

## **Principal Leadership that Promotes Collective Teacher Efficacy**

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*I understand that the best way to teach is to promote creativity and collaboration, but that takes time. As long as I am being evaluated by a multiple choice high-stakes test at the end of the year, I will do what I know works, which is lecture and notes.*

*I don't think our scores can go any higher with our student population. The schools doing better than we are have easier kids to work with. They are not dealing with the diversity we are dealing with. Considering our clientele, we are doing a great job.*

*I can't relate to the kids in my class anymore. There are more kids being disrespectful and unmotivated. It wasn't like that when I first started teaching. Also, the parents are less supportive. It used to be that when I called home to discuss an issue, the parent would say, 'I've got this. It will not be a problem going forward.' Now, parents are likely to say, 'Well what did you do to cause my kid to be rude. He wouldn't do that unless he was provoked.'*

*I dread these professional development sessions. It's always the latest greatest new thing, which is the same thing we tried 15 years ago, and it is just getting recycled. I wish the administration would leave us alone and just let me teach.*

These comments, and more like them, are frequently overheard during faculty conversations at a large suburban high school in Central Virginia. This faculty feels frustrated that their district and school-level leaders expect measures of school success to continually improve. They feel that expectation as an indictment of their teaching—that they are not doing an adequate job already. They feel overwhelmed by the number of changes and initiatives introduced by district leadership over the past several years. They feel unequipped to respond to the changing demographics of their school population and the pressure from the accountability movement to ensure that every child succeeds, no

matter what baggage each child is bringing to the classroom. In sum, the faculty is feeling a lack of collective efficacy to respond to the ever-increasing demands on their time and their efforts.

Collective teacher efficacy is an important characteristic of schools that have a positive impact on student achievement. Collective efficacy is the shared belief that the organization as a whole can achieve desired performance goals together. It is a social construct developed through teachers' experiences and interactions with one another (Bandura, 1997, p. 469). In a 1993 study, Bandura demonstrated that collective efficacy has a more significant impact on student achievement than the socio-economic status of the students in the school. These findings were reinforced in a 2000 study by Goddard, Hoy and Hoy:

When collective efficacy is high, teachers in a school believe they can reach their students and that they can overcome negative external influences. Given these beliefs, teachers are more persistent in their efforts; they plan more; they accept responsibility for student achievement; and temporary setbacks or failures do not discourage them (p. 497).

Because collective teacher efficacy is so important to student achievement in a school, it is essential to explore what school leaders can do to positively influence perceptions of efficacy. Bandura (1997) suggested that factors such as public scrutiny, lack of control over working conditions, and shared responsibility for student achievement can be obstacles to improving collective efficacy. However, the literature examining motivational theory and principal leadership points toward several ways that a skillful principal can change teacher perceptions and create an optimistic, empowering school climate. A principal with a strong understanding of what motivates people and a distributed leadership

orientation can positively impact collective teacher efficacy in powerful and lasting ways.

When a principal is asking a faculty who believes they are already doing the best they can to think differently about their work and to try different strategies in the classroom, the principal must first consider what is likely to motivate the faculty. In his synthesis of several psychological studies, Daniel Pink (2009) asserted that extrinsic rewards can backfire, actually stifling creativity and intrinsic motivation. Pink proposed three keys to human motivation: mastery, autonomy and purpose.

### **Mastery**

Human beings are motivated when they know they are doing a job well and are continually making progress and getting better at it. Principals can capitalize on this mode of motivation to increase collective teacher efficacy by providing frequent, ongoing opportunities for teachers to engage in action research together to create mastery experiences (Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2000; Pfaff, 2000). This means that teachers work in groups to study research about high-yield instructional techniques. They then try these techniques in the classroom and receive feedback from colleagues in order to get better at using them. Just as learning to play the piano and seeing tangible progress can be highly intrinsically rewarding, practicing pedagogical techniques and receiving feedback that provides evidence of improvement can be highly motivating for teachers.

**Collaboration.** In order to create these action-research-based mastery experiences, the principal must work to establish a culture of collaboration among the faculty. When summarizing research that shows a strong correlation between high teacher efficacy and teacher collaboration, Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) said, “Teacher collaboration might influence efficacy beliefs by creating a climate that legitimates help seeking, joint problem solving, and instructional experimentation” (p. 192). In other words, if teachers do not feel that they have to solve problems on their own, but rather have the collective support of their colleagues and the school

leadership to take risks and experiment with solutions, teachers are likely to feel better equipped to meet the challenges of the changing classroom. In their meta-analysis of how principals can have an impact on student learning, Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson and Wahlstrom (2004) found that redesigning the organization to promote collaboration was one of the three most effective principal strategies. This involves creating time for teachers to meet and plan together during the school day. It also involves setting and monitoring the expectation that all teachers are involved in professional learning teams that routinely meet to discuss student progress and their own teaching practices.

In contrast to a culture in which teachers operate in isolation behind closed classroom doors, teaching in a highly collaborative culture is motivating and empowering. Rosenholtz (1986) said that there are two types of climates: collaborative and individualistic. The first fosters continuous improvement. The other fosters pockets of excellence, pockets of incompetence, and stagnancy of the organization. In an atmosphere of collaboration and continuous improvement, teacher effort is focused on skill acquisition to achieve specific goals. Experimentation and failure are expected and acceptable in the process of teaching and learning.

Seeking or giving collegial advice is desirable, necessary and legitimate. Finally, teaching is viewed as a skill that can be learned and developed. In a discussion of how leaders can strengthen the efficacy and capacity of an organization, Fullan (2001) said, “If you want to develop leadership, you should focus on reciprocity, the mutual obligation and value of sharing knowledge among organizational members. The explicit value to be internalized is the responsibility for sharing what you know” (p. 132). The personal mastery experiences and vicarious mastery experiences needed to cultivate collective teacher efficacy are best facilitated in an atmosphere that supports and encourages mutual sharing of ideas and working together to find solutions.

**Learning culture.** Another important role of the principal in growing mastery is providing effective, engaging and responsive professional development opportunities for teachers. Increasing the knowledge of the faculty through professional development was identified by Leithwood et al. (2004) as a top three strategy that principals use to impact student learning. This does not mean that the principal becomes a faculty trainer imparting knowledge to teachers. Rather, it means that the principal models continuous learning by seeking out and sharing best practices in response to teachers' requests and needs. If the leader always takes on the role of the person who provides solutions, it deprives teachers of the chance to explore their own interests and take ownership of their learning. The leader sets the context for the school and provides opportunities for learning in a way that motivates the faculty to propose solutions (Fullan, 2001, p. 112). A commitment to ongoing learning and reflection must permeate everything that the faculty does. The usual approach to professional development in schools is to set aside a day when everyone goes to a separate location to be trained in some philosophy or technique. Afterwards, the faculty returns to school to conduct business as usual. In contrast, real, ongoing team learning requires people to regularly think and act together in their daily meetings, classrooms, and professional development sessions organically and systematically (Senge, 2012, p. 115). This idea is reinforced by Hattie (2009) who found that professional development can have a significant impact on student achievement *if* the training occurs over time, challenges teachers to think differently about how students learn, provides opportunities for teachers to discuss best practices, and is supported by principals who have instructional expertise (pp. 120-121). Thus, teachers will experience the motivating force of mastery if the principal makes a commitment to promoting and sustaining a culture in which collaborative, on-going learning is the norm.

### **Autonomy**

In order to feel highly motivated, people need to have the freedom to pursue their own goals. Teachers are not motivated by top-down goals that

apply external pressure without the opportunity to provide input (Elmore, 2000). Too often, leaders act without truly understanding the lived experience of the people on the front lines. A skillful leader is one who talks with teachers about their vision for the school and for their own practice. The leader must then use this information to shape the shared or collective vision of the organization. Goddard (2002) showed a positive correlation between collective teacher efficacy and the amount of input teachers had in school improvement planning efforts. Teachers who feel their voices are sought out and heard have a greater sense of motivation and efficacy. The people working directly with students in the classroom are the ones who have the knowledge necessary to stimulate school-wide improvement, not administrators (Elmore, 2000, p. 14). A principal who attempts to use charisma and force of will to impose a vision on the faculty may have a short-term effect on the activity of the school, but will ultimately fail to tap into the intrinsic motivation teachers need to sustain efforts and persevere through obstacles. People will resist a leader who tries to help by doing all of the thinking for the organization (Knight, 2011, p. 25).

**Distributed leadership.** Because of the need to directly involve teachers in decision-making, principals who adopt a distributed leadership style as opposed to an authoritative style will have a stronger impact on collective teacher efficacy. In a distributed leadership model, the principal shares authority and power. Teachers form committees that have responsibility and accountability for management and improvement of the school (Spillane & Halverson, 1999). The large scale of organizations and the scope of improvements that are necessary in education present a problem for traditional top-down systems of management (Elmore, 2000, p. 15). Schools are loosely coupled systems in which principals have no direct influence over student achievement. Thus, principals must respect the teachers' ultimate axis of control over the classroom. The principal can suggest, evaluate, provide feedback, and provide models, but ultimately, the teacher must internalize the need to change or improve instruction as a deeply held personal goal. DiPaola and Hoy (2008) described effective leaders as people who

“recognize the talents and expertise of others in their schools, provide opportunities for leadership development in others, and create a broad leadership base in their schools” (p. 15).

In a large school, it is impossible to achieve one hundred percent faculty buy-in from every individual. There will always be dissenters and hold-outs. However, if the school has strong leaders in every level (departments, PLC teams, etc.), then the level of commitment to ongoing improvement and continuous learning will grow. Think of throwing a pebble into a pond. An authoritative leader can throw only one stone. The stone will cause a ripple effect, but the effect becomes weaker and weaker as it spreads through the entire pond. In a school with distributed leadership school, there are many stones, each having its own ripple effect. Mintzberg asserts that this distribution of power creates a healthier organization:

They’ve got to build a strong core of people who really care about the place and who have ideas. Those ideas have to flow freely and easily through the organization. It’s not a question of riding in with a great new chief executive on a white horse. Because as soon as that person rides out, the whole thing collapses. (quoted in Fullan, 2001, p. 134)

**Coherence.** Of course, if multiple pebbles are hitting the pond, it will not help the organization as a whole if the ripples are all moving in different directions. An important challenge of distributed leadership and granting autonomy to individual actors is that it can lead to competing agendas, or people working at cross-purposes with one another. Lack of organizational coherence is one of the greatest causes of harm to collective teacher efficacy. Schools do not lack innovation. Instead, they are bombarded with mandates from state legislatures and division offices each year requiring teachers to take on new initiatives that have little correlation or coordination with initiatives adopted in previous years. When these disjointed initiatives do not immediately produce the desired result, they are scrapped in favor of the next new thing. Innovation requires focus, resources, time and commitment to produce results (Fullan, 2001, p.

109). In an organization that grants autonomy to teachers, teachers are freed from having to comply with top-down directives that do not mesh with what the teachers know they need to do to achieve instructional improvement. With that freedom comes the responsibility to ensure that their efforts are working in harmony.

An essential role of the principal, then, is to make certain that all of the school’s programs and innovations are tightly aligned. When visiting school districts throughout the country and evaluating the support systems that are intended to increase collective teacher efficacy, Knight (2001) found the implementation of these plans severely lacking. “Each is implemented separately, with the net result being that teachers are overwhelmed by demands on their time. Additionally, school improvement plans are too long, too complicated, and understood by too few to be implemented with any kind of success” (p.xiii). Reeves (2008) reinforced this finding in his study of hundreds of school improvement plans. The process of strategic planning usually resulted in an impossible number of goals and action steps with no real differentiation between goals, results and desired outcomes. More importantly, instructional quality was rarely affected in any significant way by the planning process. Thus, while it is essential for the principal to involve teachers in leadership decisions and planning, it is also essential for the principal to constantly keep an eye toward simplifying, streamlining and aligning efforts.

### **Purpose**

Organizational coherence is achieved through establishing a commitment to a shared set of aims and values (Elmore, 2000, p. 17). The difference between an organization that follows a distributed leadership model and a disjointed collective of individuals is a commitment to a common task and a common set of values employed to accomplish that task (p. 15). The most important task of a principal when it comes to having an impact on student learning is to set the direction of the school by developing a shared understanding of the organization and its activities and goals. Having such goals helps people define their purpose in the



organization and makes them feel needed and appreciated (Leithwood et al, 2004, p. 10). School improvement plans can be a means of setting direction. "It's difficult for schools to make progress without something to focus their attention, without any goals. Improvement plans are a rational model about how to act purposefully in schools" (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 11). Leaders bring hope, energy and enthusiasm to the tasks of discovering a moral purpose, understanding change, building relationships, creating and sharing knowledge, and creating coherence to inspire commitment of all members and achieve results (Fullan, 2001, p. 4). In their book about how principals impact student learning, DiPaola and Hoy (2014) present four prominent models of instructional leadership: Hallinger and Murphy (1985), Murphy (1990), Patterson (1993) and Weber, (1996). All of the models have the first priority in common: articulating a shared vision that focuses on improving student learning through more effective teaching (p. 5).

People will commit their time, energy, focus and effort to a cause if they perceive the cause as important and likely to make a difference in the world. When a task requires creative, conceptual thinking, external motivators such as punishments and rewards do not have an impact on an individual's effort (Pink, 2009). Organizations that require workers to engage in innovation and creativity have to cultivate a sense of transcendent purpose. When workers believe that they are achieving something greater through their collective efforts, they feel inspired, they work harder and more efficiently, and they are less likely to take shortcuts and engage in unethical behaviors. Reform efforts such as appropriating funding, restructuring school management teams, adopting textbooks, or revising curriculum will never succeed "if we continue to demean and dishearten the human resource called teacher on whom so much depends" (Palmer, 2007, p.4). Principals must invest time in helping to remind teachers about why they went into teaching in the first place, and showing them that they are making a difference in the classroom every day.

## **Conclusion**

While the field of educational research is rich with studies of the correlation between collective teacher efficacy and student performance, more work needs to be done to reveal what principals can do to create a culture of high collective efficacy in their buildings. The optimal job of a school leader is to build the capacity of the people in the school, create a common commitment to high expectations, encourage productive interactions and relationships among the parts of the organization, and make individuals accountable for doing their part to contribute to the success of the school (Elmore, 2000, p. 15). Leadership theory suggests that principals who invest time in establishing a shared vision, creating a collaborative learning culture, and ensuring alignment of school improvement efforts toward a common goal will have a positive impact on teachers' perceptions of what they can do together to give every child the best possible instruction every day. The field would benefit from more researchers examining case studies of schools that exhibit a high level of collective teacher efficacy to reveal what specific steps school leaders are taking to grow and enhance that sense of efficacy.

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