

# Leverage

Using PLCs to Promote  
Lasting Improvement in Schools

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Foreword by Richard DuFour



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# Preface

**H**undreds of books have defined the attributes, qualities, and traits of great leaders. Of these, dozens have been written that describe the dimensions of effective leadership in schools. These authors have distilled the global theories of school-level leadership into contextual applications for anyone aspiring to make a positive, significant, and lasting impact on the lives of students who attend his or her school.

For nearly 20 years, leading experts in the field of education have pointed to Professional Learning Communities as the most effective strategy for improving schools. The importance of a guaranteed and viable curriculum, a balanced and coherent system of assessments, and schoolwide, systematic pyramids of intervention are not up for debate. Neither is the idea that teachers are most effective when they work together on collaborative teams. The consensus is clear. As Milbrey McLaughlin said, “The most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is building the capacity of school personnel to function as a professional learning community” (1995).

This book is focused specifically on aspects of leadership related to the principal’s role in leading a Professional Learning Community. It is our belief that learning is the fundamental purpose of schools and that leaders best meet our collective commitment to the children we serve through the successful implementation of Professional Learning Communities in every classroom, every school, and every district across the land.

In schools functioning as Professional Learning Communities, the work is deeply rooted in best practice and is grounded in optimistic certainty. Because we believe that all children can learn, they do. Because we believe working together in collaborative teams is more effective, it is. Because we believe that every child in every school deserves our best efforts every day, we provide learning opportunities characterized by limitless possibilities for our children.

When we believe in ourselves, our colleagues, and our community, we can make a difference for our children. By continuing to work together, we can create the kind of schools that make a positive and lasting difference for all our children.

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# Introduction

The overarching framework for this book reflects the belief that as principals become more knowledgeable about the strategies that have the greatest impact on teaching and learning—and if they focus their time, energy, and attention on successfully implementing those strategies—then teaching and learning will improve.

In many ways, what we are asking of principals is no different from what we ask of teachers when they power and prioritize their standards. In that process, teachers identify what is most important for students to learn, and they focus on teaching the standards that provide students with the best chance of achieving the highest levels of learning. Likewise we argue that principals must *power and prioritize their practice*. In order to ensure that all students learn to high levels, principals must identify which strategies have the greatest leverage and focus on implementing those that will have the most significant impact on teaching and learning in their schools.

Our thinking is built around four beliefs. Each one, when considered on its own, has implications for our practice, but when taken together as a set of related propositions, our beliefs build a persuasive argument for encouraging principals to focus their school improvement efforts on a limited number of high-leverage strategies.

## **FIRST, PRINCIPALS ARE CRITICAL TO THE FUNDAMENTAL PURPOSE OF SCHOOLS**

We believe the fundamental purpose of school is learning. The research on this is clear; the relationship between a building principal's leadership and student achievement is unequivocal. Show us an effective school where all students are learning, and we will show you an effective principal working tirelessly to make a difference. Thus, if schools are going to

fulfill their fundamental purpose of learning for all, then we must maximize the effectiveness of the principal's role.

## **SECOND, THE CAPACITY OF THE PRINCIPALSHIP IS AT, OR NEARING, ITS PRACTICAL LIMIT**

We believe that while an effective principal is critical to a successful school, the capacity of the principalship is at its practical limit. The job of a building principal has become more and more complex, as seemingly endless expectations are placed on those who serve in that role. If we agree that principals have limited, or at least finite, resources, especially with regard to time, then we must help them become more disciplined with what initiatives they invest their time in and with how they invest their time and why.

## **THIRD, SOME STRATEGIES HAVE A GREATER IMPACT THAN OTHERS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING**

We believe that there has never been a clearer consensus or greater agreement on what schools should do to positively impact student learning. According to Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde, "There is a strong consensus among seemingly disparate subject matter fields about how kids learn best. Virtually all the authoritative voices and documents in every teaching field are calling for the same things" (2012, p. 3).

## **FOURTH, THE MOST EFFECTIVE PRINCIPALS FOCUS ON A FEW, IMPACTFUL STRATEGIES**

Finally, we believe we must acknowledge that principals are pulled in dozens of directions every day; therefore, it makes sense to help principals prioritize their practice. Given that time in school is so precious, *especially for principals*, it makes sense to identify the strategies that are effective and efficient and to focus our attention on those strategies that have the greatest impact.

The book is organized into three sections. In Section I, we build a case for the importance of the role of principals in promoting higher levels of student learning and suggest that it will be beneficial if we look at what principals are expected to do through the lens of leverage.

Chapter 1 reviews the positive influence an effective principal has on teaching and learning. The chapter makes a case for differentiating the type of leadership behavior that is most important if principals are to maximize their impact on teaching and learning.

Chapter 2 explores the day-to-day reality of the principalship, identifies the factors contributing to an overloaded and unrealistic set of expectations, and offers some alternatives to consider.

Chapter 3 introduces the concept of *leverage*, develops an operational definition of leverage, and provides support for the notion that, while many strategies improve teaching and learning, principals must focus on those that impact teaching and learning most.

Chapter 4 argues that principals can best fulfill their mission of ensuring high levels of learning for all students by focusing their time, energy, and attention on implementing the big ideas of Professional Learning Communities.

In Section II, we provide concrete examples, practical applications, and specific suggestions for principals seeking to identify and implement specific strategies that promote high levels of learning for all.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7 we explore opportunities where principals can find the leverage points to promote a Focus on Learning, a Collaborative Culture, and a Results Orientation in their schools. Our belief is that if we provide principals with practical and pragmatic examples of the best-known research and evidence-based practices, we can accelerate the implementation of the strategies that make a difference. We know what works. If we can identify a few high-leverage strategies and the associated leverage points within the system, everyone benefits.

Section III highlights strategies principals can use to rekindle, reignite, and reenergize their Professional Learning Communities. In Chapters 8 and 9 we explore ways to clarify what matters most, methods to identify what is nonnegotiable, and techniques for communicating effectively, and we provide some thoughts on how to respond to resisters in productive ways.

Underlying our thinking is the notion that we make the process of improving schools too complicated. Certainly, ensuring that all students learn is a complex task, but it is not complicated. The solutions we seek are simple, not simplistic. To paraphrase Peter Senge (1990), a few small and well-focused actions by a principal can produce significant, enduring improvement in schools.

# 1

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## Leadership Matters

No longer is there a question about the effect of leadership on student achievement. Clearly, leadership makes a difference.

—Waters and Cameron (2007, p. 3)

Leadership matters. Principals make a difference. In fact, according to Linda Darling-Hammond, the leadership provided by an effective building principal is second only to the guidance provided by the classroom teachers in impacting student learning. In her study of the principalship, Darling-Hammond notes, “School leadership strongly affects student learning. Principals are central to the task of building schools that promote powerful teaching and learning for all students” (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005, p. 3).

### EVIDENCE OF A PRINCIPAL’S IMPACT ON STUDENT LEARNING

For more than 35 years, scholars have built an extensive body of evidence that supports the important role a principal plays in helping students learn. In summarizing their research in 2009, Matthew Militello, Sharon Rallis, and Ellen Goldring documented the extent to which the relationship between student achievement and effective principals has been carefully studied. Militello, Rallis, and Goldring reported that “the skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed by the school principal to improve

instruction have been extensively explored by Elmore, 2000, 2002, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Seashore, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2005; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005” (2009, p. 17). In each case, the authors cited strong support for the role leaders played in improving student achievement. Their conclusion was self-evident: *Leadership matters*.

But it is not just any leadership that matters. As our understanding of school leadership has evolved, other researchers have identified the “specific types of leadership behavior that had an impact on student achievement” (Militello et al., 2009, p. 17). (See also Leithwood & Mascall, 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008.) Over the past three decades, we have come to understand that the *type of leadership matters*.

Other studies identified specific ways effective principals impact student learning. As Militello and colleagues reported,

Louis and Miles . . . talked about a close, cohesive internal network when describing the relationships among staff members in those high schools that successfully implement change. More recent studies have shown the importance of principal’s role in leading professional learning communities or what Militello and Rallis referred to as “communities of practice.” (2009, p. 17)

(See also Militello, Schweid, & Carey, 2008; Printy, 2008; and Supovitz & Christman, 2003.) Militello and colleagues found studies that documented the importance of principals

taking charge of initiatives centered on the core of teaching and learning . . . investigating policies such as student retention . . . and using data to develop new support mechanisms and to implement new teaching and learning strategies (see Coburn & Talbert, 2006; Militello, Sireci, & Schweid, 2008; Supovitz & Christman, 2003). (2009, p. 17)

The notion that certain types of leadership behaviors matter more than others was clarified in a meta-analysis conducted by Tim Waters and his colleagues at Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL). Their extensive review of the literature on school leadership identified a number of key responsibilities and behaviors that, when practiced by principals, were likely to “promote significant improvement in student achievement” (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003).