

Distributed Leadership Helps Schools Succeed

By Jackie Burniske and Tom Barlow

Educators, community members, researchers, and policy makers agree: today's principal cannot lead the school alone. At one time, managing the school building was a principal's primary duty. Today, principals have many other duties as well. These include responding to parents and the community, collaborating with outside agencies that support the school, and managing the finances and staffing. To support improved student achievement, principals must also coordinate teachers' professional development and ensure that standards are taught in the classroom. And the list goes on. No wonder many principals are leaving the profession and others are hesitant to join.

Given the demands placed upon principals, collaboration and support are necessary in order to provide each child with a high quality education. Current leadership buzzwords like "participatory leadership," "de-centered leadership," "shared decision making," and "distributed leadership" describe the new leadership role. Let's take a look at some of the models being used in schools today.

Shared leadership through a co-principalship is one model. The co-principals share every leadership function, including working with teachers, parents, and students. This arrangement requires extensive coordination, but, with appropriate implementation, results in increased support for teachers and parents.

Another shared leadership model can involve a small group of parents and teachers who work as partners with the principal. The leadership team has a well-defined task, such as creating a school improvement plan based upon student data. After the plan is complete, the leadership team works with others to complete different tasks, like planning professional development.

A third distributed leadership model is to organize the school like a company, with the principal serving as CEO. An assistant principal, department heads, and grade-level leaders can each be responsible for specific functions.

Some schools work to create a model in which everyone in the school accepts school leadership responsibilities, and those with specialized skills and talents take on appropriate tasks. For example, teachers in the math department may help other teachers analyze complex student achievement data.

Regardless of which model of distributed leadership a school chooses, everyone must share a common vision aligned with meaningful and attainable goals for student achievement. As one Pacific island elementary school principal explains, "An educational leader has the same qualities as a community leader. The process of learning needs collaboration and support from all."

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For Further Reading

For more information about these models of distributed leadership, see Larry Lashway's article "Distributed Leadership," available at http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/roundup/Summer_2003.html.