

THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL IN SCHOOL REFORM

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New York, New York
10th Year Celebration - November 9, 2000

*Adapted from M. Fullan,
The New Meaning of Educational Change, 3rd Edition
Teachers College Press, 2001*

Effective principals attack incoherence.

- Bryk et al 1998

While research on school improvement is now into its third decade, systematic research on what the principal actually does and its relationship to stability and change is quite recent. Some of the earlier implementation research identified the role of the principal as central to promoting or inhibiting change, but it did not examine the principal's role in any depth or perspective. During the 1980s research and practice focusing on the role of the principalship, vice-principalship, and other school leaders mounted, resulting in greater clarity, but also greater appreciation of the complexities and different paths to success.

I start with a description of where principals are. I then turn to the part of their role that interests us the most – what principals do and don't do in relation to change. In the last section of the chapter, I talk about the complexity of leadership, and offer some guidelines for how principals might lead change more effectively. I should also acknowledge at the outset that effective principals share, in fact, develop leadership, among teachers. So we are really talking about assistant principals, department heads, grade level coordinators, and teacher leaders of all types in the school.

Where Principals Are

"Pressure drives heads to drink" blares a recent headline in the *Times Education Supplement* in England (TES, July 14, 2000, p. 5). The article reports that among the principals and deputy principals in the district of Warwickshire (a district with 250 schools) 40% had visited the doctor with stress-related problems in the past year, with 30% taking medication. Warwickshire was selected, says the article, because it was considered to be a well run district – a good employer!

With the move towards self-management of schools, the principal appears to have the worst of both worlds. The old world is still around with expectations to run a smooth school, and to be responsive to all; simultaneously the new world rains down on schools with disconnected demands expecting that at the

end of the day the school should be constantly showing better test results, and ideally becoming a learning organization.

In *What's Worth Fighting For in the Principalship* (Fullan, 1996), I reported on a study of 137 principals and vice-principals in Toronto (Edu-con, 1984). The growing overload experienced by principals was evident over fifteen years ago: 90% reported an increase over the previous five years in the demands made on their time and responsibilities, including new program demands, the number of board priorities and directives, the number of directives from the Ministry of Education, etc. Time demands were listed as having increased in dealing with parent and community groups (92% said there was an increase), trustee requests (91% reported an increase), administration activities (88%), staff involvement and student services (81%), social services (81%), and board initiatives (69%).

Principals and vice-principals were also asked about their perceptions of effectiveness: 61% reported a *decrease in principal effectiveness*, with only 13% saying it was about the same, and 26% reporting an increase. The same percentage, 61%, reported decreases in "the effectiveness of assistance . . . from immediate superiors and from administration." Further, 84% reported a decrease in the authority of the principal, 72% a decrease in trust in leadership of the principal, and 76% a decrease in principal involvement in decision making at the system level; 91% responded "no" to the question, "Do you think

the principal can effectively fulfill all the responsibilities assigned to him/her?"

The discouragement felt by principals in attempting to cover all the bases is aptly described in the following three responses from interviews conducted by Duke (1988) with principals who were considering quitting:

The conflict for me comes from going home every night acutely aware of what didn't get done and feeling after six years that I ought to have a better batting average than I have.

If you leave the principalship, think of all the "heart-work" you're going to miss. I fear I'm addicted to it and to the pace of the principalship—those 2,000 interactions a day. I get fidgety in meetings because they're too slow, and I'm not out there interacting with people.

The principalship is the kind of job where you're expected to be all things to all people. Early on, if you're successful, you have gotten feedback that you are able to be all things to all people. And then you feel an obligation to continue to do that which in your own mind you're not capable of doing. And that causes some guilt.
(p. 309)

Duke was intrigued by the "dropout rate" of principals after encountering an article stating that 22 percent of Vermont administrators employed in the fall of 1984 had left the state's school systems by the fall of 1985. In interviewing principals about why they considered quitting, he found that sources of dissatisfaction included policy and administration, lack of achievement, sacrifices in personal life, lack of growth opportunities, lack of recognition and too little responsibility, relations with subordinates, and lack of support from superiors. They expressed a number of concerns about the job itself: the challenge of doing all the things that principals are expected to do, the mundane or boring nature of much of the work, the debilitating array of personal interactions, the politics of dealing with various constituencies, and the tendency for managerial concerns to supersede leadership functions (Duke, 1988, p. 310).

Duke suggested that the reasons principals were considering quitting were related to fatigue, awareness of personal limitations, and awareness of the limitation of career choices. All four principals experienced reality shock: "the shock-like reactions of new workers when they find themselves in a work situation for which they have spent several years preparing and for which they thought they were going to be prepared, and then suddenly find that they are not." Duke (1988) concludes

A number of frustrations expressed by these principals derived from the contexts in which they worked. Their comments send a clear message to those who supervised them: principals need autonomy *and* support. The need for autonomy may require supervisors to treat each principal differently; the need for support may require supervisors to be sensitive to each principal's view of what he or she finds meaningful or trivial about the work. (p. 312)

There is no question that the demands on the principalship have become even more intensified over the past ten years, five years, one year . . . More and more principals in almost every Western country are retiring early; more and more potential teacher leaders are concluding that it is simply not worth it to take on the leadership of schools

Wanted: A miracle worker who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second-guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of paper and work double shifts (75 nights a year). He or she will have carte blanche to innovate, but cannot spend much money, replace any personnel, or upset any constituency. (Evans, 1995)

An impossible job? A job that is simply not worth the aggravation and toll it takes? Even students notice:

I don't think being a head is a good job. You have to work too hard. Some days [the head] looks knackered – sorry, very tired. (Secondary student, Day et al, 2000, p. 126)

At the present time the principalship is not worth it, and therein lies the solution. If effective principals energize teachers in complex times, what is going to energize principals. We are now beginning to see more clearly examples of school principals who are successful. These insights can help existing principals become more effective; even more, they provide a basis for establishing a system of recruiting, nurturing, and supporting and holding accountable school leaders (see Chapter 15).

The Principal and Change

I know of no improving school that doesn't have a principal who is good at leading improvement. "Almost every single study of school effectiveness has shown both primary and secondary leadership to be a key factor" says Sammons (1999) in her major review. Building on the previous chapter let us see more precisely what this means. Especially, what does it mean in the

year 2000 and beyond, because these are very different times for school leadership

Fortunately, there are several recently released studies of school leadership across different countries which provide consistent and clear, not to say easy, messages (Brighthouse and Wood, 1999; Bryk et al, 1998; Day et al, 2000; Donaldson, 2001; Leithwood et al, 1999 and Leithwood, 2000; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001; and Newmann et al, 2000, Elmore, 2000).

Bryk and his colleagues have been tracing the evolution of reform in Chicago schools since 1988. In schools which evidenced improvement over time (about one-third of 473 elementary schools):

principals worked together with a supportive base of parents, teachers, and community members to mobilize initiative. Their efforts broadly focused along two major dimensions: first, reaching out to parents and community to strengthen the ties between local school professionals and the clientele they are to serve; and second, working to expand the professional capacities of individual teachers, to promote the formation of a coherent professional community, and to direct resources toward enhancing the quality of instruction. (Bryk et al, 1998, p. 270)

These successful principals had (1) "inclusive, facilitative orientation"; (2) an "institutional focus on student learning"; (3) "efficient management"; and (4) "combined pressure and support." They had a strategic orientation using school improvement plans and instructional focus to "attack incoherence":

In schools that are improving, teachers are more likely to say that, once a program has begun, there is follow-up to make sure it is working and there is real continuity from one program to another. . . .In our earlier research, we dubbed schools with high levels of incoherence "Christmas tree schools." Such schools were well-known showcases because of the variety of programs they boasted. Frequently, however, these programs were uncoordinated and perhaps even philosophically inconsistent. (Sebring and Bryk, 2000, pp. 441-442)

Other studies of schools improving are variations on themes. McLaughlin and Talbert examined the effects of strong and weak professional learning communities in high schools. Leadership (or lack of it) at the department and/or school level made a strong difference on teacher and student learning. For example:

These very different worlds reveal how much department leadership and expectations shape teacher community. The English department chair actively maintained open department boundaries so that teachers would bring back knowledge resources from districts and out of district professional activities to the community. English faculty attended state and national meetings, published regularly in professional journals, and used professional development days to visit classrooms in other schools. The chair gave priority for time to share each others' writing, discuss new projects, and just talk. . . . English department leadership extended and reinforced expectations and opportunities for teacher learning provided by the district and by the school, developing a rich repertoire of resources for the community to learn.

None of this applied down the hall in the social studies department, where leadership enforced the norms of privatism and conservatism that Dan Lortie found central to school teaching. For example, the social studies chair saw department meetings as an irritating ritual rather than an opportunity: "I don't hold meetings once a week; I don't even necessarily have them once a month." Supports or incentives for learning were few in the social studies department . . . This department chair marginalized the

weakest teachers in the department, rather than enabling or encouraging their professional growth. (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001, p. 107-108)

McLaughlin and Talbert found that only 3 of 16 high schools demonstrated school-wide professional communities. In these comparisons McLaughlin and Talbert talk about "the pivotal role of principal leadership:

The utter absence of principal leadership within Valley High School . . . is a strong frame for the weak teacher community we found across departments in the school; conversely, strong leadership in Greenfield, Prospect and Ibsen has been central to engendering and sustaining these school-wide teacher learning communities . . .

Principals with low scores [on leadership as perceived by teachers] generally are seen as managers who provide little support or direction for teaching and learning in the school. Principals receiving high ratings are actively involved in the sorts of activities that nurture and sustain strong teacher community. (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001, p. 110)

Day and his colleagues (2000) in England wrote a book on the leadership roles in twelve schools, all of which "had consistently raised student achievement levels – in this sense they were 'improving schools' – and all the headteachers were recognized as being instrumental in this and in the overall success of the schools. (p. 1)

We observe a now familiar refrain:

The vision and practices of these heads were organized around a number of core personal values concerning the modeling and promotion of respect (for individuals), fairness and equality, caring for the well-being and whole development of students and staff, integrity and honesty. (Day et al, 2000, p. 39)

These school leaders were "relationship centered," focused on "professional standards," "outwards looking in" (seeking ideas and connections across the country), and "monitoring school performance."

In summarizing Day et al conclude:

Within the study, there was also ample evidence that people were trusted to work as powerful professionals, within clear collegial value frameworks which were common to all. There was a strong emphasis upon teamwork and participation

in decision-making (though heads reserved the right to be autocratic). Goals were clear and agreed, communications were good and everyone had high expectations of themselves and others. Those collegial cultures were maintained, however, within contexts of organization and individual accountability set by external policy demands and internal aspirations. These created ongoing tensions and dilemmas which had to be managed and mediated as part of the establishment and maintenance of effective leadership cultures. (p. 162)

These findings are reinforced in Donaldson's (2001) new book in which he claims that effective school leadership "mobilizes for moral purpose" through fostering "open, trusting, affirmative relationships," "a commitment to mutual purposes and moral benefit," and a "shared belief in action-in-common."

Similarly, Leithwood and his colleagues provide numerous case studies, and cross case synthesis to show that school leaders at both the elementary and secondary levels concentrate on fostering the conditions for school growth by: helping to obtain and target resources, developing collaborative cultures across subgroups of teachers, supporting and pushing teacher development, creating facilitative structures, and monitoring teacher commitment as an indicator of organizational capacity (Leithwood et al, 1999; Leithwood, 2000).

Probably the clearest integration of the ideas is contained in the new work by Newmann and his colleagues (Newmann et al, 2000, King and Newmann, 2000). Recall that Newmann et al (1995) provided us with great new insights about the inner workings of professional learning communities. In their most recent case studies, they use the more comprehensive concept of "school capacity" which in turn affects instructional quality and student assessment in the school as a whole.

The five components of capacity and their cumulative relationships are most revealing:

Teachers' knowledge, skills, dispositions

Professional community

Program coherence

Technical resources

Principal leadership

Basically, they claim, with backing from case studies, that professional development often focuses on the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of teachers as *individual* staff members. Obviously this is important and can make a difference in individual classrooms.

In addition, they say (and certainly backed up strongly in previous citations in this chapter) there must be *organization* development because these social or relationship resources are

key to school improvement. One key social resource, of course, is *school-wide professional community*.

Moreover, individual development with professional exchange is not effective unless it is channeled in a way that combats the fragmentation of multiple innovations by working on *program coherence* – "the extent to which the school's programs for student and staff learning are coordinated, focused on clear learning goals, and sustained over a period of time" (Newmann et al, 2000, p. 5). Program coherence is organizational integration.

Fourth, instructional improvement requires additional *resources* (materials, equipment, space, time, access to expertise).

Fifth, school capacity is seriously undermined if it does not have quality leadership. Put differently principals help *cause* the previous four factors to continue to get better and better. Elmore (2000) agrees:

the job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals

accountable for their contributions to the collective result. (p. 15)

Elmore also notes that only a minority of current leaders are like this, and that it is a "systems" problem, i.e., we will continue to reproduce only small numbers of heroic leaders (heroic because they are going against the grain) until we change how we recruit, support, and develop leadership on the job. In this sense schools get the leaders they deserve. I consider in later chapters how other levels of the system can make it more or less likely that school capacity will grow or deteriorate. In the meantime, it should be absolutely clear that school improvement is an organization phenomenon and therefore the principal, as leader, is key for better or for worse.

The Complexity of Leadership

There are at least four ways in which school leadership is complex: (1) the changes we are seeking are deeper than we first thought; (2) as such, there are a number of dilemmas in deciding what to do; (3) one needs to act differently in different situations or phases of the change process; and (4) advice comes in the form of guidelines for action, not steps to be followed.

First, then, is the realization that what is at stake is "reculturing" schools, a deep and more lasting change once it is attained. Any other changes are superficial and non-lasting. For

example, one can increase scores on standardized achievement tests in the short run with tightly led and monitored changes. But, as Bryk et al warn:

There is a growing body of case evidence documenting that it is possible to raise standardized test scores quickly under high stakes accountability systems based on standardized tests. . . . However, there is also some evidence that these effects may not generalize beyond the specific accountability instruments and may not persist over time . . . [test scores improve] without undertaking the fundamental change necessary to achieve effects that are more likely to persist over time. (Bryk et al, 1998, p. 354)

Win the battle and lose the war, because the results are neither deep (what is learned is not transferable) nor lasting. These types of superficial learnings are not what Gardner (1999), Branson et al (1999), and other cognitive scientists are talking about when students really come to understand and apply what they learn; they aren't the kinds of changes that will help disadvantaged students move forward as Oakes et al (2000) confirm. For this level of reform we need new learning cultures where many teachers are working in a concerted way inside and

outside the school – something that requires sophisticated school leadership.

Second, developing learning communities is not a dilemma-free process, and once established, they are intrinsically problematic. This is what makes them valuable as adaptive learning environments. Day et al talk about several enduring tensions and dilemmas faced by the teachers' effective school heads in their study including: balancing and integrating "internal versus external change demands," deciding on the boundaries and occasions of "autocracy versus democracy," finding "personal time versus professional tasks" with the latter becoming more and more consuming, and "development versus dismissal" in working with staff who are not progressing.

Also difficult is deliberately valuing differences of opinion and even dissent. It is a mistake for principals to go only with like-minded innovations. As Elmore (1995) puts it: "small groups of self-selected reformers apparently seldom influence their peers" (p. 20). This strategy just creates an even greater gap between the innovators and others, which essentially becomes impossible to bridge. It is counter-intuitive, but effective, "to respect those you wish to silence" (Heifitz, 1994). Incorporating naysayers in complex times is necessary because they often have some valuable ideas and criticisms, and you need them for implementation, but how do you know when you are going too far in this direction?

Third, we are beginning to find out that effective leaders combine different leadership characteristics depending on the phase of the change process or on circumstances over time. To turn "failing schools" around you need assertive leadership; schools on the move need facilitation, coaching and assistance; more fully developed professional communities need greater scope for participative problem solving.

These variations in effective leadership are confirmed in a revealing way by Goleman's (2000) analysis of Hay/McBer's database in a random sample of 3,871 executives. Goleman examined the relationship between leadership style, organization climate (or culture) and performance. He identified six leadership styles, four of which positively affected climate, and two had negative influences. The six styles were:

Coercive (demands compliance, or "do what I tell you")

Authoritative (mobilizes people toward a vision, or "come with me")

Affiliative (creates harmony and builds emotional bonds, or "people come first")

Democratic (forges consensus through participation, or "what do you think?")

Pacesetting (sets high standards for performance, or "do as I do, now")

Coaching (develops people for the future, or "try this").
Goleman, 2000, pp. 82-83

The two styles that negatively affected climate, and in turn performance, were coercive (people resent and resist) and pacesetting (people get overwhelmed and burnt out). All four of the other styles positively affected climate. Goleman concludes that "leaders need many styles":

the more styles a leader exhibits, the better. Leaders who have mastered four or more – especially the authoritative, democratic, affiliative, and coaching styles – have the very best climate and business performance. And most effective leaders switch flexibly among the leadership styles as needed. . . . Such teachers don't mechanically match their style to fit a checklist of situations – they are far more fluid. They are exquisitely sensitive to the impact they are having on others and seamlessly adjust their styles to get the best results (Goleman, 2000, p. 87)

No matter how you cut it, effective leaders are energy creators (Brighthouse and Woods, 1999, p. 84)

Incidentally, although these results come from business executives, they apply to leadership in all complex organizations. Increasingly they apply to the principal because

the principal in a professional learning community is a CEO. The long-term trend, if we are to be successful, will see school principals with more leeway at the school level operating within a broad framework of standards and expectations – not only for charter schools, but for all schools.

The fourth complexity follows. Leadership cannot be captured in a checklist. We can provide guidelines for action as leadership is developed by reflective practice and related assistance and expectations. It is always the thinking leader who blends knowledge of local context and personalities with new ideas from the outside who is going to do best. Our own recent set of six guidelines for principals is a case in point:

1. Steer clear of false certainty (there is no ready made answer out there, to the how question).
2. Base risk on security (promote risk-taking but provide safety nets of supportive relationships).
3. Respect those you want to silence (incorporate and learn from dissenters).
4. Move toward the danger in forming new alliances ("out there" may be dangerous, but you need external partners).
5. Manage emotionally as well as rationally (work on your emotional intelligence, don't take dissent personally).
6. Fight for lost causes (be hopeful against the odds).

In short, the principal's role has become decidedly more daunting, more complex, and more meaningful for those who learn to lead change, and are supported in that role.

These findings present a powerful message for school reform. A study in Tennessee found that students who get three good teachers in three successive years did better? Well, students in schools led by principals who foster strong professional communities are much more likely to encounter three good teachers in a row, whether it be on the same day or over the years.

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