

# 1 Does District Leadership Matter?

In his state of education address in 1987, Secretary of Education William Bennett attached the nickname “the blob” to administrators and the administrative system in public schools. The blob, he argued, is made up of people in the education system who work outside of classrooms, soaking up resources and resisting reform without contributing to student achievement (Walker, 1987). According to Bennett, the term *blob* is an acronym for “bloated educational bureaucracy.” Those who are science fiction aficionados might also make a connection to the 1958 sci-fi movie *The Blob* starring Steve McQueen and the 1988 remake starring Kevin Dillon. For those who are not, the blob was an amorphous mass from outer space that assimilated all living tissue in its path. Those organisms unlucky enough to be assimilated by the blob ceased to exist as independent entities. Rather, they existed only as a source of nutrients for the blob. Whether or not Bennett intended the allusion to the other-worldly blob, the moniker was not a complimentary one for school administrators and the administrative system.

Bennett and his coauthors (Bennett, Finn, & Cribb, 1999) reiterated this allusion in *The Educated Child* when they wrote,

The public school establishment is one of the most stubbornly intransigent forces on the planet. It is full of people and organizations dedicated to protecting established programs and keeping things just the way they are. Administrators talk of reform even as they are circling the wagons to fend off change, or preparing to outflank your innovation . . . To understand many of the problems besetting U.S. schools, it is necessary to know something about the education establishment christened the “blob” by one of the authors. (p. 628)

Apparently, the blob cuts a wide swath since Bennett et al. (1999) include superintendents, district office staff, and local school board members as members of the amorphous mass. Certainly, one can find examples of local school district bureaucracies that stand in the way of efforts to improve K–12 schooling. But does this characterization apply to administration in general? Is district administration really unrelated to student learning

(at best) or detrimental to student learning (at worst)? These were precisely the questions we set out to answer by examining the extant research on the relationship between district administrative leadership and student achievement.

To put the study described in this book in perspective, consider a similar study we completed regarding the effect of leadership at the school level (that is, leadership by building principals). We reported our findings in a book titled *School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results* (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). There, we concluded that principal leadership has a correlation of .25 with average student achievement in a school. One way to interpret this finding is that the actions of the principal in a school have a moderate but significant relationship with average student achievement in the school (see Technical Note 1.1, page 117, for a more detailed interpretation). Certain behaviors on the part of the principal influence policy in the school, the behaviors of the teachers, and maybe even the behavior of the students. While one might argue that the actions of a principal do not directly affect or “cause” student achievement since principals do not actually work with students on a daily basis, a more balanced and reasonable interpretation (we believe) is that the actions of the principal are an important part of the mix of activities that in the aggregate have a powerful causal effect on student achievement.

The study described in this book sought to determine whether leadership at the district level has a similar relationship with student achievement—whether it is an important part of the mix of actions that in the aggregate have a causal effect on student achievement. The answer is not obvious. As indicated by the preceding discussion, there are those who believe that the actions of district-level administrators have little or no relationship with student achievement. If this is the case, then the job of district-level administrators should be limited to supporting the decisions made at the school level and “staying out of the way” of effective schooling. However, if there is a discernable relationship between district leadership and student achievement, then a proactive stance would be warranted—a stance that calls district administrators to provide strong guidance and maybe even mandates regarding what occurs in the classrooms throughout the district. Consequently, our study sought to answer two basic questions:

1. What is the strength of relationship between district-level administrative actions and average student achievement?
2. What are the specific district leadership behaviors that are associated with student achievement?

## The Study

The methodology we used for our study is meta-analysis. The specifics of meta-analysis are detailed in a number of works (see Cooper & Hedges, 1994; Hunter & Schmidt, 2004; Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). In brief, meta-analysis involves a range of

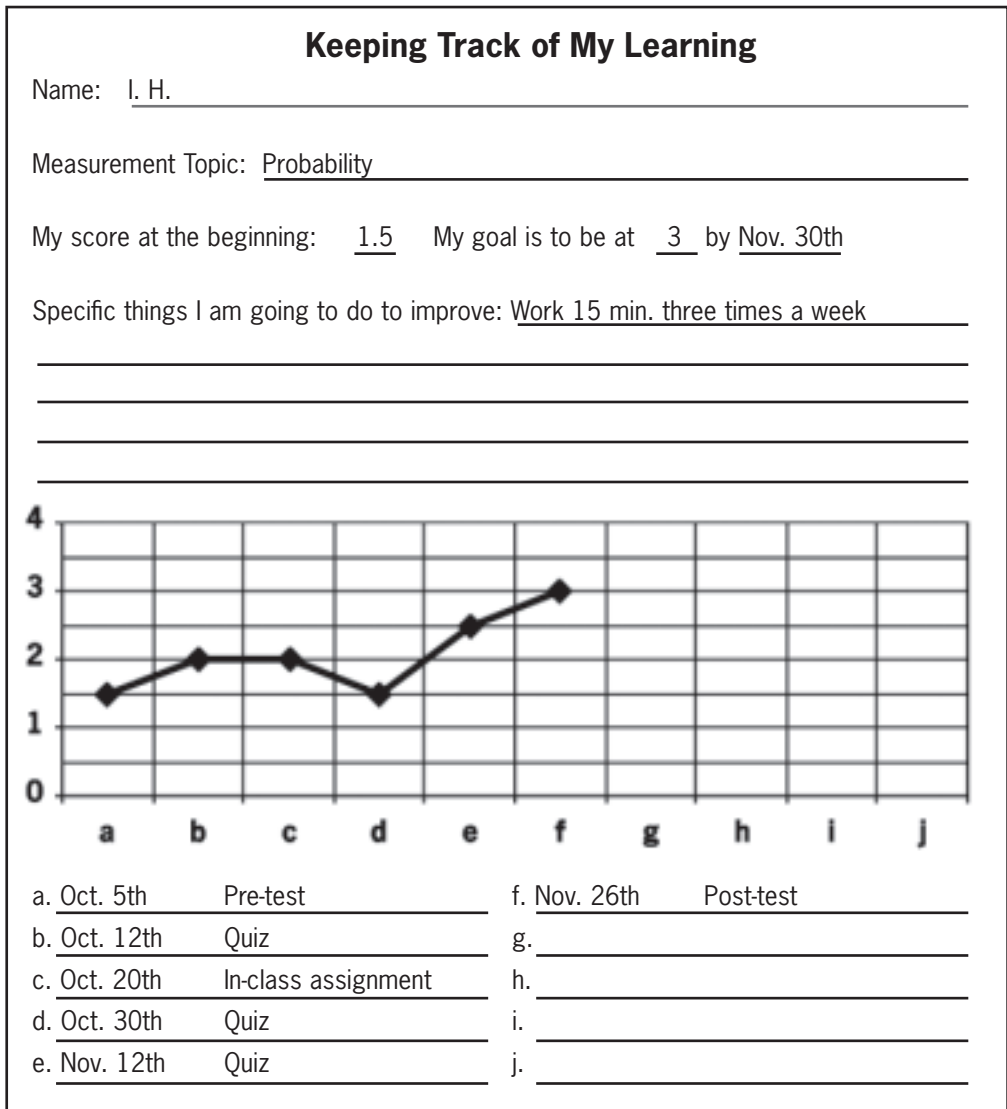
Grade 2	
<b>Score 3.0</b>	<p><b>While engaged in grade-appropriate tasks, the student demonstrates an understanding of numbers and number systems by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• using place value concepts to represent, compare, and order whole numbers (up to 999) (e.g., explaining and exemplifying how each place represents a power of ten)</li> <li>• representing different forms of money (e.g., explaining and exemplifying how common decimal numbers, .10, .25, .50, and .75, are related to money)</li> </ul> <p><b>The student exhibits no major errors or omissions.</b></p>
Grade 1	
<b>Score 3.0</b>	<p><b>While engaged in grade-appropriate tasks, the student demonstrates an understanding of numbers and number systems by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• generating equivalent forms for the same number (e.g., explaining the difference between two equivalent forms of the same number)</li> <li>• describing the value of a small collection of coins (total value up to one dollar) (e.g., explaining the difference in value between different coins)</li> <li>• describing and using ordinal numbers (first to tenth) (e.g., explaining the position of different ordinal numbers)</li> </ul> <p><b>The student exhibits no major errors or omissions.</b></p>
Grade K	
<b>Score 3.0</b>	<p><b>While engaged in grade-appropriate tasks, the student demonstrates an understanding of numbers and number systems by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comparing and ordering whole numbers up to 10 (e.g., explaining the quantity represented by different whole numbers)</li> <li>• placing simple sets of objects into ordinal position (e.g., explaining why one set of objects belongs in a specific ordinal position)</li> <li>• constructing multiple sets of objects each containing the same number of objects (e.g., making and describing equal sets out of a group of different objects)</li> </ul> <p><b>The student exhibits no major errors or omissions.</b></p>

Source: From *Making Standards Useful in the Classroom* (pp. 117–120), by Robert J. Marzano and Mark W. Haystead. Melbourne, Victoria: Hawker Brownlow Education. © 2008 by ASCD. Used with permission. [www.hbe.com.au](http://www.hbe.com.au).

Table 3.4 illustrates the recommended level of vertical alignment from grade level to grade level (and from course to course at the high school level). The reporting topic depicted in table 3.4 is number sense and number systems within the mathematics strand of numbers and operations. Typically, the expectation for a given grade level or course is found in the Score 3.0 elements. At eighth grade, students are expected to determine and explain the intersection of various sets. This involves explaining and exemplifying the union of two sets as the set of elements that are in either set. At the seventh-grade level, students are expected to express large numbers in multiple ways. This involves demonstrating how the same number can be expressed in scientific notation and in standard notation. At the sixth-grade level, students are expected to express various small numbers in multiple ways. At this grade level, the emphasis is on factors and exponents. At each successive grade level, then, a given reporting topic should address the same general

assessments. To implement a data bank of common items, a district would generate Score 4.0, Score 3.0, and Score 2.0 items for each measurement topic at each grade level for K–8, and for each course at the high school level. Teachers could then use the items in the item bank to design their own unique assessments composed of common items.

Since formative assessments are designed to provide a view of students’ learning over time, Phase 2 ultimately involves charting students’ progress. To do so, teachers would provide students with a blank chart for each reporting topic like that in figure 3.2.



**Figure 3.2 A sample student progress chart**

Source: From *Classroom Assessment and Grading That Work* (p. 90), by Robert J. Marzano. Melbourne, Victoria: Hawker Brownlow Education. © 2006 by ASCD. Used with permission. [www.hbe.com.au](http://www.hbe.com.au).

<b>Name:</b>	John Mark											
<b>Address:</b>	123 Some Street											
<b>City:</b>	Anytown, CO 80000											
<b>Grade Level:</b>	4											
<b>Homeroom:</b>	Ms. Smith											
Language Arts	2.46	C			Participation	3.40				A		
Mathematics	2.50	B			Work Completion	2.90				B		
Science	2.20	C			Behavior	3.40				A		
Social Studies	3.10	A			Working in Groups	2.70				B		
Art	3.00	A										
<b>Language Arts</b>												
<i>Reading:</i>												
Word Recognition and Vocabulary	2.5											
Reading for Main Idea	1.5											
Literary Analysis	2.0											
<i>Writing:</i>												
Language Conventions	3.5											
Organization and Focus	2.5											
Research and Technology	1.0											
Evaluation and Revision	2.5											
Writing Applications	3.0											
<i>Listening and Speaking:</i>												
Comprehension	3.0											
Organization and Delivery	3.0											
Analysis and Evaluation of Oral Media	2.5											
Speaking Applications	2.5											
<i>Life Skills:</i>												
Participation	4.0											
Work Completion	3.5											
Behavior	3.5											
Working in Groups	3.0											
<b>Average for Language Arts</b>	2.46											

Figure 3.3 Sample report card

continued on next page ➡