

Strength Found Through Distributed Leadership

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The Changing Demands of School Leaders

Today's principals and supervisors are faced with increasing demands, prompting their responsibilities to evolve dramatically over the past few decades. In addition to holding the largely managerial roles of the past, modern school leaders are expected to facilitate efficient operations, provide the instructional guidance to help teachers develop professionally, and maintain the primary importance of furthering student learning. Ongoing

legislation has focused both on advancing America's international competitiveness and closing the achievement gap among students, making "accountability the centerpiece of the education agenda" (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002, p. 3) in the United States. The need for schools to meet academic performance requirements has further solidified the need for principals and supervisors to embrace collective efforts to meet such high demands.

The Township of Franklin Public School District has faced similar modern educational demands and chal-

lenges. In 2010, the district had to create and implement improvement action plans in an effort to increase student performance on state standardized assessments. Initial efforts included the implementation of common planning time and professional learning communities (PLCs), understanding that teachers needed opportunities to work, plan, and learn together. However, there was a disconnect, as many of the meetings were administratively driven, and genuine collaborative efforts focused on student learning were lacking. The district realized that

it needed to empower its teachers by developing methods of increased leadership opportunities.

The Need for a Distributed Leadership Approach

Knowing that the impact of school leadership on students' academic success is second only to teaching (Wallace Foundation, 2004), it became clear that systemic leadership shifts were necessary to make improvements in our district. Many principals and supervisors will likely agree that leadership can take various forms and can be found distributed throughout any given school environment. However, the concept of distributed leadership is often used to describe any shared, collaborative, or extended leadership practice. Notable researcher in the concept of distributed leadership, James Spillane, argued that distributed leadership is first and foremost about leadership practice. Rather than traditional leader roles and structure, a genuine distributed perspective extends beyond positions to interactions throughout the school community, "not just the actions of heroes" (Spillane, 2006, p. 4). Through a purposeful system focused on the actions and interactions of many, multiple leaders of various positions and professional titles share activities and responsibilities throughout the school community at any given time.

At its roots, distributed leadership implies a fundamental shift in the way formal leaders view their leadership roles and responsibilities when interacting with others. The culture necessary to share traditional leadership roles and to empower teacher-leaders must be established and fostered by principals and supervisors. Democratic practices, shared governance, time for collaboration, and opportunities to contribute to larger efforts are all structural factors that allow for teacher-leaders to emerge (Danielson, 2006). Hierarchies can then become flattened as individuals throughout the district contribute to larger organizational efforts. Distributed leadership is not "done" by principals and supervisors "to" others. It is fostered through the interactions and relationships occurring among individuals throughout the school community on a daily basis.

Putting Distributed Leadership in Action

Through a distributed leadership framework that embraces the value of teacher-leaders, our district has worked to solidify a fundamental collaborative focus on student learning. Teacher-leaders contribute to the success of activities across various categories in the school and district. Curriculum work, coordination and management of school operations, professional learning opportunities, and nurturing positive relationships within the school community are all mutually supported and enhanced through a distributed leadership perspective.

Teacher-leaders regularly model and encourage professional growth through both scheduled professional development sessions and daily learning that occurs through informal communication and weekly PLC discussions. Using the Connected Action Roadmap (CAR), the teacher-leaders have developed a culture among the members of their PLCs as they have and continue to facilitate conversations directly aligned to matters that impact the education of their students. True, purposeful connections to student achievement are at the forefront of PLC meetings. The teacher-leaders help guide their peers in a continuous development of their curriculum, develop and analyze student assessments, and maintain organizational structures within their department. Kennedy et al. (2011) are proponents of the use of distributed leadership as a method for teachers to work collaboratively and to participate in the inner workings of their schools. The use of distributed leadership to cultivate PLCs includes using the teachers' knowledge to develop a lateral decision making model and using dialogue and inquiry to build a positive school culture.

Principals are able to provide leadership by building and maintaining a vision, direction, and focus for student learning while prompting an atmosphere of participation, responsibility, and ownership. The establishment of a School Leadership Committee (SLC) has enabled teachers to collectively make decisions regarding school operations, instructional elements,

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and professional growth initiatives. This committee, which encompasses the teacher leaders of each department, allows a multi-faceted approach to making school-level decisions. Principals are able to solicit input and empower staff to serve as an intricate part of the oversight of school operations. Furthermore, developing leadership beyond traditional positions offers additional collective efforts to increase student achievement. The sharing of power among principals and teachers is seen as essential to the success of site-based management and shared decision-making strategies. Schools that are successfully restructuring seem to be typified by high levels of administrator-teacher collaboration in leadership, particularly when principals take the initiative in taking the steps needed for success (Lucas & Valentine, 2002). The SLC supports the notion that the principal's job is no longer simply managerial, rather, principals should focus on building teams that include all stakeholders within their schools.

The District Leadership Committee (DLC), comprised of SLC teacher-leaders and administrators from each school, meets monthly to contribute to district-led decision-making. Every population of teachers (e.g., special education, basic skills, related arts, etc.) has a voice at the DLC table. Teacher-leaders play a critical role in analyzing teacher and student data in order to drive decisions for professional learning, curriculum, assessments, district operations, staff surveys, and initiatives. The DLC is also instrumental in streamlining communication throughout the district. The flow of communication is open and ongoing from PLCs to the SLC to the DLC and vice versa. Clear communication through this DLC↔SLC↔PLC

framework emphasizes and respects the actions and interactions of many school members.

Without question, the role of the school administrator has become increasingly more demanding over the past few decades. The expectations of continued, annual student academic performance cannot simply be accomplished in isolation. Leadership is distributed not

by delegating it or giving it away, but by purposefully weaving together people, materials, and organizational structures for a common cause (Spillane, 2006). Effective principals and supervisors do not just string together a series of individual actions, but systematically distribute leadership by building it into the fabric of school life. Over the past two years, we have been very fortunate to be selected as a Pilot School for

the Connected Action Roadmap / PLC project through NJPSA/NJDOE. During this enriching experience, the district and school has been highlighted for its integration of PLCs and utilization of teacher-leaders to promote a positive educational environment. Generating cultural shifts through a framework of distributed leadership has helped to empower teachers and enhance a common focus on student learning.

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About the Authors



Theodore J. Peters has been an educator for the past 15 years, the last eight as the Principal of the Caroline L. Reutter School in the Township of Franklin Public Schools. In this role, he has transformed the school by empowering teacher leaders, implementing the Connected Action Roadmap model, and instituting professional learning communities. In addition to holding various leadership roles within his district, Ted also actively serves on the New Jersey Department of Education's State Professional Learning Committee and the Teacher Leader Network. Ted has degrees from The College of New Jersey and Seton Hall University along with post-graduate work at various institutions.



Jaime Doldan has been in the field of education for 20+ years. Her career started in high school as a student preschool teacher in the preschool program that was offered. While attending classes in the evening at Wilmington University to obtain a bachelor's degree in teaching, she worked full-time as a preschool teacher and a paraprofessional. Upon graduating with a teaching certificate in 2001, she entered her first teaching assignment at Salem City Middle School. In 2012, While at Salem City, she earned her Masters of Education in School Leadership from Wilmington University. By this time she was teaching in the Township of Franklin School District. Shortly thereafter, she was promoted to the district's first Instructional Mathematics Coach, then an Instructional Supervisor. In 2014, Mrs. Doldan landed her current position, Supervisor of Curriculum & Instruction, in the Township of Franklin School District.



Richard Carr is the Instructional Supervisor in the Township of Franklin School District, a K-6 district located in Gloucester County. He has spent the past 12 years in public education, serving as an elementary and middle school math teacher prior to entering administration. Rich holds a B.S. in Elementary Education, a M.Ed. in School Leadership, and is currently completing the dissertation phase to pursue an Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Innovation, focusing on how educator perceptions of intelligence shape the approaches used to determine students' academic abilities.