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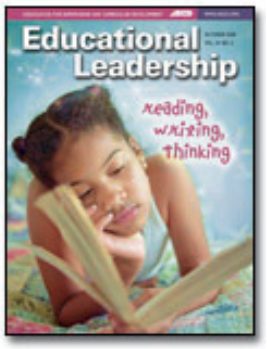

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Leading To Change / Leadership Leverage

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School leaders are often held accountable for things beyond their control. The skills that students bring to kindergarten; the education attainment of families in the community; the local tax base; the pool of available teacher candidates—all these factors affect student achievement. Because complaining about things outside our control is an ineffective leadership strategy, it is more productive to focus on the key factors that we *can* directly influence.

Teacher assignment. The most important resource any education leader allocates is teachers. Ask yourself—Does every student in my school have an equal opportunity to have the best teachers and take the most advanced courses that we offer? The all-too-typical answer is that the least-experienced and least-qualified teachers are assigned to the classes with the most complex and challenging student needs, whereas the teachers with the most experience and highest qualifications teach the most motivated and self-directed students.

In one recent study, Yun and Moreno (2006) suggest that this problem is pervasive, with African American and Hispanic students significantly less likely than white and Asian students to have certified teachers and access to advanced classes. It doesn't have to be that way. Consider Whittier Union High School District in California. The district has more than 13,500 high school students, over 80 percent of whom are Latino and a large percentage of whom are economically disadvantaged. After a group of senior teacher-leaders agreed to take on the challenge of teaching struggling math students, the percentage of students who passed the state math exam rose from 37 percent in 2001 to 79 percent in 2006.

In most cases, principals and department heads have the authority to ensure that teacher and course assignments are equitable. But even when collective bargaining agreements limit the ability to change teachers' course assignments, leaders can use creative options to improve the equitable distribution of teachers. It's sometimes possible to offer differential financial incentives to teachers who take on challenging classes in disadvantaged schools. If not, creative leaders can also develop nonfinancial incentives. For example, principals should consider offering teachers in the toughest classes lower class sizes, more planning time, more professional development opportunities, or greater autonomy.

Professional development. Leaders set the direction of the professional development agenda.

Unfortunately, some schools are still influenced by vendors who cram every available second of professional development time with mind-numbing workshops. Ironically, we may find 500 teachers in a dark auditorium listening to an expert lecture about the need for differentiated instruction—*in precisely the same way to each teacher*.

If your school is stuck in this model of professional development, consider focusing on a few things: what to teach, how to teach it, how to meet the needs of individual students, and how to build internal capacity. With an emphasis on internal capacity, the leadership of professional development efforts comes from the faculty itself, and a large part of professional education takes place in the classroom in the context of authentic teaching.

For example, at Oceanview Elementary School in Norfolk, Virginia, principal Lauren Campsen and a team of grade-level leaders provide professional development opportunities throughout the year, including coaching, model lessons, and data analysis. Teachers learn about differentiated instruction through hands-on differentiated professional development. Half of Oceanview's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and 62 percent are ethnic minorities. In 2001, 53 percent of students were proficient in reading; by 2006, more than 90 percent of students met that standard.

Collaboration. Imagine a football game in which each referee had a different opinion about the shape of the ball, the dimensions of the field, and the height of the goal posts. In the event of such a calamity, all the spectators would rise and yell, "That's not fair!" Yet the same scenario plays out every day in English, science, social studies, and mathematics classes, as teachers interpret "proficiency" in their own way.

Because fairness is as important inside the classroom as on the athletic field, effective leaders allocate faculty time to collaboration. Roland Barth (1990) suggests that collaboration does not imply just congeniality, but rather collegiality. The former is about getting along in the tradition of hot coffee, good bagels, and little professional challenge; the latter is about the tough work of examining student needs. After all, if the adults cannot agree on what proficiency means, then how are students supposed to figure it out?

In Bristol, Connecticut, Superintendent Mike Wasta has made collaborative scoring part of the school system's improvement efforts. Rather than attending traditional faculty meetings, teachers and administrators collaboratively score examples of student work. When they disagree, they work out their disagreements, clarify the scoring guides, and, as a result, improve the clarity of the assignments.

Time. Principals and superintendents can exert considerable influence over the allocation of time within the school day. For example, schools that devote an exceptional amount of time to literacy—three hours a day in elementary school and double periods in middle and high school—not only perform better in English language arts, but also show improved performance in science, social studies, and mathematics (Reeves, 2004). Of course, any change in the schedule involves trade-offs—when more time is devoted to literacy, fewer hours are available to other subjects. It is not necessary to engage in every subject every day. Some schools alternate science and social studies, providing an extra period for literacy. This requires the

deliberate decision to focus on the most essential parts of social studies and science rather than assuming that coverage is equivalent to learning. In addition, explicit literacy instruction can be effectively included in music, art, physical education, science, technology, and social studies classes.

Meetings. Meetings have an enormous influence on the way time is used. Principals and superintendents sometimes waste hundreds of person-hours reading announcements and tolerating political agendas. Instead, they could say, "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I have provided our usual administrative announcements in e-mail and written form, so we will devote the rest of our meeting to the following learning activity...," thus putting themselves literally and figuratively on the same side of the table as the faculty. Faculty meetings, formerly dominated by dull announcements and endless discussions, would then focus on student learning, creative teaching strategies, collaborative scoring, and the development of engaging assessments and individualized instruction.

Education leaders do have minimal control over many areas. That's all the more reason to focus your energies on key factors. In coming columns, we'll consider case studies of more school leaders who are making a difference.

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