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Leading Schools: Distinguishing the Essential from the Important

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During the past decade, growing body of evidence has demonstrated the impact of principal leadership on student achievement. Building on seminal reviews of leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Cotton, 2003; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004), Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) identified specific principal leadership responsibilities and practices correlated with student achievement and change leadership (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, in press). This research can help leaders distinguish principal leadership responsibilities that are *essential* from those that are *important*.

Principals assume a myriad of responsibilities that are important in running a school, but many of these duties are not *essential* to improving student achievement. For example, such issues as maintenance, finance, law, human resources, and public relations (to name a few) are important, but not necessarily essential in terms of improving student achievement. In an era of accountability when student achievement is paramount and evidence of the effects of principal leadership on student achievement continue to

accumulate, it is not enough to just know what is *important*; principals must also know what is *essential*.

Identifying what is important

In the 1990s many efforts were made to identify important leadership responsibilities, functions, and practices for principals. One of the efforts mounted on an international scale was the establishment of standards for principals (Gronn, 2002). Through the development of principal standards, important principal leadership responsibilities were identified. However, the scope of the standards includes everything the developers deemed to be important. The developers of these standards did not distinguish between what is important and what is essential to improving student achievement. As a result, these attempts to formalize a manageable scope of principal responsibilities were not as fruitful as the developers and practitioners had hoped.

What the development of principal standards produced was an extraordinarily wide range of responsibilities without distinction between important and essential responsibilities. For example, there are 184 indicators for the six *Standards for School Leaders* developed in

the United States in 1996 by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Council (ISLLC) and the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA). In addition to being overwhelming in scope, the standards offer no guidance on which responsibilities and practices should take primacy – or what is essential for principal leadership in light of their impact on student achievement (Waters & Grubb, 2004). Gronn (2002) describes similar trends in standards in Victoria and the United Kingdom (p. 570). Further, Gronn and others assert that prospective and aspiring principals are dissuaded from seeking positions by the increasingly intense and complex work of principals (Gronn, 2002; Cranston, Ehrich, & Billot, 2003; The Wallace Foundation, 2003; Miller, 2004). As a result, current principal standards may actually exacerbate the difficulty schools and districts are facing in recruiting and retaining principals (Gronn, 2002, p. 570).

Distinguishing what is essential

The increasingly complex demands and challenges confronting principals (Cranston, Ehrich, & Billot, 2003; Scott, 2003; The Wallace Foundation, 2003; Blackmore, 2004) have combined to create what a recent *EdWeek* article labeled an “impossible job” (Archer, 2004). d’Arbon (2003) states the problem succinctly, “Principals should get a life” (p. 17). One way to make a seemingly impossible job more manageable is to achieve clarity on what is essential as well as what is important. Such clarity can help principals prioritize the demands of the job by helping them focus first on the responsibilities and practices correlated with student achievement rather than attempting to fulfill every responsibility that someone deemed important regardless of its impact on learning. Just as content standards in the United States are being narrowed in scope to determine what is essential for students to learn (Marzano, Kendall, & Gaddy,

1999), principals may benefit from having the standards focus on what is essential. One way to pare this long list of principal standards down to a more manageable set is to use research findings to identify those leadership responsibilities that are *essential* for raising student achievement.

30 years of research on leadership

McREL’s meta-analysis of research on school-level leadership began in 2001 with a review of nearly every study published since the early 1970s that purported to examine the relationship between school leadership and student achievement. From a total of more than 5,000 studies, 69 met the criteria for rigor, including the use of standardized test scores to measure student achievement and teacher perceptions (as opposed to leaders’ self-evaluations) to measure principals’ leadership abilities. Combined for the purpose of a meta-analysis, the 69 studies represent a sample size of 2,802 schools and approximately 14,000 teachers and 1.4 million students – the largest-ever sample for an examination of research on leadership practices.

McREL’s meta-analysis resulted in three major findings that support the claim that school-level leadership matters in terms of student achievement. First, the meta-analysis produced data on the effect size of leadership on student achievement. We found that the average effect size, expressed as a correlation, is .25. This means that a one standard deviation improvement in principal leadership is associated with a 10 percentile difference in student achievement on a norm-referenced standardized test. The second finding adds specificity and detail to the first finding. The meta-analysis identified 66 leadership practices principals use to fulfill 21 responsibilities that have statistically significant relationships with student achievement (see Appendix).

The third major finding relates to the *differential impact* of leadership. Just as leaders can have a positive impact on student achievement, they also can have a marginal or, worse, a *negative* impact on achievement. Although the average correlation of leadership on student achievement is .25, we found studies in which the impact was as high as .50 and others in which the impact was negative. Stated differently, in some of the studies included in our meta-analysis, teachers rated principals high in terms of their leadership abilities and student achievement in those schools was much higher than the average across the study sample. In other cases, though, teachers rated principals as strong leaders yet student achievement was below average.

Although we recognize that several plausible explanations could be given for this finding, we offer two possible explanations. First, we posit that when school leaders fail to identify and focus on the school and classroom practices that are most likely to improve student achievement, their leadership can have a negative impact. Second, when they fail to understand the magnitude of change they are leading, they may actually use the wrong leadership practices, and thus, have a negative influence on student achievement. Conversely, when school leaders focus on the “right” school and classroom

practices and accurately estimate the magnitude of the change they are leading, their leadership can positively affect student achievement.

Magnitude or “order” of change

The theoretical literature on leadership and change – for example, Heifetz (1994), Fullan (1993), Beckard and Pritchard (1992), Hesselbein and Johnston (2002), Bridges (1991), Rogers (1995), Nadler, Shaw, & Walton (1994), and Kanter (1985) makes the case that not all change is of the same order of magnitude. Some changes have greater implications than others for staff members, students, parents, and other stakeholders based on the background, knowledge, experience, and expertise of the people asked to implement them. In Exhibit 2, we use the terms “first-order” and “second-order” to describe these two different types of change; others have used such terms as technical vs. adaptive, incremental vs. fundamental, and continuous vs. discontinuous to capture the same notion.

It is important to note that not all changes have the same implications for each individual or stakeholder group. What will be experienced as a “first-order” change for some may be a “second-order” change for others. Assuming all change will have the same implications for all stakeholders, and/or using practices that

Exhibit 2: Perceptions of changes that make them first or second-order for stakeholders

A change is first-order when it is perceived as	A change is second-order when it is perceived as
An extension of the past	A break with the past
Within existing paradigms	Outside of existing paradigms
Consistent with prevailing values and norms	Conflicted with prevailing values and norms
Incremental	Complex
Implemented with existing knowledge & skills	Requires new knowledge & skills to implement
Implemented by experts	Implemented by stakeholders

might be appropriate for a first-order change when stakeholders are actually experiencing a second-order change, will likely result in a negative impact on student achievement. Thus, in addition to focusing leadership efforts on school and classroom practices associated with improved student achievement, leaders also must tailor their own leadership practices based on the magnitude or “order” of change they are leading.

The magnitude or order of change has less to do with the change itself and more to do with how stakeholders perceive the change. In short, magnitude of change is in the eye of the beholder. For both individuals and groups, changes are first order when they are perceived as (1) consistent with existing values and norms, (2) advantageous for stakeholders, and (3) readily implemented with existing knowledge and resources. In an education setting, these might be new instructional practices, materials, curricula, or data collection systems.

A change becomes second order when stakeholders (1) are unclear about how it will make things better for them; (2) must master new knowledge, practices, or approaches to implement the change; or (3) feel the change conflicts with prevailing personal values and organizational norms. To the degree that individuals and/or stakeholder groups in the school or school system hold conflicting values, embrace different norms, possess different knowledge, or operate with varying mental models of schooling, a proposed change might represent a first-order change for some and a second-order change for others. Different perceptions about the implications of change can lead to one person’s solution becoming another’s problem. That is, if a change has first-order implications for one person or group of individuals, yet has second-

order implications for another person or group, the latter group may view the change as a problem rather than a solution. This is true of nearly every educational reform introduced over the last 20 years. The shift from focusing on the inputs of schooling to the outputs of schooling, which was the core concept of “outcome-based” education, is a classic and dramatic example of one person’s solution being someone else’s problem.

Many more contemporary examples of first-order changes exist for educators, policymakers, and parents, including the role and use of content standards; high-stakes testing and accountability; changes to the school calendar; non-graded classrooms; home schooling; and school vouchers. For some educators, policymakers, and parents, these changes are all appropriate responses to what they see as problems with schools. These “solutions” are consistent with their prevailing values and norms and are natural extensions of their ongoing efforts to improve schools.

But for other stakeholders in the K-12 community, such changes may be dramatic and undesirable breaks with the past, sharply conflicting with their prevailing values and norms. Rather than seeing them as solutions, these stakeholders may see such changes as the very problems confronting schools and school systems. Thus, they are second-order changes.

Recognizing which changes are first and second order for which stakeholders can help leaders select leadership practices and strategies appropriate for their initiatives. Doing so enhances the likelihood of sustainable initiatives and a positive impact on achievement. Failing to do so, on the other hand, can result in changes producing a marginal or negative impact on achievement.

Factor analysis of Balanced Leadership™ responsibilities

Building on our foundation of research and theory, in 2003 McREL developed an online leadership survey to collect additional data from principals. The data were used to (a) gain knowledge about principals' practices and behaviors related to the 21 leadership responsibilities, (b) examine the change initiatives these principals were leading, (c) understand the extent to which principals emphasize certain leadership responsibilities related to their change initiatives, and (d) identify inter-correlations that might exist among the leadership responsibilities. Between July 2003 and May 2004, 700 principals throughout the United States participated in our data collection. We used responses from 652 of the 700 respondents to conduct a factor analysis.

Three key findings emerged from our factor analysis that are particularly relevant for principals and those who support them. First, we found no inter-correlations among the leadership responsibilities that were strong enough to support collapsing or reducing the 21 responsibilities. In addition to all responsibilities being positively correlated with student achievement, all are positively correlated with change initiatives in a school that are perceived as "routine" or first-order. Although some of the leadership responsibilities have higher correlations than others, we found no indication that any of the responsibilities should be eliminated or diminished. In sum, all 21 leadership responsibilities and 66 practices are essential to improving student achievement.

The factor analysis also identified seven leadership responsibilities positively correlated with leading changes with second-order implications: *Change agent*; *Flexibility*; *Ideals and beliefs*; *Intellectual stimulation*; *Knowledge of*

curriculum, instruction and assessment; *Monitor and evaluate*; and *Optimizer*. This finding provides an empirical basis for determining which leadership responsibilities principals emphasize for the purpose of initiating, leading, and sustaining changes with second-order implications for stakeholders.

Finally, four responsibilities were negatively associated with change with second-order implications: *Communication*, *Culture*, *Input*, and *Order*. This is an important finding for principals who are leading change with second-order implications for a large percentage of their stakeholders. We interpret this finding to mean that when teachers, staff, and other community members perceive a change as second order, they may also perceive the principal's use of these responsibilities as having declined. We have interpreted this finding as a negative, unintended consequence of change with second-order implications. This does not mean that principals should ignore or dismiss this perception of stakeholders. Indeed, principals should be even more attuned to these responsibilities and the need to fulfill them during change initiatives with second-order implications. However, regardless of a principal's efforts to fulfill these four responsibilities, this may not change the perception that they are simply not fulfilling them well enough. Anticipating that this perception may emerge and developing shared strategies for addressing it can increase the likelihood of successfully implementing changes with second-order implications.

Knowing the essential

Essential responsibilities, practices, knowledge, and skills for principals that are correlated with student achievement are presented in McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework™. We found 21 areas of leadership responsibility and 66 associated practices correlated with

student achievement. In addition we know that strong leadership is not enough. It also matters if the principal has chosen the right focus (Elmore, 2000) and estimated accurately the magnitude of change (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, in press). Finally, depending on the magnitude of change, some leadership responsibilities need to be emphasized more than others. Specifically, some should be emphasized by the principal when leading changes with second-order implications while others might best be fulfilled by a school's leadership team. However, *learning* what is essential – the leadership responsibilities positively correlated with student achievement – is clearly easier than *doing* what is essential.

Getting to the essential

The developers of standards for principal preparation and licensure have advanced their conclusions about important responsibilities that need to be fulfilled by school leaders. It is the scope of these responsibilities that in part contribute to the perception of the job of the principal as undoable. This frames the dilemma faced by all principals: assuring that all *important* responsibilities are fulfilled while focusing on what is *essential* to student achievement.

In light of the reality that *urgency* frequently trumps what is *important* in schools, getting to what is essential is even more challenging. Therefore, principals need to develop strategies for continuously fulfilling essential leadership responsibilities. One approach to doing this is distributing leadership responsibilities to others (Elmore, 2000; Copland, 2001; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001; Whitaker, 2002). Alone, principals simply and unequivocally cannot fulfill all of the leadership responsibilities necessary for running a school, not to

mention improving student achievement. Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy (2003) call for “reconstruct[ing] roles and relationships at the school level around a vibrant core purpose of improving student learning and ensuring that all students achieve academic success” (p. 18). Getting to this “vibrant core” requires the thoughtful distribution of leadership responsibilities to others in the school. Determining which responsibilities principals might ask others to fulfill can be informed by the results of our factor analysis. Specifically, the responsibilities that stakeholders tend to view as declining during second-order changes (*Culture, Communication, Order, and Input*) may be fulfilled effectively by a school-level leadership team or informal leaders. Because the perception is likely to persist that the principal's performance in these areas of responsibility declines during a change with second-order implications, distributing them to others will provide the necessary support for those who view the change as second order. Additionally, by sharing or distributing these four responsibilities, principals can emphasize the seven responsibilities positively associated with leading change with second-order implications.

Moving forward

The rapidly changing and increasingly complex contexts in which schools must operate will continue to present new challenges for principals, and for those who prepare, supervise, and support them. According to Fullan (2005), a major responsibility required for sustaining effective school leadership is developing others as leaders; particularly teacher leaders (Cotter & Buchanan, 2003). To share leadership effectively and develop a cadre of potential future school leaders, principals have to promote and support the development of others. But how can busy principals accomplish this while attending to their own professional development? There are

two possible answers to this question. First, policymakers should adopt standards for school leaders that focus on what is essential – research-based leadership responsibilities and practices proven to improve student achievement. The 21 responsibilities identified in McREL’s research provide the basis for essential principal standards. It is also critical to design future standards for school leaders based on the premise that leadership is a function – broader than a single position – to be carried out by all. This will facilitate sharing or distributing responsibilities within the school. The existing principal standards are inherently biased towards individualism (Fullan, 2005), thus, reinforcing the notion that school leadership is the sole responsibility of the principal. The next iteration of principal standards should be developed as standards for school-level leaders with a focus on responsibilities rather than a position. This is a crucial aspect of sustaining current principals and of developing future generations of school leaders.

Second, those who prepare principals should design and develop professional development programs that help current principals, teacher leaders, and aspiring school leaders master all of the types of knowledge they will need to succeed in their positions. Elmore (2002) describes administration as a “highly differentiated occupation in which the categories of specialization have little or nothing to do with the core function of the organization, which is instruction” (p. 29). He asserts, “Improvement requires a less differentiated administrative structure with more focus on the skills required for the practice of improvement” (p. 29).

McREL’s knowledge taxonomy may be a useful tool in the design of research-based and knowledge-specific professional development programs focused on improving student

achievement. Specifically, the knowledge taxonomy includes four types of knowledge which can be applied to nearly all endeavors. In the Balanced Leadership Framework™, we are applying the taxonomy to the 21 leadership responsibilities and 66 associated practices. The four types of knowledge are

1. **Contextual knowledge** – Knowing *when* to fulfill specific responsibilities and use appropriate leadership practices,
2. **Experiential Knowledge** – Knowing *why* specific responsibilities and practices are important,
3. **Declarative Knowledge** – Knowing *what* leadership responsibilities to fulfill and which practices are used to fulfill them, and
4. **Procedural Knowledge** – Knowing *how* to fulfill specific leadership responsibilities and use research-based practices. (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003, p. 13).

In general, professional development for principals tends to focus on two types of knowledge: declarative and procedural. Although this knowledge is necessary, without understanding *why* a particular leadership responsibility must be fulfilled and *when* it should be fulfilled, it is unlikely that school leaders will acquire the knowledge and obtain the skills necessary to lead changes with both first- and second-order implications. For example, *successful* leaders possess the contextual knowledge needed to fulfill responsibilities for *change agent* and *situational awareness* and the pacing of various change initiatives; when to push, when to support, when to back off and encourage others to push. They possess the experiential knowledge needed to name and frame both their initiatives and the responsibilities of *optimizer, monitor and evaluate, culture, communication, order, and input* that they and others must fulfill to sustain them. They also possess the

declarative knowledge needed to fulfill the responsibilities *focus, knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and relationships* to calibrate the magnitude of changes for the organization and to understand the implications of their initiatives for stakeholders. Finally, they possess the procedural knowledge needed to fulfill responsibility for *intellectual stimulation, flexibility, and ideals/beliefs*, using research effectively in change initiatives with both first- and second-order implications. Professional development programs that include these four types of knowledge will help principals apply research to their practice and are more likely to support individuals committed to continuing in the principalship.

Sustaining leadership at the school level is becoming a top priority for principals (Hargreaves, 2004; Fullan, 2005). As “baby boomers” move closer to retirement and the number of aspiring principals continues to diminish (The Wallace Foundation, 2003), leadership succession is a fundamental problem that must be addressed. There is, however,

hopeful news for the current and aspiring corps of educational leaders. Policymakers, researchers, and the general public increasingly recognize the importance of strong leaders and the relationship of leadership to student achievement. Some states in the United States have begun to review and revise their principal standards and will begin integrating the results of quantitative research findings into the next generation of these standards. Professional development programs that are based on research and provide the knowledge that principals need to be successful are now available. There is a growing recognition in communities around the world that dramatic, second-order changes are needed to improve education systems and that these changes must be led by school leaders who are able to distinguish and maintain a relentless focus on what is essential. We believe now is the time for research on leadership to converge with the need for strong leaders. This convergence will support those with the courage, vision, and capacity to focus their leadership on what is essential.

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Appendix: Balanced Leadership Framework Responsibilities, Average r, and Associated Practices

Responsibilities	Avg r	Practices Associated with Responsibilities
Affirmation	.19	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematically and fairly recognizes and celebrates accomplishments of teachers and staff • Systematically and fairly recognizes and celebrates accomplishments of students • Systematically and fairly acknowledges failures and celebrates accomplishments of the school
Change agent	.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consciously challenges the status quo • Is comfortable leading change initiatives with uncertain outcomes • Systematically considers new and better ways of doing things
Communication	.23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is easily accessible to teachers and staff • Develops effective means for teachers and staff to communicate with one another • Maintains open and effective lines of communication with teachers and staff
Contingent rewards	.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizes individuals who excel • Uses performance vs. seniority as the primary criterion for reward and advancement • Uses hard work and results as the basis for reward and recognition
Culture	.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotes cooperation among teachers and staff • Promotes a sense of well-being • Promotes cohesion among teachers and staff • Develops an understanding of purpose • Develops a shared vision of what the school could be like
Curriculum, instruction, assessment	.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is involved with teachers in designing curricular activities and addressing instructional issues in their classrooms. • Is involved with teachers to address assessment issues
Discipline	.27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protects instructional time from interruptions • Protects/shelters teachers from distractions
Flexibility	.28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is comfortable with major changes in how things are done • Encourages people to express opinions that may be contrary to those held by individuals in positions of authority • Adapts leadership style to needs of specific situations • Can be directive or non-directive as the situation warrants
Focus	.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishes high, concrete goals and the expectation that all students will meet them • Establishes high, concrete goals for all curricula, instruction, and assessment • Establishes high, concrete goals for the general functioning of the school • Keeps everyone's attention focused on established goals
Ideas/beliefs	.22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holds strong professional ideals and beliefs about schooling, teaching, and learning • Shares ideals and beliefs about schooling, teaching, and learning with teachers, staff, and parents • Demonstrates behaviors that are consistent with ideals and beliefs
Input	.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides opportunities for input from teachers and staff on all important decisions • Provides opportunities for teachers and staff to be involved in policy development • Involves the school leadership team in decision making

Responsibilities	Avg r	Practices Associated with Responsibilities
Intellectual stimulation	.24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stays informed about current research and theory regarding effective schooling • Continually exposes teachers and staff to cutting-edge ideas about how to be effective • Systematically engages teachers and staff in discussions about current research and theory • Continually involves teachers and staff in reading articles and books about effective practices
Knowledge of curriculum, instruction assessment	.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is knowledgeable about curriculum and instructional practices • Is knowledgeable about assessment practices • Provides conceptual guidance for teachers regarding effective classroom practice
Monitors/evaluates	.27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of the curriculum • Monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of instruction • Monitors and evaluates the effectiveness of assessment
Optimizer	.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inspires teachers and staff to accomplish things that might seem beyond their grasp • Portrays a positive attitude about the ability of teachers and staff to accomplish substantial things • Is a driving force behind major initiatives
Order	.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provides and enforces clear structures, rules, and procedures for teachers, staff, and students • Establishes routines regarding the running of the school that teachers and staff understand and follow
Outreach	.27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures that the school is in compliance with district and state mandates • Advocates on behalf of the school in the community • Interacts with parents in ways that enhance their support for the school • Ensures that the central office is aware of the school's accomplishments
Relationship	.18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remains aware of personal needs of teachers and staff • Maintains personal relationships with teachers and staff • Is informed about significant personal issues in the lives of teachers and staff • Acknowledges significant events in the lives of teachers and staff
Resources	.25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensures that teachers and staff have necessary materials and equipment • Ensures that teachers have necessary professional development opportunities that directly enhance their teaching
Situational awareness	.33	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is aware of informal groups and relationships among teachers and staff • Is aware of issues in the school that have not surfaced but could create discord • Can predict what could go wrong from day to day
Visibility	.20	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes systematic and frequent visits to classrooms • Is highly visible around the school • Has frequent contact with students

Note: The r correlations reported in this table were derived from McREL's leadership meta-analysis