright, Sandra Horn, and William Sanders note, "The immediate and clear implication . . . is that seemingly more can be done to improve education by improving the effectiveness of teachers than by any other single factor" (p. 63).

Teachers' knowledge of subject matter influences student performance. Teachers with proper training in the subjects they teach had students who achieved more.

"Having good teachers is the single most important factor in providing a good education for kids. Research shows that students of the best teachers learn up to six times more than students of less effective teachers."

Sanders, W. L., and Horn, S. P. "The Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) Mixed-Model Methodology in Educational Assessment." *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 1994, 8, 299–311.

Wright, S. P., Horn, S., and Sanders, W. "Teacher and Classroom Context Effects on Student Achievement: Implications for Teacher Evaluation." *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 1997, 11(1), 57–67.

"To Close the Gap, Quality Counts." *Education Week*, Jan. 9, 2003, p. 10.

Puriefoy, W. "Newsblast Special Edition: Give Kids Good Schools." *Public Education Network*, Jan. 7, 2003.

