

IGNITING TEACHER LEADERSHIP

*How do I empower my teachers
to lead and learn?*

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Igniting Teacher Leadership

The principal pulled her office door shut and glanced around the empty administrative office lit only by a sliver of fading sunlight. She paused in front of the teachers' mailboxes, where 82 names were labeled beside their respective trays. She thought about the teachers who would be here first thing in the morning to collect their mail, notes, and memos, and she thought about the hundreds of students who were represented by those teachers—all of whom had thoughts, goals, challenges, and successes. Thoughts such as these:

- “I’ve enjoyed having a student teacher this semester. I can distinctly remember those challenges and successes when I was immersed into learning how to become a better teacher.”
- “Wow, I’d love to stop by your classroom to see how you get these results . . . if I can just find the time.”
- “How are you able to get Scottie to engage in class? I’ve been trying, but I sure could use any tips you can spare.”
- “Where does she find the time to incorporate those new strategies? I’d love to learn more.”

These statements and questions are examples that reveal our student-centered perspective as educators. We want the very best for *all* of our students. We prepare for years to become a teacher, we work tirelessly to engage and challenge

our students, and we continually strive to meet the needs of today's learners. As educators, many of us have leadership roles or aspirations. We push ourselves to learn, grow, and innovate because we realize that leadership is continuously in flux. Nevertheless, when it comes to leadership, we must focus on growing one very important resource within the school: the teachers.

Jack Welch points out that leadership is not just about you. He observes, "Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others" (2005, p. 61). It's important to emphasize growing others since we must, as leaders, focus on the shared, collaborative nature of school leadership. Regardless of your school's size, level, or location, the bottom line is that each leadership role depends on us moving forward and growing together to accomplish the goals of the entire school.

Research shows that school leadership is vital to an engaged school community and increased student achievement. One six-year study of more than 7,000 principals noted that "schools with high achievement were less likely to have a new principal and more likely to have had the same leader for several years" (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013, p. 68). Why is the principal so important? Simple: central to the role is the critical function of coordination in which the principal fosters, develops, and propels the collective effort of teaching and learning.

A recent Gallup study that was focused on the importance of school leadership found that "the principal's position aids coordination of separate contributors that collectively drive

student achievement” (Gordon, 2013, p. 3). For far too long, many of these “separate contributors” have been hard-working teachers who have felt isolated and burnt out or who have been going through the motions of teaching without seeing substantial results in terms of learning. In that in-depth study of more than 90 principals and 4,500 teachers, “highly talented” principals demonstrated excellence in the following seven key areas (Gordon, 2013):

- **Goals and Expectations:** They present a vision for the school.
- **Teacher Support:** They work hard and are available for teachers.
- **Teacher Growth:** They are in classrooms often and help teachers use their individual strengths.
- **Student Focus:** They like students and do what is best for them.
- **Recognition of Success:** They celebrate and encourage teachers and success.
- **Positive Outlook:** They are optimistic and see problems as opportunities.
- **Parent Engagement:** They involve parents and inspire them to support the teachers.

We must support our teachers. It is the teacher who does the real work of instruction in the classroom. It is the teacher who usually greets each student into the learning community on Monday morning, even when it’s hard. It is the teacher who must stay relevant—even decades after student teaching—for