

REFRAMING TEACHER LEADERSHIP

TO IMPROVE YOUR SCHOOL



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WHY A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHER LEADERSHIP?

One cannot read Plato's accounts of the dialogues of Socrates and believe that teacher leadership is a 21st century idea. From his first days in the Lyceum to the last drop of hemlock and his journey to the Elysian Fields, teacher and leader were one. Even though 21st century educators are fond of the new—and this book will not disappoint in that respect—contemporary authors are disingenuous if they fail to recognize the shoulders on which they stand. Names we know—Diderot, Kant, and Locke from Europe—and teachers whose identities we infer from archaeological records from Africa, Asia, and South America all testify to the truth that teaching and leadership are inseparable qualities. In the 21st century, influential scholars have advocated distributed leadership (Elmore, 2000), implying that hierarchy is less effective than networks (Reeves, 2006b). Whether the perspective is from ancient times, the Renaissance, the previous century, or tomorrow, teachers and school leaders continue to focus on an essential question: how can we transcend the boundaries among teachers, leaders, and political authorities in a way that allows us to nurture, challenge, encourage, and develop every student entrusted to our care? I will attempt to address that question in the following pages.

If teacher leadership is not a new concept, why am I proposing a new framework for teacher leadership? The straightforward, if immodest, response is that although the existing teacher leadership literature contains many compelling anecdotes and rhetorical flourishes, it is strikingly unburdened by evidence and systematic research. In the course of more than 2 million miles of travel to schools around the globe, I have learned at the very least that teachers and school leaders demand practical

information and applicable research. The framework is based on a study of students, teachers, and school leaders from demographically, economically, and linguistically diverse areas. This study, supported by the Public Education Foundation of Clark County and the Clark County School District Office of Research and Accountability, included 81 schools in Clark County, Nevada, the United States' fourth-largest school system, with a student population of more than 330,000 pupils. Clark County is an ideal research environment because it includes urban, suburban, and rural schools with a wide range of student characteristics. Teams of teachers and school leaders from throughout the county applied for participation in the research project (see Appendix B for the research proposal form and Appendix C for the rubric used to evaluate the applications). Eighty-two applications were accepted, and 81 research teams completed the project. Research began in the fall of 2006 and was completed in the spring of 2007. Participating teams represent all grade levels, from prekindergarten through high school, and a wide range of subjects. Appendix A includes the abstracts for all of the projects.

Although many research conclusions are equivocal, the results of this study are clear and striking. Teachers not only exert significant influence on the performance of students, but they also influence the performance of other teachers and school leaders. Overall, the educators in this study reported that they were more likely to be influenced by the professional practices and action research of their peers than they were to be influenced by journal articles or undergraduate or graduate courses. With the response range including 1 (not influential); 2 (rarely influential); 3 (somewhat influential); and 4 (very influential), the average ratings were as follows: undergraduate courses, 1.8; professional reading, 2.3; graduate courses, 2.6; and advice from a colleague, 3.6.

When offered the opportunity to list all of the influences on their professional practices, these teachers emphasized other teachers, students, family, and personal experience over many other presumed influences on their practice. Figure 1.1 shows the percentage of total responses each source of influence received from participants.

From Research to the New Framework

This brings us to *Reframing Teacher Leadership to Improve Your School*, a contribution to the literature that is based on research rather than on speculation, personal preference, or philosophy. In my work around the world, I have yet to hear a teacher inquire about my uninformed opinion or idiosyncratic personal preference. Rather, teachers inquire about research, evidence, and experience. Therefore, this study is not the only one that offers insight to practitioners and policymakers. Rather, the greatest value from this initial research project is a framework in which teacher researchers will ask important questions, conduct investigations, discern inferences, and share their wisdom with colleagues.

In their seminal work *Wikinomics: How Mass Collaboration Changes Everything*, Don Tapscott and Anthony D. Williams (2006) invited readers to complete their text, transforming it from a stagnant document into a living work. Because an integral part of the new framework is the creation of a sustained network for professional excellence, the dialogue in this book will continue at the commercial-free Web site www.teacher-leadership.info. There readers can find a continuing series consisting of teacher research, commentary, questions, and insights from teacher researchers around the world. In addition, readers are invited to contribute their own findings, successes, challenges, disappointments, and triumphs. Therefore, even if you choose not to finish this book, your opportunity to participate is as close and fast as your nearest Internet connection.

Before you abandon the printed page for the Web, however, please allow me to make a case for the rest of the book. In the following pages, you will learn not only about cutting-edge research findings, but also about practical applications that can help improve student achievement and educational equity. You can learn how to have more influence as an educator and school leader. You can learn—not just from me, but from your colleagues—how to achieve more fun, greater satisfaction, and better results in every class.

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HOW SYSTEMS SUPPORT THE NEW FRAMEWORK FOR TEACHER LEADERSHIP

This book has made the case that teacher leadership is a systems issue. It is neither a slogan nor a fad, but a fact. The single greatest influence on the professional practices of teachers is the direct observation of other teachers. With systemic support, that network of direct observation can transform a large and complex system with dramatic effect. But what if, as with so many educational reforms, teacher leadership is honored with no more than a label, a brief passing reference from senior leadership before they proceed on to the next new thing?

Perhaps teacher leadership can survive in the short term without systemic support. After all, great teachers have always identified challenges, engaged in research, shared their results, and influenced practice. Without systemic support, however, great teachers remain islands of excellence, surrounded by oceans of well-intentioned teachers who lack the information, skills, and opportunities for practice that distinguish their most effective colleagues. The new framework describes two stark alternatives: rejection or resilience. When teacher initiative and insight are repeatedly followed by rejection, the lack of systemic support will undermine the framework and render teacher leadership nothing more than a hollow slogan. When policymakers, administrators, and leaders at every level embrace the framework, then they contribute to the establishment of a resilient system that will endure disappointments and hardships because of the confidence in a culture of evidence and support for teacher leadership. In this chapter, we consider system support at the school, district, and state and provincial levels and offer suggestions for how national governments can enhance and support teacher leadership.