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Improving Leadership for Learning



Overview

Leading, Learning, and Leadership Support

Executive Summary



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University of Washington

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Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

The Leadership Issue Project

State-of-the-Field Reports: Improving Leadership for Learning

These reports have been produced by a research team at the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, a national research consortium home-based at the University of Washington. Developed with support from The Wallace Foundation during the early stages of an initiative that explores central issues in the exercise of educational leadership, the reports synthesize studies, conceptual work, and examples of current and emerging practice.

The reports are intended to clarify each leadership issue, while assembling what is known from empirical studies. The information in these reports lays the groundwork for further study and practical experimentation by leaders and reformers in states, districts, and schools.

The first report offers an overview of leadership and leadership support in relation to the overarching goal of improving learning. The remaining six explore in more detail particular issues within that terrain.



Overview

Leading, Learning, and Leadership Support

By Michael S. Knapp, Bradley S. Portin, Michael A. Copland, and Margaret L. Plecki.



Data-Informed Leadership

Data-Informed Leadership in Education

By Michael S. Knapp, Juli Ann Swinnerton, Michael A. Copland, and Jack Monpas-Huber



Resource Allocation

Allocating Resources and Creating Incentives to Improve Teaching and Learning

By Margaret L. Plecki, Christopher R. Alejano, Michael S. Knapp, and Chad Lochmiller



Redefining Leadership Roles

Redefining Roles, Responsibilities, and Authority of School Leaders

By Bradley S. Portin, Christopher R. Alejano, Michael S. Knapp, and Elizabeth Marzolf



Leadership Assessment

Purposes, Uses, and Practices of Leadership Assessment in Education

By Bradley S. Portin, Sue Feldman, and Michael S. Knapp



Improving Governance

Redefining and Improving School District Governance

By Margaret L. Plecki, Julie McCleery, and Michael S. Knapp



High School Transformation

Leadership for Transforming High Schools

By Michael A. Copland and Elizabeth Boatright

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Summary: Leading, Learning, and Leadership Support

It is a difficult, yet exciting, time to be an educational leader. So much is expected of school leaders, district officials, school board members, or even teachers who are assuming formal or informal leadership responsibilities. State educational leaders operating at some distance from the classroom face the same high expectations, along with the demands of guiding an entire educational system toward improved performance. The climate of high accountability underscores the weight of the expectations facing all these leaders. The stakes are high.

The biggest challenge lies in visualizing how to connect leadership practice with student learning, and then mobilizing others' energies and commitment accordingly. This challenge implicates not only individual leaders, operating from their respective vantage points in a complicated system, but all of them together. *How are they to bring their collective efforts to bear on the task of improving learning for all students?* And it also implicates a larger cast of characters whose actions guide or support leadership

practice. *How do they create conditions that prompt and enable leaders to constructively influence learning outcomes?*

This report summary, and the longer report of which it is a part, offer answers to these questions. We do so by mapping out, in broad strokes, the leadership activities and supporting conditions that enable learning-focused leadership to happen, while suggesting entry points whereby leaders who wish to pursue learning improvement agendas may do so. The report accompanies a series of six others that delve more deeply into particular dimensions of this broad territory.

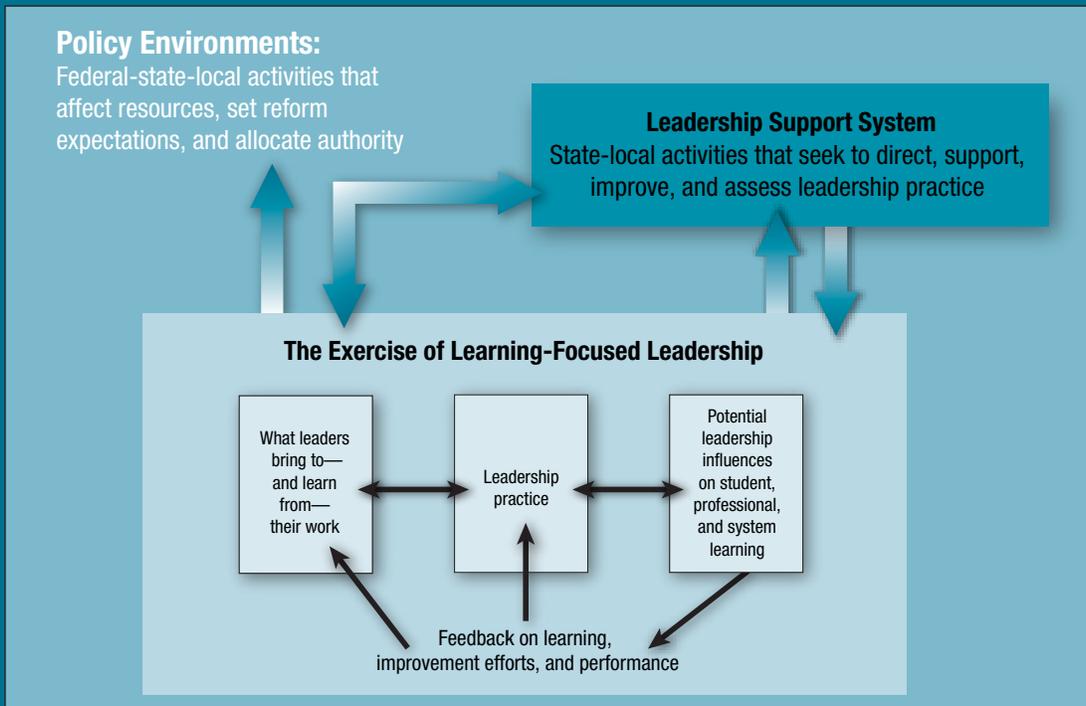
The report rests on scholarship and practical experimentation that reflect an emerging understanding of the kinds of leadership and leadership support which meet this challenge. This view presumes that more than student learning is involved. Active learning on the part of teachers and administrators and on the part of the system as a whole can reinforce the process and outcomes of improving student learning. In schools certain kinds of leadership

action are likely to enhance the prospects for learning improvement, and evidence is emerging that comparable leadership actions at the school district level can make a difference in learning outcomes. But the fine detail of learning-focused leadership action and the corresponding leadership support systems have yet to be described and studied in ways that inform practice. This report begins to address that need.

Activities and Conditions that Prompt and Support Learning-Focused Leadership

A productive way to think about this challenge highlights three layers of activity that prompt and support leaders' efforts to improve the learning in public schools. First, some of these activities are embedded in the exercise of leadership itself, a second layer seeks to guide or support leadership practice, while a third layer sets broader policies not targeted

Figure S-1. Activities and Conditions that Shape Learning-Focused Leadership



to leadership per se, yet which can powerfully affect leadership practice. Separately and together, these activities create conditions that shape and support what leaders do, think to do, and are able to do, in relation to learning improvement, schematically suggested in Figure S-1.

The starting point is leaders' persistent and public commitment to focus the school, district, or state educational system on the quality of learning for all students. At first glance, standards-based reform policies may appear to do just that, but interpreted too literally, these reforms can easily push educators to become preoccupied with achievement score measures, rather than with a broader concept of learning and learning improvement. Caught up in a compliance mentality, educators can easily lose sight of the professional learning and "system learning" that sustainable learning improvement under standards-based reform implies.

Activities embedded in the exercise of leadership itself. Given the intent to exercise learning-focused leadership, particular kinds of activities are implicated in any learning improvement strategy—

- *Redefining leadership roles and responsibilities.* School and district leaders reconstruct

or assume redesigned leadership roles that keep matters of learning improvement in the foreground as a central, collective responsibility.

- *Using data, evidence, and feedback.* Leaders at all levels generate, access, and use information that helps them pinpoint learning needs, imagine solutions, describe the operation of programs, and assess performance. Of particular importance are various forms of *feedback* to leaders concerning their own and others' efforts to address learning agendas.
- *Focusing resources on learning.* Local and state leaders allocate—which often means *reallocating*—resources that directly support the learning of students, teachers, and others, while managing the politics of (re)allocation accordingly. In addition, rather than treating resources as fixed quantities, they pay particular attention to *developing* resources, especially the human resources—the teaching staff and instructional support personnel who are in a position to serve the full range of students' learning needs.

Activities that seek to guide or support leadership practice.

One step removed, other activities at the state and local level take aim at the way leaders think about and approach their work, thereby guiding or supporting leaders toward more learning-focused forms of practice, by—

- *Developing future leadership capacity.* As part of formal preparation programs, recruitment initiatives, or “home-grown” leadership development arrangements inside school districts, a new generation of teacher leaders, school administrators, district officials, instructional improvement coaches, or an agency’s leadership cadre can be identified and nurtured, who take learning improvement seriously and understand what it means.
- *Providing direction or models for leaders’ daily work.* Certain state and local policies and practices communicate what is expected for leaders’ work—e.g., through widely promulgated leadership standards, specifications for leadership positions, and arrangements for administrator supervision. Though they often don’t, these

communications about leaders’ work can speak clearly and forcefully about learning-focused leadership practice.

- *Supporting the ongoing professional learning of practicing leaders.* Arrangements of many kinds, from individual mentoring or coaching to formal professional development sessions, teach individuals or leadership teams what it might mean to focus energy more centrally on learning improvement.
- *Establishing leadership assessment systems.* Arrangements for generating evaluative data about leadership performance, either as formative guidance for the leaders’ growth or summative judgments about their accomplishments and capacity, can generate data about the learning-focused aspects of leaders’ practice.

Activities that set broader policies not targeted to leadership per se, yet which powerfully affect leadership practice. Finally, other activities in federal, state, and local policy environments address facets of the educational system that have important implications for leaders’ work, even though they are not pri-

marily aimed at leadership practice. These activities occur in—

- *The authorizing environment*, generated by governance arrangements (at all levels), collective bargaining and the contractual agreements it produces, and the interaction among educational stakeholders within and around these arrangements.
- *The resource environment*, including the sources of funds and human resources, and also the infrastructure for gathering information on and for the schools, as well as rules governing the use of these resources.
- *The reform policy environment*, comprising the forces and conditions created by state and federal policies aimed at enhancing the quality of schooling, such as standards-based reform policies.

In numerous ways, these actions in the policy environments invite or command the attention of educational leaders. While the particular policies that come to the fore reflect many interests, a concern for the quality of learning may be infused into the debate and interplay

that produces these policies. At a minimum, participants can look hard at what these policies might mean for leaders' ability to focus their energies on learning improvement; at best, participants in policy environments can coalesce around actions that will make leaders' jobs easier.

What It Looks Like in Practice

These broad categories of activity beg questions about what people or groups located in different positions within states, districts, or schools actually do in attempting to guide or support leadership practice that focuses on learning improvement. Some examples, developed further in the full report and the accompanying six reports, follow.

In schools, a relatively small number of educators are implicated in the leadership of the school, but more than the formal administrators (principal, assistant principal) may participate in activities that broaden the concept of "leadership" and focus it on matters of teaching and learning in classrooms, as illustrated by the activities in Table 1.

Table 1. Illustrative Activities at the School Level that Prompt or Support Learning-focused Leadership

Embedded in the exercise of learning-focused leadership itself	Aimed at guiding or supporting leadership practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Role redefinition:</i> Establishing teams within the school which take on instructional leadership responsibilities • <i>Information use:</i> Setting up systems for teachers to examine student work in relation to grade-level expectations and state standards • <i>Resource reallocation:</i> Reallocating time so that teachers can work together on instructional planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Leadership development:</i> Identifying teachers with leadership potential and nurturing their growth as a future instructional leadership cadre • <i>Direction for leaders' daily work:</i> Adopting school-specific statements about what is expected of all who exercise leadership • <i>Support for leaders' professional learning:</i> Creating regular occasions for leaders in the school to engage in new learning about high-quality teaching • <i>Leadership assessment systems:</i> Developing a 360-system for gaining regular feedback on the principal's and other leaders' effectiveness

Table 2. Illustrative Activities at the District Level that Prompt or Support Learning-focused Leadership

Embedded in the exercise of learning-focused leadership itself	Aimed at guiding or supporting leadership practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Role redefinition:</i> Creating managerial support roles to remove some aspects of the routine work of the principalship and enable more of a learning focus • <i>Information use:</i> Creating or locating informational tools for school leaders • <i>Resource reallocation:</i> Making teacher professional development, linked to identified learning agendas, a resource priority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Leadership development:</i> Developing a “leadership pipeline” strategy for the district, in conjunction with a local provider, that seeks to “grow” personnel through various stages of leadership careers • <i>Direction for leaders' daily work:</i> Adapting state leadership standards in ways that reflect local learning improvement priorities • <i>Support for leaders' professional learning:</i> Creating a local leadership induction/mentoring program, parallel to teacher induction and mentoring • <i>Leadership assessment systems:</i> Creating learning-focused criteria to guide leadership assessment within the district

At the district level, a different set of individuals come into play, who occupy positions that are generally defined in terms of administrative functions—personnel, budget, transportation, community relations, school administrator supervision, and so on—only some of which are formally related to teaching and learning. Left to their own devices, their work will often have little to do with learning improvement, but through intentional action by leaders strategically placed within the central office—often the superintendent and administrative cabinet, but other mid-level staff as well—district central offices can develop new ways of relating to schools, implied by the activities shown in Table 2, that concentrate effort and attention on learning improvement goals.

A more dispersed set of actors participate in the state policy environments that affect local educational leaders' work. The organizational and political cleavages between State Education Department, governor's office, legislature (both houses), State Board of Education, and other players (e.g., professional Standards Board) will often mean that common

ground is hard, or even impossible, to find. Yet separately and, when possible, together, these players have the capacity to make a focus on learning and the ramifications for leadership support central to their respective contributions to the mix of policies aimed at schools, as Table 3 suggests.

Not shown in any one of these tables is the potentially reinforcing effect that activities in one area and at one level of the system can have on each other. The enduring challenge is one of finding coherent, sustainable ways to join forces across jurisdictional or positional boundaries, and across levels in the system, in the service of learning-focused leadership and leadership support.

Table 3. Illustrative Activities in the State Policy Environment that Affect Leaders' Ability to Focus on Learning Improvement

Aimed at guiding or supporting leadership practice	Aimed at broader policy, not specific to leadership, yet with major implications for learning-focused practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Leadership development</i>: Ensuring that principal licensure standards are keyed to learning improvement goals • <i>Direction for leaders' daily work</i>: Publicly promoting instructional leadership and related aspects of learning-focused leadership as a central responsibility of local educational leaders • <i>Support for leaders' professional learning</i>: Investing state dollars in periodic professional development for practicing leaders (e.g., to promote instructional leadership), especially for school leaders in their first three years • <i>Leadership assessment systems</i>: Linking leadership assessment to explicit, learning-focused standards for leadership practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Authorizing environment</i>: State governing bodies creating occasions for cross-department conversation about learning goals • <i>Resource environment</i>: Creating incentives that encourage the relocation of staff to better serve unmet student needs • <i>Reform policy environment</i>: Allowing districts flexibility in defining the indicators of success in achieving state standards-based reform goals

Entry Points

Emerging practices and some more established ones, in educational systems that show signs of improvement (at least, as indicated by test score performance), suggest the following six entry points in the process of nudging educational systems toward a greater and better supported focus on learning improvement:

1. *Establishing a clear and public focus on learning improvement priorities for students, professionals, and the system as a whole.* Here, leaders are in a position to put all of these learning agendas on the table

and to encourage action that creates mutual reinforcement among them.

2. *Reconceiving leadership roles so that they emphasize learning improvement, take full advantage of the collective capacity of staff, and still manage basic operational needs of schools and districts.* Here, working together, district and school staff have numerous ways to distribute responsibility for important tasks such as instructional leadership. They can do so differently at elementary,

middle, and high school levels, if attention is paid to the level-specific meaning of these leadership roles.

3. *Informing leadership action with data and inquiry that relates to learning needs, performance, and conditions supporting learning.* Here, state and local leaders can do much more to prompt “cycles of inquiry” in schools, district central offices, and state agencies and as they do so encourage “cultures of inquiry” in these settings. Building robust data infrastructures and investing in efforts to help leaders develop “data literacy,” broadly construed, will help support these cycles of inquiry.
4. *Aligning people, money, and time as closely as possible with learning improvement priorities.* Because funds, staff, and time do not always bear a close relation to learning improvement priorities, there are many opportunities to bring them more into line, though doing so will often generate active political resistance or simply have to work against the weight of tradi-
- tional practice. Reallocating funds and staffing incentives to support high-needs schools is especially important, as is the configuration of time that will support joint planning and professional learning.
5. *Providing leaders with regular feedback about their work in relation to learning improvement priorities, combined with regular opportunities to learn about and from their work.* In a much more fine-grained way than annual assessments of student learning provide, leaders in a variety of school and district positions can benefit from assessment feedback, both formal and informal, that helps them know how to improve their practice. The goal of improving leadership practice is more likely to be achieved when the feedback is tied to opportunities for further professional learning in the context of daily work (e.g., through mentoring systems).
6. *Combining clear guidance for leaders with sufficient room to exercise discretion over matters related to learning improvement.* State and local

governing bodies and others who define what educational leaders are expected to do have substantial opportunities to communicate more explicitly the centrality of learning improvement in leaders' work. But the message needs to be accompanied by attention to the degree of discretion leaders need to carry out this responsibility.

These entry points are only illustrative, and they are not based on a complete and irrefutable evidence base about the development and ultimate effectiveness of learning-focused practice. There is much we have yet to learn about how to encourage and support these leadership practices, yet the logic is clear and compelling, and emerging evidence and images of possibility suggest that the logic is sound.

We close with a hope and a caution. The hope is that these ideas prompt further efforts to connect different leaders' efforts with one another, especially across levels in the system, in pursuit of a more coherent web of support for strong, learning-focused leadership in schools and school districts. The caution is that we avoid placing

unrealistic expectations on educational leaders, as if they were solely responsible for the learning of the nation's young people. And we also caution that partial solutions—that attend to one kind of supportive condition while ignoring another—may set the stage for leaders and the educators they lead to fail. Information without resources, new roles without authority to act, learning-focused leadership activity without feedback on it—all may fall short of the promise that lies in the attempt to renew and refocus leadership practice in education.



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CTP—a national research consortium home-based at the University of Washington and including three other research partners (Stanford, University of Pennsylvania, and University of Michigan)—studies the way policies, leadership, and conditions in schools, districts, states, the federal government, and the education profession shape the quality of teaching and learning in the nation’s schools. The Center pays particular attention to the ways these forces and conditions interact with each other to influence what teachers, learners, and educational leaders do in daily practice.

A major goal of the Center’s program of research is to discover and document the means for improving practice so that the nation’s young people experience a challenging and equitable education. To that end, the Center’s research products are designed to inform policymakers, practicing leaders, and the educational reform community, along with scholars.



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