

# LEADING WITH **FOCUS**

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**Elevating the Essentials  
for School and District  
Improvement**

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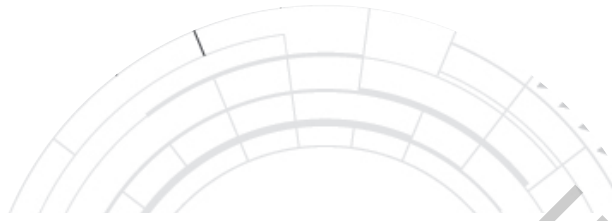


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*The first law of simplicity: Reduce.*

—John Maeda

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A rich, rounded education has profound, life-altering effects on every stratum of society, from the poor to the privileged. It enlarges the intellect, nourishes creativity, and makes us better citizens (Edmundson, 2004; Hirsch, 2009). A recent Brookings Institution study points to new evidence that affirms the decisive effects of a quality education on individual incomes, lifetime earnings, social mobility, health, and life expectancy. It increases the odds that children will be raised in stable, two-parent families and appreciably decreases the proportion

of children raised in poverty. Importantly, the study also confirms that a good education depends, even more than previously thought, on the *effectiveness of the teaching* students receive (Greenstone, et al., 2012).

But alas, most teaching is *not* effective. In the great majority of schools, there are wide, crippling disparities in both what we teach and how well we teach, both within and among schools. In most schools, a dismaying amount of time is spent on nonacademic tasks, with students rarely found reading or writing—arguably the two most educational activities they can engage in. Every credible study (as we'll see in Chapter 2 of this book) confirms these findings.

There is a great, perhaps unprecedented opportunity here for school leaders: multiple studies affirm the fact that improvements in curriculum and instruction depend, more than anything, on effective school and district leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004, in NASSP/NAESP, 2013). If we wanted to, we could ensure that the great majority of our schools *consistently* provide quality curriculum and effective instruction—and reap the immense benefits of doing so. But for this to happen, we must first radically recast the work of school leaders.

It is vital that we *simplify and demystify* school leadership. In 30 years of visiting schools and classrooms, I've become convinced that the primary obstacle to effective leadership is our failure to identify, clarify, and then focus on certain actions that ensure optimal instruction. School leadership has become an unduly profuse, complicated, and *unfocused* business. Administrative training and certification programs have contributed to this complexity: they abound in theories,

principles, and approaches, but rarely clarify and equip leaders to execute the most obvious principles and routines that lead to better educational outcomes (Elmore, Evans, & Marshall in Schmoker, 2006). If we want to bring effective instructional leadership within the reach of all school leaders, we must give leaders permission to focus their limited time and energy on the core of good schooling: a widely acknowledged, empirically established set of fairly obvious practices that have the most direct effect on the quality of education.

This book is based on the principles and practices I wrote of in my 2011 book *Focus: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning*, with a more explicit focus on actions that leadership can take. Though *Leading with Focus* can be read as a companion to *Focus* or on its own, leaders will ideally be familiar with the earlier book and will refer their teachers to it—especially chapters 4–7, which contain detailed information on curriculum and instruction in the core subject areas.

As we'll see in Chapter 1, there is an emerging reverence for the power of simplicity in the workplace. It is critical to effective leadership, productive work, and employee satisfaction. The essence of simplicity is concision and clarity: a tight, near-exclusive focus on the lowest possible number of the most effective and manageable actions and expectations. Simplicity demands that leaders *incessantly* clarify and reinforce these priorities. This book's immodest claim is that focused, straightforward efforts can enable leaders to achieve significant, transformative improvements within one or two school years. The reason for my optimism is that most schools suffer predominantly from certain obvious

but crippling shortcomings—namely, a lack of the following three essential elements:

1. A coherent, content-rich curriculum
2. A solid amount of traditional literacy tasks and activities
3. Effective, soundly structured lessons

The power of these three elements has overwhelmingly been established by research—as has the evidence that they are manifestly rare in schools. Once we acknowledge their importance, however, we create an unprecedented opportunity for school or district leaders to have a swift and significant effect on teacher performance and student achievement.

To give you a sense of how powerful the three elements are, consider two very different school districts. School #1 is much like the majority of schools I've visited in dozens of states. Though it's the highest-rated school in a "good" district, I found that *not a single teacher appeared to know how to deliver a nominally effective lesson*. Moreover, every school I visited in the district employed a default curriculum that mostly consisted of short-answer worksheets and excessive amounts of group work. Every year, the district provided schools with a panoply of programs, trainings, and professional development options and initiatives. But there was no attempt—as the central office staff fully conceded—to monitor or refine the implementation of any of these.

School #2 (one of a few that I discuss in detail in Chapter 3 of this book) wasn't perfect. But it was in a district where leadership ensured that all teachers and leaders were thoroughly trained in the basic structure of effective lessons—more specifically, lessons that reflect what virtually every researcher

now agrees is central to effective teaching: the teacher's close, ongoing attention to *how many students are succeeding on each step of the lesson*. All teachers in the district were hired—and retained—on the basis of their explicit commitment to mastering and consistently delivering such lessons.

It should be obvious that the stark difference between these two schools is *leadership*. This book is an attempt to explicate and clarify the kinds of straightforward leadership practices employed in School #2. Make no mistake: such practices would enable record numbers of schools to provide high-quality instruction with unprecedented consistency—thus enabling record numbers of students to become knowledgeable, literate, productive citizens. To that end, I've organized the book as follows:

- **Chapter 1** makes the case for simple, focused school leadership, demonstrating the unrivalled power of such an approach for swiftly and substantively improving the quality of work done by both teachers and leaders.
- **Chapter 2** examines the three core elements that I believe should be the focus of leadership efforts in the great majority of schools.
- **Chapter 3** offers examples of schools and districts that have embraced the power of simple, focused school leadership.
- **Chapter 4** provides a flexible implementation guide—a “starter kit” of sorts—for ensuring focused leadership in schools and districts.

Let's now turn our attention to the power of focus for transforming leadership and the quality of our schools.