

School-Based Leadership in the US in an Age of Reform: What Does it Take?

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Abstract

This article examines the current context, challenges, and issues for school leaders and their development in the United States. Current debates about who should lead, what capacities they should have, and how they are best prepared to lead are reviewed. Using several recent studies of the principalship and learning-centered leadership, the author discusses an array of leadership capacities for leading in a high-accountability environment. The article concludes with a brief meta-analysis and suggests an array of capacities for school leaders and a means of acquiring them in the future.

Introduction

In the United States in 2005, the purpose and place of public education remains a cornerstone of our democratic life. The number of schools in the United States engaged in educating the country's students is formidable. In 2001-02, 91,380 public schools served 47.7 million students in the United States (NCES, 2003). In every community, families look to the schools to provide the educational foundation for a successful emerging generation of children to participate in economic and social life.

Public education forms such a central place in American society that from the federal to local arena, no politician can aspire to office without engaging with the contributions of schools to our national vitality. Whether running for town mayor or President, an educational platform, particularly one that embraces an improvement agenda, is essential.

In recent years, public schools in the US have been perceived as being 'in trouble'. Indeed, in 1983 when the controversial report, *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983) was published, the effect was the equivalent to a call-to-arms to stem perceived weaknesses in a critical thread in the fabric of

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American society — the US public schools. The economic competitiveness concerns of the 1980s continue to this day and are represented in the wide swathe of accountability-driven reform in all 50 states. At the same time, education policy makers and politicians continue to eye international league tables and comparisons of achievement as a means to ensure that American competitiveness is protected. However, the news from these international comparisons is often mixed. For example, the most recent comparisons of mathematics and science achievement reported that:

No measurable changes were detected in the average mathematics and science scores of U.S. fourth-graders between 1995 and 2003.... Moreover, the available data suggest that the performance of U.S. fourth-graders in both mathematics and science was lower in 2003 than in 1995 relative to the 14 other countries that participated in both studies. (NCES, 2004, p. 24)

Given the important place of public education in society, its centrality in public policy, and the hopes vested in schools, it is not surprising that the challenges American schools face are complex and varied. From rural to urban settings, public schools undertake to educate students who represent a range of learning backgrounds and needs. Whether having special educational needs, being a recent immigrant just arrived in the US, or a family living without a home, all children have a right to be served by the nation's public schools. In many of our nation's most challenged schools, it would not be uncommon for a majority of the students to be on public assistance, for dozens of first languages to be spoken by the students and their families, for a wide range of educational and emotional needs to be daily apparent in the classroom, and for the teachers and principal to be working in a deteriorating school building. Clearly, public schools represent a range of challenges and the differentials in both resources and achievement are a current issue of national importance.

Who Leads?

In the light of these challenges facing many public schools, urgent attention has been driven toward educational leadership and specifically the role that principals play in the directing of work in schools. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) note:

This renewed focus on educational leadership is an outgrowth of several larger trends and conditions. First, the outcomes of schooling

are coming under greater scrutiny, and there is strong interest in how school leaders can influence these outcomes. Second, the contexts of educational leadership, both within schools and school districts themselves as well as the larger social, political, and economic environment surrounding schools, are more complex and present new challenges for educational leaders. And third, research results and normative expectations about leadership seem to provide justification for giving leadership more attention (p. 4).

To undertake such an important leadership agenda, many organisations and agencies – both public and private – are investing in the development of those who lead schools. For example, one of the largest private organisations investing in educational leaders is the Wallace Foundation. Through their grant efforts, the foundation is investing in both research and programs to support and sustain leaders in schools. The Wallace Foundation website reports:

The Wallace Foundation is focusing on strategies to help principals and superintendents be more effective in their work. Without strong leaders to run schools and districts, efforts to produce changes that yield quality instruction for all students – especially in America's low-performing public schools – are not likely to succeed or be sustained. This emphasis on education leadership builds on the Foundation's past work to improve teaching and learning in schools. (<http://www.wallacefoundation.org/WF/GrantsPrograms/FocusAreas/Programs/EducationLeadership/>)

Since the effective schools research of the 1980s, the influence of leaders on the learning of students in schools has been explored from many angles. The consensus is that leadership matters – that leaders do make a difference in the learning of students in schools. While the direct influences are not easy to measure the indirect influences seem clear. As Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom note, 'leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school – related factors that contribute to what students learn at school' (2004, p. 5).

The central focus for leaders in schools rightfully centres on the core activity of schools – namely, teaching and learning. In response to the accountability expectations from the public policy context, school leaders are increasingly examining what are the necessary skills and attributes to keep their work centered on these important outcomes. Leithwood and Reihl (2003) describe this trend in the following manner:

The current educational reform context suggests that leadership should be directed specifically toward key outcome goals rather than concentrating on technical management, as was the tendency in the

recent past (for example, Boyan, 1988; Rosenblum *et al.*, 1994). In public education, the goals to be served increasingly are acknowledged to be centered on student learning, including both the development of academic knowledge and skill and the learning of important norms and values, such as democratic social behaviour.... Leadership as focused on and accountable for learning is the genesis of such phrases as 'leading for learning,' 'learning-focused leadership,' or 'learner-centered' accountability (for example, Darling-Hammond, 1997; DuFour, 2002; Knapp *et al.*, 2002). This explicitly learning-focused goal for leadership does not narrow school leaders' purview to the instructional system *per se* (as did earlier notions of instructional leadership). Rather it assumes that leaders will direct their attention to ensuring that all components and actions within the educational system support the learning of students (p. 8).

Current Debates in Educational Leadership

Given the dual centrality of ensuring equitable learning opportunities for students and the effect that school leaders can have to align a school's actions around learning, it is not surprising that the preparation of American school leaders is undergoing a period of examination and review. Repeated questions center on what it takes to both effectively lead a learning community, as well as who should engage in that work. The purpose behind much of the attention around school leadership has been to revisit the traditions of principal preparation in this country with the critical outcome of changing how leaders are prepared. In some circles, there is concern that traditional preparation for school leadership is centered around the expectations for schools in the past and not responsive to emerging needs. Traditionally (recognising that there are variations across the 50 states), principal preparation is delivered via universities accredited by their state for the awarding of the professional license to assume the principalship. Generally, these programs draw from the ranks of experienced teachers and often provide master's degree level work that is oriented around both campus-based instruction and some form of practicum/internship. The university-based course work often centres around traditional managerial activities of school principals including personnel matters, budget and facilities, legal issues, and instructional supervision, but increasingly attends to the learning and diversity issues that school leaders face. Often, these programs are delivered by a combination of university faculty and adjunct/clinical practitioners.

A recent review of research (Davis *et al.*, 2005) on principal preparation identified five leading elements of emerging and redesigned principal preparation including: Field-based internships of appropriate substance to provide meaningful learning opportunities; problem-based learning strategies for examining the interconnections in school life; cohort groups for both collaborative learning to and mirror school learning communities; respected and established mentors for novice leaders; and novel collaboration between university programs and school districts.

The adequacy of the traditional methods of principal preparation is under increasing scrutiny. Most recently, Arthur Levine, President of Teacher's College, Columbia University authored a pointed critique of traditional principal preparation in the United States. Levine (2005) asserts:

In a rapidly changing environment, principals and superintendents no longer serve primarily as supervisors. They are being called on to lead in a redesign of their schools and school systems. In an outcome-based and accountability-driven era, administrators have to lead their schools in rethinking the goals, priorities, finances, staffing, curriculum, pedagogies, learning resources, assessment methods, technology, and use of time and space. They have to recruit and retain top staff member and educate newcomers and veterans alike to understand and be comfortable with an education system undergoing dramatic and continuing change. They have to ensure the professional development that teachers and administrators need to be effective. They have to prepare parents and students for the new realities and provide them with the support necessary to succeed. They have to engage in continuous evaluation and school improvements, create a sense of community, and build morale in a time of transformation.

Few of today's 250,000 school leaders are prepared to carry out this agenda. Neither they nor the programs that prepared them should be faulted for this. Put simply, they were appointed to and educated for jobs that do not exist any longer (emphasis added).

Having reviewed the new challenging work for school leaders, Levine (2005), outlined a stinging critique of the programs that prepare school leaders in the US. He declares:

This study found the overall quality of educational administration programs in the United States to be poor. The majority of programs range from inadequate to appalling, even at some of the country's leading universities. Collectively, school leadership programs are not successful on any of the nine quality criteria¹ presented in Part I.

The central points of Levine's critique can be divided into two categories. The first is to match what is taught to leaders (both pre-service and in-service) to undertake the complex work that is both the contemporary and future principalship. Implied in this first point is *what* should be taught (curriculum), *how* it should be taught (pedagogy), and *who* should teach (university faculty and practitioners).

The second category centres around the issues of when is the appropriate time for an educational intervention for a school leader? Levine contends, and I believe rightly so, that leadership preparation is a continuum of preparation and development that occurs at various stages of a principal's leadership career. The model he spotlights is that found at the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in England. The NCSL, as well as a number of programs in the US, endeavor to provide development and training at the times that it is most readily needed for school leaders, rather than the heavy pre-service orientation of most US principal programs. This is a point I will return to later in this article.

As might be imagined, Levine's critique did not go without response. It was widely touted in the popular press as well as educational press [see for example: Archer, J. (2005, March 16). Study Blasts Leadership Preparation: Teachers College Head Calls for New Degrees. *Education Week*, 24 (27), 1,18]. The major professional organization for university-based leadership preparation programs, the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) responded to the Levine report in the Spring 2005 issue of the *UCEA Review*. The UCEA responders (Young, Crow, Orr, Ogawa, & Creighton, 2005) identified several points of agreement, including the central efficacy of school leadership and the need for high quality leadership programs. However, the authors took issue with the currency, methodology, and broad brush with which Levine painted leadership preparation. On the first point, they noted:

Recent years have witnessed many focused, effective efforts to improve leadership preparation, led by professional associations as well as states, foundations, and other key players in educational leadership. Many of these reforms have already led to updates and improvements in the preparation of both school and system leaders (Young *et al.*, 2005, p. 1).

They go on to describe:

The national standards movement in leadership preparation has developed sets of standards being used in many states and institutions to reform and assess preparation programs. Many of these involved collaborations between professional associations and universities. The most prominent is the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), a consortium of 32 educational agencies and 13 educational administration associations that developed a set of criteria and standards for administrative practice (Young *et al*, 2005, p. 1).

The ISLLC standards are now the driving force in most states for licensure requirements and have been integrated into accrediting standards (for example, NCATE) and various consortia of leadership professional associations and universities (for example, Educational Leadership Constituent Council, National Council for Professors of Educational Administration).

In their rejoinder, Young and colleagues noted that:

The report usefully raises the questions of program quality, but its disparaging of all programs as inadequate to poor threatens the validity of its own inquiry. As in any field – and public education itself – quality varies widely across programs. Indeed, the variability in quality is what spurred efforts to improve program quality through standards setting, certification requirements and assessment, which have strengthened many programs, closed others, and fostered new programs.... It is unclear why Levine felt compelled to frame his findings only in negative terms, mis-representing in many cases both his own data and the results of other research projects. (Young *et al*, 2005, p. 2).

The purpose for reviewing this recent debate is to highlight a central feature of the educational leadership landscape in America. Namely, that the work that school principals and other school and district leaders do remains vitally important to the learning success of students in our schools. At the same time, we recognize that new competencies demand new means and pathways for preparation, as well as a broader conception of who participate in the leadership work of the school.

The remainder of the article examines the data from a recent study of the principalship, as well as vignettes from leading programs and theoretical models to identify the emerging frontiers of educational leadership.

Current Expectations for School Leaders

'The work of educational leaders is ultimately about guiding improvements in learning' (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003, p. 7). Clearly, the contemporary climate of concerns for the outcomes of education rests on the primacy of student learning – the *raison d'être* for schools. School leaders, therefore, are increasingly called on to orient their efforts around the learning agenda for the school. Two recent research efforts to describe and explain include Knapp, Copland and Talbert (2003) and Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004). In both studies, the direct activities and lines of influence that connect leaders to student learning are described in some detail.

Knapp and colleagues posit that equitable, high quality learning experiences for students are predicated on leaders' simultaneous engagement with three 'learning agenda: student learning, professional learning, and system learning' (2003, p. 10). Professional learning includes the array of skills, knowledge, and values that teachers garner in both pre-service education and in the professional development that sustains their growth. 'System learning' is less obvious, but 'includes insight into the functioning of the system as a whole to develop and evaluate new policies, practices, and structures that enhance its performance' (p. 11). The theory of action assumes that through simultaneous attention to these three learning agenda in the unique contexts of their schools and districts, leaders have greater opportunity to effect high quality learning environments for students.

A second part of this framework orients leadership action around five 'areas of action' outlined in Figure 1:

Figure 1
Leading for Learning, Five Areas of Action

- School and district leaders can advance powerful and equitable student learning by:
- 1) **Establishing a focus on learning** - by persistently and publicly focusing their own attention and that of others on learning and teaching.
 - 2) **Building professional communities that value learning** - by nurturing the work cultures that value and support their members' learning.
 - 3) **Engaging external environments that matter for learning** - by building relationships and securing resources from outside groups that can foster students' or teachers' learning.
 - 4) **Acting strategically and sharing leadership** - by mobilizing effort along multiple 'pathways' that lead to student, professional, or system learning, and by distributing leadership across levels and among individuals in different positions.
 - 5) **Creating coherence** - by connecting student, professional, and system learning with one another and with learning goals. (Knapp *et al.*, 2003, p. 12)

The Knapp *et al.*, *Leading for Learning* framework, expands and exposes the dimensions of leading in schools and districts across a larger learning agenda and outlines examples from practice of how school leaders can utilize 'pathways' of direction and influence to create greater alignment within the school for powerful learning.

This is not to say that the managerial is unimportant as a key expectation for school leaders. Indeed, many of the strategic actions of leadership depend on ensuring that the organizational system supports the decisions that are being made. In addition, pervasive concerns for safe and secure environments in schools necessitate vital leadership attention to this critical managerial action.

The Current Policy Context for Leadership

A central focus for leaders in both schools and districts are the provisions from various manifestations of 'accountability reform' that is prevalent in both federal and state-level legislative and policy contexts. In addition to state testing provisions, the other policy context that shapes the activities of the US schools of that federal policy, more specifically, the provisions of 'No Child Left Behind' (NCLB). One of the stated goals of this act was for students to obtain a quality education and reach proficiency in core academic subjects. To reach this goal, NCLB refocused federal education programs on the principles of stronger accountability for results, more choices for parents and students, greater flexibility for states and school districts, and the use of research-based instructional methods.

An important provision of NCLB has been the expectation that schools meet adequate yearly progress measures (AYP) in key academic areas to ensure all students are proficient in reading and mathematics by school year 2013-2014. Beginning in the 2005-2006 school year, all students in grades three through eight will be assessed in reading and math to measure school and school district performance. A critical change – and the key to ensuring that no child is left behind – is that schools are considered to have made adequate yearly progress only if all student groups, including poor and minority students, students with limited English proficiency, and students with disabilities receive the quality education they deserve.

Low-income students attending schools identified for improvement for two or more years may obtain supplemental educational services, such as tutoring and other academic assistance. According to some

sources, studies of state achievement data show that reading and mathematics scores are up in most states and the achievement gaps among racial and ethnic groups have begun to narrow.

In any case, actions such as No Child Left Behind and the array of state tests and accountability measures mean that no school is left unexamined. This has presented districts and schools with a new array of data to both manage and interpret, creating a keen new capacity for school leaders, that of being able to collect, manage, and interpret a wide variety of student achievement data.

Other Contextual Issues Affecting School Leaders

Of the nearly 48 million students in America's public schools (NCES, 2003), 39 percent are classified as minority students. This diversity is represented differently in various communities, from 62.5 per cent minority population in the large and midsize cities to 20.8 per cent in small town and rural contexts. Diversity in race, ethnicity, language and religious groups represents both the vital mix of American society, but often also signals historic disparities in educational opportunity. Leithwood and Reihl note:

Many educational leaders work with student populations that are diverse and may not be experiencing high levels of success in school. This includes children who are from families in poverty or whose backgrounds or characteristics fall outside of the cultural mainstream (for example, native peoples or recent immigrants, children with physical handicaps, and children from historically marginalized racial/ethnic groups such as Latinos or African-Americans). (2003, p. 25)

Leithwood and Reihl (2003) further describe leadership in these contexts as a moral commitment just as central as the successful implementation of policy and effectively managing schools. They note that:

The second approach to leadership aims to ensuring, at minimum, that those policies and other initiatives that were identified are implemented in just and equitable ways. This usually means building on the forms of social capital that students do possess rather than being restricted by the social capital they do not possess. Such an approach to leadership is referred to variously as emancipatory leadership (for example, Corson, 1996), leadership for social justice (for example, Larson & Murtadha, 2002), and critical leadership (for example, Foster, 1989b), (Leithwood & Reihl, 2003, p. 36).

It is important to note also that the funding of education has created additional challenges for school leaders. Following the economic downturn beginning in 2000, the impact on state budgets was, in many cases, severe. The individual states carry the primary responsibility for the funding of public education with over 92 percent of funds provided by state and local funds. Economic uncertainty and pinched state budgets have led many school and district leaders to exercise a higher degree of entrepreneurship. Business partnership and grant funding are matters that most school leaders now attend to in order to supplement public resources provided to the schools.

Matching Leadership Needs and Capacities

In 2000, with colleagues at the University of Washington Center for Reinventing Public Education, we undertook a study to explore what it takes to be a principal by looking at what practising principals actually do. Over the course of two years, we interviewed over 150 educators in a mix of 21 widely different cases/schools in four small to mid-size urban cities in four different states. The schools included all levels and both public and private schools.

Prior research has largely avoided samples that cut across public and private schools in order to avoid an 'apples and oranges' argument. We chose to embrace the comparative advantage that can come from looking at a diversity of schools. It seemed to us that the contrast brought clarity, rather than confusion. While we certainly saw important differences in leadership across school sectors, the intersections were more interesting, and they led us to five findings about leadership across the 21 schools (Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003a; 2003b).

Our research was guided by three questions:

- Are there core roles that all principals play regardless of the type of school they lead?
- How do these roles differ across traditional public, magnet, charter, and private schools?
- Do current training programs address the demands of the job?

To answer these questions, interviews were conducted with the principal, but we also interviewed any assistant principals, teacher

leaders, department heads, and teachers at-large. The interviews followed a semi-structured format.

During the interviews we asked people about the way their schools distributed leadership and management responsibilities, maintained the quality of instruction, and identified and solved problems. We also paid attention to how different school leaders were trained, what formative experiences they considered most important, and where they thought their preparation was deficient.

The schools we visited included five elementary schools, 7 middle or K-8 schools, seven high schools, and two K-12 schools (see Table 1). As our second research question implies, the sample of schools we visited included, but wasn't limited to, traditional public schools. The sample also included private independent schools (both sectarian and non-sectarian) as well as what we called 'entrepreneurial public schools' – i.e. charter schools, contract schools, and magnet schools. These entrepreneurial public schools were funded based on the numbers of students they attracted, rather on a guaranteed budget; they generally had more control over their finances and staffing than the traditional public schools did. While some of the schools in the sample were success stories, others were works in progress. We purposefully avoided looking only at 'hero' principals in order to get a picture of the principalship that goes beyond just the exemplars of the profession.

Table 1
Participant School Characteristics

	Elementary School	Middle or K-8	High School	K-12	TOTAL
Private	1	2	1	1	5
Traditional Public	3	1	4		8
Magnet		2			2
Charter	1	2	2	1	6
TOTAL	5	7	7	2	21

Admittedly, the set of schools we visited and the people we interviewed were not a random sample; we cannot claim that they are statistically representative of some larger group². Our findings are ultimately limited to the places we visited. Nevertheless, what we learned provides detailed impressions of what school leadership looks like in action across a variety of schools and across a variety of states.

Our opportunity sample was broad. Moreover, we found that whether a school was independent or overseen by a public board had more of an effect on the demands its principal faced than did the state where it happened to be located. With all the appropriate caveats in mind, we think our interviews revealed some clear patterns that are broadly applicable, if not perfectly representative. I suggest that the core findings are informative for the larger questions about what it takes to lead contemporary schools, who is best situated to provide that leadership, and what support is necessary across a leader's career. In particular, our observations across the 21 schools led us to five findings about school leadership:

- 1) The core of the principal's job is diagnosing his or her particular school's needs and, given the resources and talents available, deciding how to meet them.
- 2) Regardless of school type, all schools need leadership in seven critical areas.
- 3) Principals are responsible for ensuring that leadership happens in all seven critical areas, but they don't have to perform all leadership tasks personally.
- 4) A school's governance structure affects the way it performs key leadership functions.
- 5) Regardless of their training, most principals think they learned the skills they need 'on the job.'

In the end, we found that there is no general answer to the question, 'What does it take to run a school?' The leadership challenges faced by these 21 principals cannot be reduced to set formulas. Some schools need more focus on the inside from someone who can rebuild weak staffs and overcome internal distrust. Others need a leader with external expertise who can stabilize funding, satisfy regulators, or build ties to parents. All schools need to provide good instruction, but there is no one best model of instructional leadership: Principals who have detailed theories about instruction can lead schools, but so can principals whose

main skill is delegating to others and holding them accountable. Different situations, we found, require different kinds of leadership.

Three Key Findings for Understanding School Leadership

Of the findings in this study, three provide pertinent insight into core responsibilities for school-based leaders. The three are: 1) The diagnostic expertise of principals; 2) a span of attention across the seven critical areas defined in the study; and, 3) patterns of distributed leadership.

The core of the principal's job is diagnosing his or her particular school's needs and, given the resources and talents available, deciding how to meet them.

Whether they are dealing with a shortage of capable educators, unpredictable funding, or social turmoil, principals face an excess of challenges. Yet our interviews suggest that one challenge stands out as the heart of what it means to lead a school (be it a traditional public, a charter, or a private school), and that is the challenge to understand a school's needs, and to decide how to meet them. This sounds deceptively straightforward. But it involves a complicated array of actions and talents. It suggests that principals have to know how to 'read' their school's goals, context, and resources (financial and human resources) in order to understand its strengths and weaknesses; they have to set priorities; they have to motivate others to act. The principals we interviewed talked about doing all of this in terms of 'diagnosing problems' and 'analyzing available resources and solutions.' Diagnosis and analysis are central to the job.

In these study cases, the principal had to be a master diagnostician. How they diagnosed, interpreted, and dissected what are necessarily complex systems was, in some ways, a key measure of their ability to succeed in moving their school toward its aims and in managing the multiple demands of the job. As we heard from some leaders, diagnosing and analyzing complex problems sometimes occurred in the moment: during a serious discipline event, an unexpected turnover of key staff, the loss of anticipated funding, or even a broken sewer pump. The challenge to understand needs and decide how to meet them also necessarily occurs in the context of a school's overall mandate, be it implicit or explicit. State legislatures, districts, boards of trustees, and communities all hand down mandates to schools (for example build a

new school and program, maintain a valued program, or turn around a 'disaster'). To complicate matters, the principals we interviewed said that in addition to dealing with multiple mandates, they had to understand how mandates change over the life of a school and involve multiple stakeholders.

Leaders are bombarded with understanding challenges everyday. In the end, the principal's job seems to pivot around how well she is able to think clearly through problems and mandates in a way that uncovers root causes, anticipates outcomes (and unintended consequences), establishes contingency plans, and that considers the broader context of stakeholders and circumstances that make up their school.

Regardless of school type, all schools need leadership in seven critical areas

During our site visits we asked principals and those who work with them to describe what they did as the school's leader, what they were responsible for, what other leaders in the school did, and what they thought had to occur in order for their school to function effectively. Our challenge was to identify a set of critical leadership *areas* or *roles* that had explanatory power regardless of whether we were talking about a traditional public school, a charter or magnet school, or an independent school.

From an extensive list of tasks, functions, roles, and duties, we identified seven common areas of leadership that the principals grappled with in one way or another, regardless of type of school. Our set covers major categories of action that leaders must navigate as they work to understand and meet their school's needs. Table 2 lists the seven critical areas and describes representative actions associated with each.

As might be expected, the seven areas include well-known aspects of leading a school, things like instructional leadership, cultural leadership, and strategic leadership. Many of the principals we interviewed talked predictably about guiding curriculum and professional development (Instructional, and what we call Human Resource leadership); about the importance of maintaining their school's sense of tradition and tone (Cultural leadership); and about the importance of managing finances and 'getting creative' with funding (Managerial leadership). Most of the school leaders were also well versed in the vocabulary of 'vision' and 'mission,' whether they were working from a district-supplied school improvement plan or they were working with a board of trustees to lay out goals for the next five years (Strategic Leadership). These areas of action are well-described and documented elsewhere.

Table 2
School Critical Functions and Characteristics

Critical Function	Characteristic and Actions
Instructional Leadership	Assuring quality of instruction, modeling teaching practice, supervising curriculum, and assuring teaching resources
Cultural Leadership	Tending to the symbolic resources of the school (for example its traditions, climate, and history)
Managerial Leadership	Tending to the operations of the school (for example its budget, schedule, facilities, and transportation)
Strategic Leadership	Promoting a vision, mission, goals, and developing a means to reach them
Human Resource Leadership	Recruiting, hiring, firing, inducting, and mentoring teachers and administrators; developing leadership capacity and professional development opportunities
External Development and Political Leadership	Representing the school in the community, developing capital, public relations, recruiting students, buffering and mediating external interests, and advocating for the school's interests
Micropolitical leadership	Buffering and mediating internal interests, maximizing resources (financial and human)

But as we looked at leadership across the various school types, we found we also had to supplement these categories. In particular, the private and 'entrepreneurial schools' we visited led us to include leadership functions that the literature sometimes overlooks. Private school heads talked about the need to 'market' their schools and raise money above and beyond the tuition paid by students. Whether this took the form of an annual giving campaign or a particular push to raise money for a major capital project, private school leaders spent much of their time worrying about making connections to external resources and commitments. Though more common in private schools, this was also evident in some of the public schools. A public middle school principal,

for example, described this kind of activity by saying, 'I want people to come and see what we're doing here – we want to promote our work, get visible. We can make connections to the community that add to our program and resources.' We call this additional leadership activity, *External Development and Political Leadership*.

We also identified another critical area of activity in which we saw principals and others facilitating the transactions across the other six areas. As principals promote a vision and core mission of their school (Strategic Leadership) and work to develop the quality of teaching at their school (Instructional leadership), for example, they and other leaders in the school need to explain what they intend to do and why it is important, they must motivate people to join the cause, and they may need to redirect resources accordingly. All of this requires mediating and buffering varied internal interests within the school as the school staff choose priorities for both programs and resources. We call this additional leadership activity, *Micropolitical Leadership*.

Though the seven areas of leadership action help to organize our thinking about what we saw, how they played out in the schools was far from uniform; both their interaction and their relative urgency differed. As the next finding explains, so did their distribution.

Principals are responsible for ensuring that leadership happens in all seven critical areas, but they don't have to perform all leadership tasks personally.

The way the principal and others acted in the seven areas differed considerably between the schools we visited. In some, the principal retained direct links to all of the activities; in others, the principal delegated large areas of leadership activity to teachers or assistant principals.

We discovered an important pattern by looking at the clustering of leadership functions across all 21 of our study schools. In general, the ability to distribute leadership functions seemed to be largely determined by both available resources and the freedom the school had to share leadership. In the traditional public setting, union contracts, constraints on resources, and the historical vesting of power with the principal, seem to rein-in opportunities to distribute leadership across all seven leadership functions.

Table 3 illustrates this variety further by looking at how three specific schools distributed leadership responsibilities across the seven

areas. The rows in the table list the different people, or groups of people, involved in leadership activities in each school. In the charter school, the principal participated in each of the seven areas, but he shared leadership with others around instruction, strategy, and human resources. Teachers were a particularly important part of the school's leadership team with key roles around instruction, the school's mission, and hiring decisions. In the parochial school, the principal completely delegated instructional and human resource leadership to an assistant principal, but remained vested in the rest of the leadership functions. By contrast, in the traditional public school, no one appeared to be leading the school's instructional program (what little instructional coherence there was seemed to be driven by the school district) and the principal was largely constrained to activities around management, culture, and internal politics. Activities associated with human resources and strategy were mostly vested in the district.

There is a subtle distinction that needs to be drawn in all of this. In all of the schools we viewed something more complex than just delegation to individuals or to management teams. Even when there was a fairly wide distribution of leadership, we found that the principal was able, and needed to, keep a 'finger on the pulse' of each of the seven core areas. This is an important distinction given today's emphasis on instructional accountability. In no case was a principal walled-off from the instructional work of the school; but neither did they all present themselves as the 'instructional exemplar' of the school—able to teach any class at any time. Principals often recognized that their distance from the classroom meant that they needed to rely on others who were closer to the work of teachers in classrooms to provide leadership.

Just how many people are involved and how a school is able (or unable) to act in all seven areas of leadership depends, as the next finding discusses, on the school's context, particularly its governance structure.

Table 3
Three Schools Distribute Leadership Differently
Core Leadership Functions

	Instructional	Cultural	Managerial	Strategic	HR	Ex. Dev	Micropol
CHARTER SCHOOL							
Principal	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Asst. Principal							
Teacher 'A'	X			X	X		
Teacher 'B'	X			X	X		
Board					X		
CATHOLIC SCHOOL							
Principal		X	X	X		X	X
Asst. Principal	X		X		X		
Teacher 'A'							
Teacher 'B'							
Board				X			
TRADITIONAL PUBLIC SCHOOL							
Principal		X	X	X	X	X	X
Asst. Principal			X	X	X	X	
Teacher 'A'							X
Teacher 'B'							
District				X	X		

Implications for Policy and Practice: Where Do We Go From Here?

Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) in their review of research around transformational approaches (Burns, 1978; Bass & Avolio, 1994) to leading schools identify three primary categories of leadership actions: These are:

- 1) Setting directions: including identifying and articulating a vision; fostering the acceptance of group goals; and establishing high performance expectations.
- 2) Helping people: including providing individualized support/consideration; intellectual stimulation; and providing an appropriate model.
- 3) Redesigning the organization: including creating collaborative cultures; restructuring; and building productive relationships with families and communities.

(Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005, pp. 7-9)

When placed alongside the findings from Portin *et al.* (2003) and Knapp *et al.* (2003) in Table 4 a pattern that informs future roles and responsibilities for school-based leaders emerges.

Table 4
Cross Analysis of Leadership Actions

Leithwood and Jantzi (2005)	Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, and Gundach (2003)	Knapp, Copland, and Talbert (2003)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting directions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic leadership • Cultural leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a focus on learning • Acting strategically and sharing leadership • Creating coherence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional leadership • Human resource leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building professional communities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Redesigning the organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managerial leadership • External development leadership • Micropolitical leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging external environments

The themes and actions represented in this matrix describe the array of foci necessary for school leaders to provide powerful learning opportunities for students, ensure the professional learning of the teaching staff, and develop a resilient organisational structure that adapts to changing expectations and contextually-dependent needs. While a bold agenda, it would be ill-advised to imagine that it could either be accomplished by a single individual or that it represents a skill-set learned in a limited time frame. Instead, it suggests that both an arena and temporal focus for leadership preparation and development needs to be adopted. Similarly to the three learning arenas of Knapp *et al* (2003), the set of competencies and processes represented in Table 4 suggest that there is a wide range of contexts in which school leaders learn, examine, diagnose, and strengthen these capacities.

For example, building a professional community/the human resource responsibilities of school leadership may start in a university context where aspiring leaders learn how adults learn and what needs they experience at different stages of their career. This includes a self-assessment of their own learning during their career. The learning continues in the evolving roles that an educational leader may have as a teacher leader, perhaps a department head, in some guided internship, or in early days as a deputy or assistant principal. For the school leader in-post, new dimensions for working with teachers on professional development consistently arise. How does this manifest when staff are largely young and inexperienced? How does a leader link teacher development to the needs of the student population? Many of these are complex questions that experienced leaders puzzle over and benefit from interaction with experienced peers and resources.

The point is to broaden the idea of what it means to prepare to lead to include a continuum of leadership learning activities and opportunities along the life-span of those who act and influence on behalf of students in schools.

The value from the reform policy of this decade is that the issue of differential achievement and the strategic learning agenda of schools are more prominent than, perhaps, at any previous period. What it suggests is an expansion of what is necessary to lead a learning community, an expansion of who participates in that leadership, and an expansion of when, where and how leaders can best integrate these capacities to provide powerful leadership for their schools.

NOTES

1. The nine quality criteria outlined by Levine are: Purpose, curricular coherence, curricular balance, faculty composition, admissions, degrees, research, finances, and assessment (Levine, 2005, p. 14).
- 2 To facilitate comparisons within the group, however, we structured the interviews and selected the respondents in a consistent manner.

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