

## Literature Review on Leadership for School Change

[From Chapter 7 of CASEL's (2006) *Sustainable schoolwide social and emotional learning (SEL): Implementation guide and toolkit*]

Schools today face unprecedented challenges and pressures, which have changed our understanding of what it takes to be an effective school leader. More than ever before, schools must be responsive to diverse constituencies outside the school walls. Parents, community groups, businesses, and the government all make demands—many of which conflict with one another (DuFour, 2003). At the same time, students' social and emotional development, as well as their academic growth, have come to be seen by many as an essential school responsibility (Bencivenga & Elias, 2003). Given these pressures, it is not surprising that new programs that promise to help schools address a variety of critical issues are being developed all the time. New programs and policies are constantly introduced by external sources as the latest solution to low-performing schools and student achievement. Fullan (2000, 2001) warns school leaders that there is no magic solution to making schools successful. Rather, leaders should make an effort to learn good leadership practices to help ensure that whatever changes and change process they do adopt are as successful as possible.

### THE ROLE OF THE LEADER IN IMPLEMENTATION

Although school leadership has been the subject of countless books and articles, little study has been done on the role of leaders in implementation and the effects of leadership on intervention outcomes (Fullan, 2000; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). This is relatively new territory, but it is becoming increasingly clear that high levels of support from school leaders have a significant impact on program implementation. A recent study of six inner-city schools found that schools with high levels of principal support were more than twice as likely to see improvements in students' social and emotional competence, aggressive behavior, and behavioral dysregulation as schools with low principal support when implementing a delinquency prevention program, even when implementation quality was high in both groups (Kam et al., 2003). Not surprisingly, the leader is a crucial part of creating a school community and climate that are open to and active in making change happen. He or she is responsible for providing a clear focus for what the school is trying to accomplish and making sure every aspect of the culture supports the achievement of those goals (Farrell, 2003).

Because the school leader is so important to successful reform, the literature identifies many different roles the principal or school leader should strive to assume in order to support and encourage his or her staff during the change process. The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) has set standards for leadership that include promoting a shared vision of learning, advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth, managing operations and resources effectively and efficiently, collaborating with families and communities—and doing all of this with integrity and fairness and in a manner responsive to the social, economic, political, legal, and cultural context (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996).

Trail (2000) sees the principal as responsible for a series of support and encouragement tasks, including acting as a psychologist, teacher, facilities manager, philosopher, police officer, diplomat, social worker, mentor, public relations director, coach, and cheerleader. Similarly, Portin and colleagues (2003) visited 21 schools in four cities and identified seven key leadership functions that must exist in all schools regardless of type and size:

1. **Instructional:** assuring quality of instruction and supervising curriculum
2. **Cultural:** dealing with history and traditions
3. **Managerial:** focusing on school operations
4. **Human Resource:** recruiting, hiring, firing, and mentoring teachers and staff
5. **Strategic:** promoting the vision, mission, and goals of the school
6. **External Development:** representing the school in the community
7. **Micropolitical:** mediating and dealing with internal interests

Although one individual cannot reasonably perform all these roles and functions equally well, effective leaders experiment with each at different points as specific situations dictate. Finally, the effective school leader is most importantly a good collaborator and therefore can hire and empower team members to assume the roles he or she is unable to fulfill (Patti & Tobin, 2003).

The literature on school leadership identifies a number of means leaders can and should use to fill these varying roles during a school change effort, which are described below.

### **Creating a School Culture of Change**

School leaders may rely on their staff to carry out the nuts and bolts of a change initiative, but they are the ones responsible for creating the school climate or culture that supports change. Leaders must set a clear sense of direction and help staff to develop a shared vision and set of goals (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Comprehensive reform cannot consist of simply implementing a new program in one or two classrooms. If schoolwide change is to take place, the entire culture of the school must embrace it and believe that fundamental change is possible (Designs for Change, 2003; Finnan & Meza, 2003). For example, Patti and Tobin (2003) contend that if a school wants to implement social and emotional learning as a core aspect of its instructional practices, the leader must take responsibility for creating an “ecology, milieu, social system and culture” responsive to change. That is, he or she must take on a “systems perspective,” examining both structure and culture; the physical plant, including upkeep and design; the social dimensions of the school, including values, beliefs, and norms; and the administrative structure, including rules, roles, and procedures.

All aspects of the school system should reflect a commitment to SEL, including practices during lunch, recess, and physical education classes, in addition to classroom management and academic subjects (Bencivenga & Elias, 2003). The school must find ways to embed SEL concepts into the school culture so that the attitude becomes, “This is the way we do things here,” rather than, “How do we make this fit into what we are already doing?” Leaders can accomplish this by making SEL part of the school’s mission, including it as part of hiring practices and new teacher orientation, providing training and staff development that incorporates SEL into all facets of instruction, and, perhaps most importantly, modeling the SEL skills they are asking their teachers to learn and use (Bencivenga & Elias, 2003; Patti & Tobin, 2003).

### **Engaging Staff in a Shared Leadership Process**

In effective schools, principals “lead from the center rather than the top” and are responsible for the learning of their colleagues (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 184; Lambert, 2003). One of the most important ways a school leader can do this is by sharing leadership responsibility with other members of the faculty and staff. When leaders take on too much responsibility for problem solving, staff develop a dependency on the leader that can damage efforts to change (Lambert, 2003). Further, delegating responsibility to other team members ensures that knowledge of the change process does not reside with any one individual. This is important given the average tenure of two and a half years for big-city superintendents (Farrell, 2003) and under five years for school principals (Lovely, 2001). Engaging faculty and staff in the decision-making process allows them to feel they are owners of the change process rather than burdened by yet another externally imposed reform (Cherniss, 1998; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Houston, 2001; Rabinowitz, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2000; Thompson, 1998; Trail, 2000).

It is essential that teachers and other school staff share a vision for why change is needed and how it can be achieved. In fact, success is more likely when everyone is committed to reaching the same outcomes. As one case study of successful school change noted: “[W]hen all the adults who impact children’s lives work together, children achieve exceptional results” (Designs for Change, 2003, p. xiv). School leaders can instill a sense of shared responsibility into the school culture both by providing guidance and dispersing power. This strategy is what DuFour (2003) calls “loose-tight” leadership. He has found that the most effective schools are those where the

leader, often the superintendent, establishes clear priorities and goals (tight leadership) but leaves it up to each school or department to determine how to achieve them (loose leadership). Initiating a process of shared leadership does not have to involve long discussions about process. Instead, the leader can simply identify an issue or problem and use a collaborative approach to solve it, in the meantime demonstrating to staff how shared decision-making will work. The approach can then slowly become a more regular part of the school's processes (Trail, 2000). Leaders can further bolster a system of shared leadership by forming school improvement teams, study groups, action teams, or implementation teams led by teachers and other staff. If these groups are given the time, resources, and authority to make decisions, they can be successful in creating a climate of mutual responsibility (Lambert, 2003).

Being the leader of a team requires the principal to take several risks. First, he or she must be willing to put power in the hands of individuals (i.e., teachers) who do not necessarily share accountability (Patti & Tobin, 2003). Next, he or she has to be willing to lead the process more than the people. That is, in a truly collaborative approach, the leader helps the group set rules and norms, keeps them focused on goals, and helps the team obtain necessary resources to accomplish them, but does not use his or her position to dictate group actions or decisions (Rabinowitz, 2003). In a school setting, where hierarchy is relatively flat (new teachers are expected to perform the same job as experienced ones) and the principal is really the only individual at a "higher" level, this team approach may be particularly successful (Barth, 2000).

### **Providing Resources, Infrastructure, and Information to Make Change Possible**

Although school staff should be empowered to share in the leadership of a change effort, it is the leader's responsibility to provide financial and material resources and support to make that possible. Leaders can do this by allowing deviations from the traditional school day to accommodate programs and planning, providing for new programs in the school budget planning process, and developing an organizational infrastructure that supports the change. In addition, the leader must be responsible for keeping abreast of the most recent literature and distributing information on new social and emotional learning programs to staff (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Educational Commission of the States, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Patti & Tobin, 2003). In effect, the leader is the "head learner," guiding his or her staff by distributing information related to the school's core values (Sergiovanni, 2000).

Developing an infrastructure to support change is one of a school leader's most important tasks. Glickman (2002) contends that the most successful schools spend several years developing a set of operations and beliefs, a governance structure for decision-making, and a process for continual self-assessment *before* launching any change initiatives. Once this infrastructure is in place, leaders have something to which they can refer when they meet opposition or obstacles during the change process. Further, it places reform in the hands of the entire school community, rather

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than with an individual, allowing it to be carried forward beyond any one leader's tenure (Lambert, 2003).

Fullan (2001) supports the idea that the most effective leaders in change efforts take a slow, systematic approach that allows them to absorb details, listen attentively, and make careful and informed decisions with the help of their staff. Often this strategy allows leaders to notice mistakes and be better prepared to solve problems. These "slow knowers" are also less distracted by details and are therefore better able to see the big picture. They are less likely to be discouraged if things go wrong in the early stages because they have a vision of the entire change process. Substantive change can take as long as seven to ten years to show results (Patti & Tobin, 2003). A leader who can see the big picture will be less frustrated by slow progress and more likely to wait for the results of change instead of giving up and trying something new.

### **Providing Support, Feedback, and Incentives**

During a change initiative, it is important to keep teacher and staff morale and commitment high. In order to do this, the school leader must provide staff with consistent feedback, opportunities to reflect on progress, and support and encouragement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Leaders should also recognize outstanding staff accomplishments through public events, incentives, celebrations, and announcements and publications detailing their success (Bencivenga & Elias, 2003; Educational Commission of the States, 2000; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). When positive feedback is used well, and when it is not perceived as false praise, a relationship of trust and mutual respect can be developed. This will allow the leader to deliver negative feedback in a more comfortable way and motivate staff to make changes (Patti & Tobin, 2003). In addition, teachers and staff must be given opportunities for professional development, including regular training and a set of parameters or guidelines to make the change process more manageable (Educational Commission of the States, 2000). Although staff should feel empowered to lead, they must also feel supported and encouraged.

### **Serving as the Liaison to the Greater Community**

School leaders often must take on the role of liaison to the community during a change process by addressing the questions and concerns of parents, school board members, local government officials, and other stakeholders. Questions the leader might face when implementing a change initiative, particularly a social and emotional learning program, include: Does it work? Does it conflict with other course content? Will it burden already overloaded teachers? Will parents support it? How will you deal with teacher resistance? (Educational Commission of the States, 2000). Any one of these questions can stall the implementation process. Good leaders must be equipped with answers that will allow progress to continue.

In addition to dealing with difficult questions, the leader of a change initiative must take on a public relations role by including change in the mission, vision, and strategic planning process of the school; working with the school board, state officials, and local leaders to gain support and possible funding; building partnerships with community groups and parents; and noticing and reporting changes in students' behavior that can be attributed to the change process (Educational Commission of the States, 2000; Fullan, 2001; Houston, 2001; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003; Patti & Tobin, 2003). School leaders should consider themselves responsible for bringing all stakeholders from the school and community on board *before* reforms are adopted so they will all feel included in the planning process. Once reform has begun, clear, consistent communication is essential to maintaining these relationships (Thompson, 1998). Particularly important are partnerships with parents, who should play a key role in the school change process. The principal or school SEL leader must find ways to involve parents; treat them with respect, including recognition of and attendance to language or cultural barriers; and involve them in the collaborative process of change (Bencivenga & Elias, 2003; Designs for Change, 2003). Effective leaders find ways to involve parents and community members in the activities of the school through informational meetings, classroom volunteer opportunities, and partnerships such as working with the local media to broadcast or publish student work (Bencivenga & Elias, 2003).

### **HOW CAN A LEADER FILL ALL THESE ROLES?**

One of the most important things leaders can do during a schoolwide change effort is to understand the magnitude of the change they are leading and know where to focus their efforts. According to Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), change can be either first- or second-order. First-order change represents

an extension of what has been done in the past, is focused, linear, and implemented with existing knowledge and skills. In contrast, second-order changes are new, complex, and nonlinear; they require a break from the past, as well as new knowledge and skills. Most schoolwide SEL initiatives fall into the latter category. Given their complexity, second-order changes usually meet with more resistance than other changes. Leaders, therefore, must be cognizant of the type of change they are leading and how it might affect individuals in different roles. This awareness allows them to use appropriate leadership styles when dealing with each individual or stakeholder group. In addition, leaders are always more successful if they model the social and emotional skills that they want staff to learn.

### **Adopt Several Leadership Styles**

Principals, superintendents, and other school leaders may employ several different leadership styles and methods. Some approaches are in general more effective than others; however, which style will work best depends on the situation. For example, a commanding or assertive leadership style may work well if teachers are not demonstrating competency or if a school is failing (Fullan, 2000; Sergiovanni, 2000), but an approach that uses facilitation, coaching, and assistance may work better in a school that is moving toward positive change (Fullan, 2000).

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Dan Goleman (2000) identifies six leadership styles and describes how they relate to leading with emotional intelligence:

- \_ **Coercive** leaders demand immediate compliance.
- \_ **Authoritative** leaders mobilize people toward a vision.
- \_ **Affiliative** leaders create emotional bonds and harmony.
- \_ **Democratic** leaders build consensus through participation.
- \_ **Pacesetting** leaders expect excellence and self-direction.
- \_ **Coaching** leaders develop people for the future.

In Goleman's research, coercive and pacesetting leadership styles were shown to have a negative impact on climate, while the other four had positive impacts on climate. In a school change environment, the democratic style may be most effective because it fosters buy-in or consensus and allows trust to grow through shared decision-making. A Rand study of 1,000 school governance patterns found that high-performing schools had democratic decision-making and leadership practices (Barth, 2000). However, with this style it is easy to get bogged down in time-consuming consensus-building meetings.

Both Goleman and Rabinowitz (2003) warn against reliance on one style; rather,

effective leaders use many styles in combination. Leaders who lack certain competencies

should enlist team members who can fill the gap. Through a combination of emotionally intelligent leadership and appropriate leadership styles, school leaders can help implement change that will produce positive results.

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