

A Framework for Shared Leadership

Linda Lambert

Instead of looking to the principal alone for instructional leadership, we need to develop leadership capacity among all members of the school community.

The days of the principal as the lone instructional leader are over. We no longer believe that one administrator can serve as the instructional leader for an entire school without the substantial participation of other educators (Elmore, 2000; Lambert, 1998; Lambert et al., 1995; Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, & Richert, 1997; Olson, 2000; Poplin, 1994; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). The old model of formal, one-person leadership leaves the substantial talents of teachers largely untapped. Improvements achieved under this model are not easily sustainable; when the principal leaves, promising programs often lose momentum and fade away. As a result of these and other weaknesses, the old model has not met the fundamental challenge of providing quality learning for all students.

Our lesson is clear: Instructional leadership must be a shared, community undertaking. Leadership is the [professional work](#) of everyone in the school.

Linking Leadership and Learning

For decades, educators have understood that we are all responsible for student learning. More recently, educators have come to realize that we are responsible for our own learning as well. But we usually do not move our eyes around the room—across the table—and say to ourselves, “I am also responsible for the learning of my colleagues.” Some students seem to understand that the classroom and school communities are in the business of learning together. For instance, when our 9-year-old grandson, Dylan, completes his own work, he observes how other students are progressing. He voluntarily goes to the desks of other students and assists them. Shannon, our 10-year-old granddaughter, serves as a peer mediator at her school in Colorado, helping other students work out solutions to their conflicts.

Being responsible for the learning of colleagues is at the center of the [definition](#) of leadership that I propose. By understanding that learning and leading are firmly linked in community, we take the first essential step in building shared instructional leadership capacity. This understanding rests on some assumptions that promise to shift our thinking about who can learn and who can lead:

- Everyone has the right, responsibility, and ability to be a leader.
- How we define leadership influences how people will participate.
- Educators yearn to be more fully who they are—purposeful, professional human beings. Leadership is an essential aspect of an educator's professional life.

A New Framework for School Improvement

Educators and policymakers alike seek a framework for instructional leadership that will produce sustainable school improvement. The development of leadership capacity can provide such a framework. I define “leadership capacity” as broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership. In schools with high leadership capacity, learning and instructional leadership become fused into professional practice. Such schools have some important features in common.

- *Principal and teachers, as well as many parents and students, participate together as mutual learners and leaders* in study groups, action research teams, vertical learning communities, and learning-focused staff meetings.
- *Shared vision results in program coherence.* Participants reflect on their core values and weave those values into a shared vision to which all can commit themselves. All members of the community continually ask, “How does this instructional practice connect to our vision?”
- *Inquiry-based use of information guides decisions and practice.* Generating shared knowledge becomes the energy force of the school. Teachers, principal, students, and parents examine data to find answers and to pose new questions. Together they reflect, discuss, analyze, plan, and act.
- *Roles and actions reflect broad involvement, collaboration, and collective responsibility.* Participants engage in [collaborative work](#) across grade levels through reflection, dialogue, and inquiry. This work creates the sense that “I share responsibly for the learning of all students and adults in the school.”
- *Reflective practice consistently leads to innovation.* Reflection enables participants to consider and reconsider how they do things, which leads to new and better ways. Participants reflect through journaling, coaching, dialogue, networking, and their own thought processes.
- *Student achievement is high or steadily improving.* “Student achievement” in the context of leadership capacity is much broader than test scores; it includes self-knowledge, social maturity, personal resiliency, and civic development. It also requires attention to closing the gap in achievement among diverse groups of students by gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. These features—skillful participation, vision, inquiry, collaboration, reflection, and student achievement—interact to create the new tasks of shared instructional leadership. An abundance of research into school improvement suggests that these features are vital to the school improvement process (for example, see Barth, 1999; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lambert, 1998; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Schmoker, 1996; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Leadership Capacity in Action

A growing number of schools have undertaken the work of building leadership capacity to bring about sustainable school improvement. Schools are inventing and experimenting with many forms of participation. The following examples come from former principal students of mine or from educators whom I have come to know in my development work, in the United States, Canada, England, and Australia.

Study Groups

Study groups read articles or books together and discuss the implications of the texts' ideas. Educators in Edmonton, Wild Rose, and Calgary in Alberta, Canada; Columbus, Ohio; Kansas City, Kansas; and San Leandro, California, regularly use study groups as a means to challenge and integrate their thinking and move to new and collective levels of understanding. These conversations give rise to new and better instructional practices. Chief Justice Milvain School in Calgary, Canada, an ethnically diverse elementary school serving 460 students, developed an inquiry-based [improvement plan](#) with the broad participation of teachers, parents, and administrators. Study groups emerged from the school's professional [development process](#), focusing on four areas: Building a

Learning Community; Teaching for Understanding; Representing, Assessing, and Responding; and Access and Management of Resources. The study groups examined student achievement data and engaged in dialogue that challenged participants' assumptions about student learning. An integrated improvement plan emerged from this process.

Action Research Teams

Action research teams identify a compelling question of practice and conduct research to discover information that will shed new light on the question and lead to new actions.

In the Seven Oaks School System in Winnipeg, Canada, a system with a culture of inquiry, Superintendent Edie Brock describes how educators responded to pressure for student retention. Staff and community members embarked on a study to find out what happened to individuals later in life who had been retained in school. The result was a district-published book entitled *Faces of Failure*, which examined the long-range impact of retention. Seven Oaks no longer retains students; instead, the district finds alternative interventions to ensure student progress.

Vertical Learning Communities

In the vertical learning communities model, multiple grades are linked together in a common community in which teacher leaders have the authority to work closely with students in instruction, curriculum design, discipline, and family relations. Teachers know all the students well, so students feel cared about. During an advisement period, teachers mentor students in small groups. The curriculum is carefully articulated and focused on student needs, and discretionary time and resources allow teachers to do intensive collaborative planning. Teachers are assigned to students for multiple years; this “looping” structure creates strong, long-term relationships.

Wyandotte High School in Kansas City, Kansas, is organized into eight vertical learning communities. Looping at the high school level provides an opportunity for students to have the same teacher in many disciplines for the entire four years.

Leadership Teams

At Hawthorne School in Kansas City, Kansas, the Vision Team joins principal Jayson Strickland to analyze data and to plan, advocate, monitor, and implement the school improvement plan. The team is composed of representatives from various school departments (grade level and special education teachers and reading specialists) who are nominated and selected by the staff. All meetings are open to anyone who wants to attend. The team keeps the plan alive and ensures that its components are systematically implemented.

The Dreamkeepers at Garfield School in San Leandro, California, describe their team as a volunteer group of staff who consciously keep equity at the forefront of their minds and in all of their personal and professional actions, while remaining committed to ensuring that it is not forgotten in the minds of others.

Principal Jan Huls notes that this group is fluid, with open membership. Frequent retreats and regular meetings enable this team of teachers to design curriculum units and instructional practices, share ideas and research literature on equity, and serve as advocates for equitable practices among their colleagues.

Curriculum teams were formed in the Rhineland School System in Manitoba, Canada, when the province issued a mandated standards-based curriculum (initially K–8, then 9–12). This top-down initiative had the potential to make

educators feel disempowered, but Assistant Superintendent Dorothy Braun worked to avoid this outcome by establishing strong implementation teams armed with authority, resources, support, and time. Teams became energized, teacher leadership grew, and implementation led to inquiry and innovation. When teachers compared the current and mandated curriculum content, they identified gaps in their own knowledge. These perceived gaps in knowledge led to investigation and experimentation. Teachers raised their own questions and supported one another in finding answers or approaches.

An Integrated School Improvement Process

Participation is most powerful when combined into a thoughtful and integrated school improvement process. For example, Principal Rosalinda Canlas of Eden Gardens School in Hayward, California, describes that school's involvement with the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative, an Annenberg-Hewlett initiative in the San Francisco Bay area:

Our staff and the school learning community take the business of educating our students very seriously. Our primary goal focuses our energy into addressing the needs of *all* of our students, especially those falling below grade level; we are bridging the gap between students who are currently achieving and those who fall in the bottom quartile.

How can we do this? What teaching practices should teachers use to help students achieve? Eden Gardens staff live and breathe these big questions. Wednesday collaboration days are rotated among the cycle of inquiry, action research, grade-level meetings, new teacher support meetings, and parent/community involvement. During these collaborations, multiple assessment data help us find patterns that guide our instruction. Teacher leaders and the entire staff take responsibility for inquiring about the problem; researching possible solutions, answers, and inventions; and implementing recommendations. During the dialogues and reflections, peers support each other to become more effective teachers.

The Changing Role of the Principal

The work of developing leadership capacity brings clarity to the changing role of the principal as instructional leader. A principal who goes it alone or who dominates will find that the school becomes overly dependent on his or her leadership. As former Clayton, Missouri, principal Barbara Kohm explains: "The more adept I became at solving problems, the weaker the school became" (2002, p. 32).

Today's effective principal constructs a shared vision with members of the school community, convenes the conversations, insists on a student learning focus, evokes and supports leadership in others, models and participates in collaborative practices, helps pose the questions, and facilitates dialogue that addresses the confounding issues of practice. This work requires skill and new understanding; it is much easier to tell or to manage than it is to perform as a collaborative instructional leader.

What the Future Holds

Today, shared instructional leadership among professional staff is state-of-the-art practice. And we are developing students like Dylan and Shannon as future instructional leaders by creating opportunities for mutual learning in the classroom, on the playground, and in the community. Parents are also emerging as important instructional leaders as they share in setting goals, examining student data, conferring with teachers, tutoring students at home and in

the classroom, helping monitor and assess school programs, and forging links with community resources. Such collaboration is building a sense of collective responsibility among students and parents for the accomplishments of all students. Tomorrow, we may view all participants in the education arena, including community members and policymakers, as instructional co-leaders.

Our mistake has been in looking to the principal alone for instructional leadership, when instructional leadership is everyone's work. We need to develop the leadership capacity of the whole school community. Out of that changed culture will arise a new vision of professional practice linking leading and learning.

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