



LEADERSHIP: PRACTITIONER'S BRIEF

K20 IDEALS

Introduction

School leaders often are in a critical position to shape the educational culture of their schools. Though traditional ideas of school leadership have explored top-down forms, there has been a notable shift in recent years to explore ways in which leadership can be shared¹. When leadership is shared, administrators and teachers are able to work together to create an environment in which students, school staff, and families feel supported². Engaged leadership improves student achievement not only through the instructional leadership itself, but also through the higher levels of teacher involvement as it relates to school improvement³. When we explore the value of the school leader, we see that school leadership significantly impacts an organization's ability to positively influence teaching and learning⁴. Considered second only to classroom teaching in its effect on student learning, school leadership is crucial to the success of school improvement efforts⁵.

Instructional Leadership

School leadership with a focus on school improvement and student outcomes fosters a positive learning environment⁶. Instructional leadership is a method for school improvement enacted through a focus on teaching and learning practices that result in positive outcomes for all students⁷. The myriad of leadership models for achieving this goal can be overwhelming as school leaders attempt to determine which style best suits their educational setting. Instructional leadership is best thought of as a composite approach of different models and practices⁸; this provides school leaders with the flexibility to apply a range of strategies and behaviors that effectively support the specific needs of the school environment. It is also important to focus on fostering teacher growth and improvement to increase student achievement⁹.

It is necessary to recognize that the instructional leader can be more than one type of leader, as different scenarios within the school environment will require different responses. The instructional leader can be the school principal who works alongside teachers to support, guide, and prepare them to make instructionally effective and technologically sound decisions¹⁰. The instructional leader also needs to balance this type of work with the operational tasks required for effective school management, while still maintaining a clear focus on goals and outcomes to drive school improvement¹¹. With student outcomes determined, the instructional leader can create space for collaboration, reciprocal observation of peer teachers, co-teaching, and planning¹². The effective instructional leader adapts to the needs of their teachers and students, blending styles and strategies as needed.

Leadership Models

Instructional leadership enables us to borrow and build on existing models to foster teacher leadership and increased collaboration within the school toward a common goal¹³. School leaders share the goal of empowering their teachers as a path to increasing teacher success, teacher retention, and student achievement¹⁴. Through an examination of each leadership model, we can see the priorities that drive each type of leader. Provided in no specific order, the following leadership models represent a range of approaches that school leaders might initiate:

- **Servant leadership.** Servant leaders put others' goals and well-being before their own¹⁵. The servant leadership model assists in the development of individuals, teams, and organizations by meeting individuals' needs that correspond with Maslow's hierarchy, including physiological needs, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization¹⁶. Educators have a better view of their leaders and a greater desire to stay in their current roles when leaders are willing to share the load¹⁷.

- **Shared leadership.** This model moves away from the classical organizational structure of leadership embedded within a single individual, instead dispersing leadership responsibilities across multiple employees¹⁸. In the school environment, shared leadership can extend beyond definite limits to be shared with all staff as long as the focus remains on student achievement¹⁹. This type of leadership builds capacity for change and improvement through cultivating leadership at all levels of the school to empower others to also take on decision-making²⁰. In shared leadership, the school leader's choice to engage teachers in decision-making processes can enhance teachers' motivation and commitment to instructional improvement efforts²¹.
- **Operational leadership.** Operational leadership consists of the managerial tasks that keep the school running and provides a foundation by which the other leadership styles can thrive²². These tasks include the management of support staff such as custodians and cafeteria staff, facilities, finances, and human resources²³. School leaders can get bogged down in these day-to-day management practices, but it is important to think holistically about time management to ensure there are opportunities to truly lead rather than only manage²⁴.
- **Transformational leadership.** Transformational leadership builds on the idea of collaborating with stakeholders to leverage the strengths of the group in identifying and solving organizational problems²⁵. Transformational leadership provides an environment in which the viewpoints of teachers, students, parents, and community members are all valued by the school leader²⁶. This leadership model is also focused on equipping students with the skills to engage in civic life²⁷. Similar to what we see in shared leadership, transformational leadership helps to build capacity within the school organization²⁸. In this model, the school leader champions equitable access and connections to the world²⁹, while also introducing innovation and shaping organizational culture³⁰.

School Leadership in Practice

To expand on the principles of instructional leadership, we can look at the ways in which effective school leadership can be seen in practice. A key attribute of the effective instructional leader is the ability to split focus between student outcomes and the support of school staff as a path to achieving those outcomes³¹. Borrowing from McREL's 21 leadership responsibilities, instructional leaders can leverage a range of behaviors to guide positive change in a school setting and support their staff in working toward student achievement³². Building on both the needs of the school context and the traits of effective school leaders, the following categories can help to frame the behaviors that effective instructional leaders engage in to create a supportive and empowering environment for their teachers:

- **Collaborative decision-making**
 - *Involve teacher input when making important decisions and policies.* This means allowing teachers to share in the decisions and policies that affect the school³³.
 - *Involve teachers in as diverse roles as possible so they have influence on the decision-making process³⁴.* Leadership teams help to support educator inquiry and collaboration³⁵.
 - *Bring everyone together to agree on data-based improvements.* When school leaders engage in this approach, it produces positive changes in school climate, student achievement, and school preparedness for continued growth and change³⁶.
- **Empowerment, trust, and self-efficacy**
 - *Encourage teachers to share their strengths and mentor others.* This helps teachers feel valued and connected to their school and the profession, which has powerful implications for long-term retention³⁷. This also establishes teachers as equal partners who can mutually benefit from their colleagues' knowledge and skills³⁸. Providing ample feedback and time for reflection throughout the process is critical so that teachers can grow and improve their leadership skills³⁹.
 - *Demonstrate your commitment to giving teachers a voice and ownership in the direction of the school⁴⁰.* This not only engages teachers but also emphasizes that the work is more important than the individual.
 - *Provide teachers with necessary materials and professional development to prepare them for success⁴¹.* Provide professional development related to teacher leadership and data analysis⁴².

- **Collective leadership and responsibility**

- *Foster shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation*⁴³. Once teachers become more confident in engaging consistently and regularly with other staff around shared goals for students and the school, they can begin to engage with the families and communities they serve⁴⁴. When teachers and administrators work together to include community stakeholders, this is an example of collective leadership⁴⁵.
- *Embrace the idea that no job is too small*. Educators have a better view of their leaders and a greater desire to stay in their current roles in a servant leadership model in which leaders are willing to share the load⁴⁶.
- *Provide teachers with collective leadership opportunities that enable them to see the bigger picture of not only shared instructional leadership but also collective responsibility*. Knowledge-sharing enables teams to stretch their creativity in lesson design, to consider ideas such as cross-curricular lesson planning, and to consider how to push their students to think more critically about the world around them. As the creativity within these teams grows and develops, so does that of the individual teachers⁴⁷.

- **Responding to change for growth**

- *Adapt leadership practices to best meet the needs of the situation and the individual, embracing constructive criticism to work toward improvement*⁴⁸. This can also involve monitoring the effectiveness of school practices as they relate to student learning⁴⁹.
- *Demonstrate a willingness to change and actively challenge the status quo*⁵⁰. Adapting to change can be accomplished through looking at trends in school-wide data over time and administering climate surveys to understand changing demographics and emerging needs that could then be addressed by the leadership team through specific, targeted professional development experiences⁵¹.

As we look at school leadership and the principles that help to inform our decisions, it is important to consider how we can apply these ideas in our day-to-day routines.

Conclusion

Leadership and school-wide decision-making has continued to evolve in important and positive ways over time. As principals develop leaders among their staff who can share expertise and lend their talents, the workload is shared. Teachers empowered with a voice in the goals, mission, and direction of learning will experience greater satisfaction in their work, leading to retention. When leadership teams understand that flexibility is key and make choices based on data and feedback, both teams and students benefit. Through team-based leadership, schools can create the best possible learning environment for all students.

References

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¹⁰Marks & Printy, 2003; Torres et al., 2020
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²²Glanz, 2005
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²⁶Shields & Hesbol, 2019
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⁵¹Lyons et al., 2020; Grice, 2019

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