Fostering shared Leadership

When teachers begin taking ownership – alongside administrators – for poor student achievement, they will gain ownership of solutions that are developed as a team.

In 1933, Edward VIII shocked the world by abdicating the throne of England in order to marry Wallis Simpson, a divorced American socialite. Disdaining the rituals and trappings of royalty, Edward felt they needed to change to reflect modern times. He also desired to make the throne more accessible to the common people. However, his course of action did not bring these things about. Instead, his brother Albert took the throne, and the monarchy continued just as before.

Extreme examples and non-examples can sometimes be useful to illustrate a point and inform practice, and Edward provides an extreme example of a poor strategy for creating change. Historians would argue that Edward was simply motivated by an entirely selfish aim – marrying Wallis – far more important to him than serving as a leader. Nevertheless, a lesson can be gleaned from Edward in considering a principal's conundrum: how to develop shared leadership.

Accountability for all students' success continues to rise. As principals and teachers attend conferences that spark a desire to transform their schools into professional learning communities to improve student learning, shared leadership becomes an urgent necessity. The principalship as a monarchy, holding sole responsibility for all important decisions – with the "princes and princesses" (individual teachers) in their sovereign classrooms engaging in private practice – is an outdated and insufficient model today.

Creating significant achievement gains

In the 1980s, the nationally acclaimed California School Leadership Academy developed a program for school leadership teams, which a few county offices in California have continued since its de-funding. Then and now, a consistent strand of the two-year program has been "Forming a Learning Community."

The external evaluator who gathered and analyzed data on participating schools under CSLA showed that the resulting changes in teaching and learning created statistically significant improvements in

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student achievement. The data analysis of the nearly 100 schools whose teams have participated locally since 2003 confirms this continued trend – a testament to the power of shared leadership.

Foundational to the current program, PLC School Leadership Teams That Work, is the development of shared leadership between the principal and teacher leaders. Over these many years, we have observed a wide range of principal behaviors as they either struggle with or grow into (as most do) the new role of appropriately sharing leadership.

Obviously, not all leadership responsibilities that reside in the principalship can or should be shared. Confidential personnel and student issues, district contractual obligations, legal responsibilities for school and student safety, and numerous other areas of responsibility must be borne by administrators alone. Even in areas where leadership is appropriately shared, the "buck stops here" with the principal, regardless of the issue or decision.

However, the leadership research of Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning identified 21 areas of principal responsibility that significantly impact student achievement, and according to Robert Marzano, *et al,* in *School Leadership That Works* (2005), certain aspects of many of these should definitely be shared by the leadership team.

The mention of Edward VIII is an extreme non-example, included here because each year as principals bring their leadership teams and begin working together, abdication is a behavior we sometimes observe – intentional, as a strategy, or unintentional, due to lack of principal awareness of this behavior and its impact.

Richard and Rebecca DuFour distinguish between the traditional concept of instructional leaders, and what they term "learning leaders." Under their definition, the principal as learning leader is really the "lead learner." Most would agree that an instructional leader makes professional development available. A principal who is the lead learner is typically found engaging in professional development side-by-side with the teachers, modeling a high degree of engagement and participation, spearheading discussions and leading decision-making about curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Principals who send their teachers off for staff development while they remain behind (or in their office, when it is held onsite) – notably those where planning will occur for implementation of new classroom strategies, or changed school-wide practices – are broadcasting its relative unimportance. Their absence proclaims the negligible degree to which the strategies or practices will actually be implemented, monitored and supported.

Obviously, it is not feasible for a principal to attend every teacher workshop. But those that have ramifications for the school as a whole, especially those involving the leadership team, should be a priority. Sending an AP or academic coach with the teachers just doesn't carry the same weight as the principal's personal involvement, nor does it create the same potential for the high degree of implementation needed to impact student outcomes.

Importance of being the learning leader

It is possible that many principals simply don't realize how critical it is to be the learning leader whenever their teacher leaders are together in these settings. For example, a principal leaves his leadership team session early because he has scheduled a meeting with a parent. During team planning, the teachers express growing discouragement. They want to plan a presentation for the upcoming staff meeting, but without the principal present, they do not feel confident that the presentation they develop will meet his approval. It may not even be put on the agenda. They feel that the principal's absence represents his disinterest in the work, for which they have all developed passion and urgency.

The same is true if the principal shows up with the team, but then spends the time on a cell phone, PDA or laptop. One principal, when asked how she planned to support and guide her team on a particular issue, since the discussion had gotten bogged down while she had pushed back from the table in order to text on her PDA, replied that she had been trying to force them to resolve the issue without her.

Leadership programs should model the reflective practice that they preach. Such programs must continue working to improve the development of principals' capacity, so they can, in turn, develop their teams. Leadership programs must strategically support principal development so that:

• In the principal's vision for the school, all students are succeeding, and s/he understands how to select and leverage continuous adult learning opportunities to translate this to reality;

• Principals see themselves as the learning leaders;

• In McREL's terms, principals know when to step up, and when to step back;

• Principals develop their skill-sets for stepping up;

• Principals understand the difference between sharing leadership and delegation, and are able to do both as appropriate;

• Principals have or develop the courage to hold fast when team decisions are unpopular with vocal staff members;

• Principals are willing to hold potentially uncomfortable discussions with resistant teachers, and hold them accountable;

• Principals are actually willing to share leadership, and to intentionally develop their teachers to assume increasingly greater leadership roles.

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Each of these examples exposes a disconnect between the reality of teacher leaders' readiness and capacity for shared leadership, and the principal's assessment of it. Or perhaps the principals in these and similar cases simply didn't know how to develop the capacity of their teams in order to share leadership appropriately.

Situations like these may arise at the site as well as during team professional development sessions. One teacher member of a leadership team once expressed, confidentially, great frustration about her principal's lack of follow-through, his resistance to creating agendas and minutes for leadership team meetings, and lack of communication to the rest of the staff.

"It's like we're working in a vacuum," she said. "I don't know why I agreed to be on this leadership team – it's so frustrating."

Principal's role in developing leaders

Often, teachers on a typical leadership team initially represent a range of readiness levels to assume the role of leading their peers. Additionally, leading adults requires a different skill-set than instructing students. Although an effective program provides both skill development and discussion opportunities to develop teacher leaders' confidence and readiness, the principal's leadership is pivotal.

Kristen Hunter enrolled in PLC School Leadership Teams That Work with her team during her first year as principal of Valley View High School in the Moreno Valley Unified School District. After the second year, she said, "I'm glad you spent so much time talking about leadership at the beginning. That was new for my teachers. Most of them weren't department chairs or members of our standing leadership team. I had chosen them to lead key teams among the 27 [collaborative teams] we were starting."

Highly effective principals maintain a balancing act of "stepping up" (being more directive as needed), and "stepping back" (acting more in a guiding role as appropriate). Over time, a principal who intentionally balances her leadership in this way creates a high-functioning team of teacher leaders who, in turn, become increasingly effective leading their own teams of colleagues.

Debbie Fay became principal of Mountain View Middle School, also in Moreno Valley, in 2003. The school was struggling with student achievement, and the culture could only be described as toxic. Debbie immediately realized that developing teacher leadership was the only hope for improving the school.

When Debbie first began working with her leadership team, although she spent much time listening, her style initially was fairly directive. She made statements like, "We really need to start looking at how the kids are doing in each area. Let's take a look at math." She accepted no excuses, and simply did not allow the long-held practice of blaming students, parents or feeder elementary schools.

She not only carefully guided most conversations, but often assigned tasks, since this was a new way of operating for most

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of the leadership team members, with the negative school culture having historically discouraged teachers from stepping out of narrowly defined roles.

In every session, Debbie was the lead learner. She listened and learned along with the teachers, but her questions showed that she always remained a step ahead in order to guide their thinking. For example, as the team examined student data, Debbie might ask, "Vida, you lead math. What do you think is behind the difference in seventh- and eighth-grade scores?"

Since the end of the school's participation in the program, Debbie's leadership style with her teachers has continued to evolve. As her teacher leaders gained confidence and skill – stepping up and taking initiative in all facets of curriculum, instruction and assessment – Debbie began stepping back more often. Instead of always simply direct- ing, she brought more ideas to the staff and leadership team for input and group deci- sion-making. Teacher and team creativity blossomed.

She frequently used coaching questions with teacher leaders who were leading teams with challenging colleagues; however, when direct advice and suggestions were needed, she provided them. Most importantly, Deb- bie realized that as principal, it was up to her, not the teacher leaders, to hold individuals accountable for professional team behavior.

The direct involvement of Debbie and her two assistant principals, Mark Hasson and Lori Holland, was instrumental in launch- ing teacher collaboration. Each administra- tor was responsible for a group of teacher teams in a content area, and sat in with the teams as they were beginning the collabora- tive process. The administrators modeled involvement, helped troubleshoot problems, and by their very presence supported each team leader in the sometimes daunting task of fulfilling this important new role.

According to McREL, one research-based leadership responsibility of effective princi- pals is situational awareness. As the term implies, knowing when the time is right for a new practice to be introduced is paramount for success in major changes (those having what McREL terms "second order implica- tions" for many teachers), such as imple- menting a guaranteed and viable curriculum in core subjects across the school, or restruc- turing the master schedule to provide extra time and support for needy students. Mov- ing too soon can kill the best initiative, but a principal could wait forever for teachers who are reluctant and consistently lag behind.

The successful fulfillment of Debbie's growing expectations for the teacher leaders is a testament to her high level of situational awareness, as well as her personal knowledge of each team's level of functioning, and of her team leaders' individual levels of confidence and comfort. Teacher leaders came to be the cheerleaders for the curricular and master schedule changes.

Also, as teams became comfortable dis- cussing and trying out research-based in-

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structional strategies, Debbie invited members of the leadership team to do classroom walk-throughs to see the strategies in action. Eventually, all teachers were included in regular walk-throughs.

Debbie's carefully laid groundwork with the leadership team, creating specific agreements about walk-throughs' purpose and method, and for gathering and sharing of data from them, made walk-throughs a highly effective tool for building staff expertise with new strategies. This preparation also allayed possible teacher fears, and headed off potential contractual challenges and other barriers.

Today, MVMS's collaborative team meetings are visited and observed by teachers and administrators from all levels. The strategies that are discussed during collaborations can often be seen immediately in classrooms following the team meetings. Student achievement has improved dramatically, and achievement gaps are closing. Like teachers, principals and other administrators need continued development. Lack of confidence or skill or poor situational awareness may cause principals to simply abdicate leadership, fail to follow through, prevent them from allowing teachers to share leadership in meaningful ways, or even reverse team decisions when a few reluctant staff members complain. A principal lacking courage will find ways to avoid addressing unprofessional behavior, bringing swift death to his teacher leaders' belief in his ability to lead difficult change.

Those who coach and mentor principals can greatly support their development by asking reflective questions about ways the principal balances his own leadership in order to effectively and appropriately build shared leadership for improving achievement. For example:

• What criteria do you use to decide when to be more or less directive?

• What was a recent situation where you

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stepped up/stepped back?

• What is the role of the leadership team, and other teacher leaders?

• What decisions do you make alone, and how do you communicate them to staff?

• What do you simply delegate, and how do you decide?

• How do you picture student achievement in three years, and how will you get there?

• What criteria do you use to decide when to have a one-to-one talk with a teacher about a problem?

Appropriately shared leadership – or its absence – is demonstrated almost any time a principal convenes a group of teachers, including staff meetings, leadership team meetings, and teacher collaborations. Questions like these can help a principal reflect on the state of shared leadership as evidenced in such meetings.

Research on PLCs generates confidence that as shared leadership becomes the norm for all schools, student outcomes will improve dramatically. Achievement gaps will close. When teachers begin taking ownership, alongside administrators, for problems of poor achievement, they also gain ownership of the solutions developed as a team.

This does not happen overnight, and it does not happen through the strategy of abdication and hoping. As demonstrated at Mountain View and other schools with effective leaders, patient, skilled, intentional development is the path to a strong team of teacher leaders – and an entire staff comprised of them! ∎

Resources

DuFour, Richard & DuFour, Rebecca, *et al.* (2006). *Learning by Doing: A Handbook of Professional Learning Communities At Work.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Gordon, Gary. (2006). *Building Engaged Schools: Getting the Most Out of America's Classrooms.* New York, NY: Gallup Press.

Hattie, John. (2009). *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Marzano, Robert J.; Waters, Tim & McNulty, Brian. (2005). *School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

RCOE TV (2010). *Developing Shared Leadership – An Interview with Principal Debbie Fay.* Opening program for the planned series, *Best Practices in Leadership.* Riverside County Office of Education. This 30-minute program can be viewed online in its entirety at www.rcoe.k12.ca.us/edLeadershipServices/products.html, where it can also be purchased.

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