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Distributed Leadership

By [Larry Lashway](#)

Every principal, in moments of stress, has thought, "This job is *impossible*!"

Increasingly, researchers and policymakers are voicing the same sentiment. The expectations have always been formidable, but twenty years of school reform have stuffed the principal's job jar with new chores and have undermined comfortable old assumptions about the nature of school leadership.

In response, some analysts have concluded that the common ideal of a heroic leader is obsolete. In their view, the task of transforming schools is too complex to expect one person to accomplish single-handedly. Accordingly, leadership should be distributed throughout the school rather than vested in one position.

Beyond this core belief, however, advocates of distributed leadership offer divergent models. In some recent discussions, the term simply means giving other staff members some of the principal's current responsibilities. A principal might hand off managerial tasks to the assistant principal; a large school could assign several "sub-principals" to different grade levels; or administrators could simply rotate extracurricular assignments so each preserves a semblance of home life.

Others go beyond simply reshuffling assignments and call for a fundamental shift in organizational thinking that redefines leadership as the responsibility of everyone in the school. In this view, the principal retains a key role, not as the "chief doer," but as the architect of organizational leadership.

Because the concept is new and lacks a widely accepted definition, the research base for distributed leadership is still embryonic. While there is considerable theory, we have relatively little empirical knowledge about how, or to what extent, principals actually use distributed leadership. And evidence that firmly links distributed leadership to student achievement is still far in the future.

Nonetheless, at a time when many policymakers and practitioners agree that the principalship needs fundamental rethinking, distributed leadership offers a coherent vision of one possible future. This review examines several facets of the distributed model.

James Spillane and colleagues provide a coherent theoretical foundation for a distributed view of leadership.

Richard Elmore links distributed leadership to the school's fundamental task of helping students learn.

Michael Copland describes how one school-reform network has succeeded in creating a broader base of leadership in its schools.

The Education Alliance shares a framework and some practical tools for formalizing distributed leadership.

Michael Chirichello explains how one district has successfully established co-principalships in its elementary schools.

Spillane, James P.; Richard Halverson; and John B. Diamond. **"Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective."** *Educational Researcher* 30:3 (April 2001): 23-28. EJ 624 230. Available online at http://aera.net/pubs/er/pdf/vol30_03/AERA300306.pdf

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While distributed leadership has roots in earlier concepts such as "shared decision-making," current definitions are more far-reaching. James Spillane and colleagues see distributed learning as an example of "distributed cognition," which views thinking as a social, rather than an individual, activity. For instance, principals today are expected to exercise leadership through data analysis. However, this is a complex task requiring technical knowledge of testing, in-depth understanding of academic goals, motivational skill, and the ability to tease out implications for classroom practice. Even the best-qualified principal is unlikely to have mastery of all those areas; instead, effective principals exercise leadership by eliciting leadership from those who have the expertise.

Principals can distribute leadership through the way they organize their school. The authors describe a principal who broke down teacher isolation by instituting breakfast meetings. Over time, the resulting dialogue created connections that multiplied the original act of leadership.

The authors conclude that effective principals do not just string together a series of individual actions, but systematically distribute leadership by building it into the fabric of school life. Leadership is distributed not by delegating it or giving it away, but by weaving together people, materials, and organizational structures in a common cause.

Elmore, Richard F. **Building a New Structure for School Leadership.** Washington, D.C.: The Albert Shanker Institute, 2000. 40 pages. EJ 602 758. Available online at http://www.shankerinstitute.org/

education.html. *Paperback copies available from:* Albert Shanker Institute, 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20001. (202) 879-4401, Fax: (202) 879-4403. $10.00 (includes shipping). 202-879-4401.

The call for distributed leadership is often a response to principals' rapidly escalating responsibilities. However, as Richard Elmore makes clear in this monograph, distributed leadership also plays a crucial role in generating school reform and instructional improvement.

Elmore argues that principals' day-to-day instructional decision-making has typically provided a buffer from outside interference rather than trying to directly control what happens in the classroom. Because there has been little consensus on the "best way" to teach, administrators have often defined their roles as protecting teacher autonomy. But standards-based reform has challenged this structure by making instructional improvement the measure of leadership success.

However, instructional processes have to be *guide* rather than *controlled*. No matter how deep a principal's understanding of instruction, only classroom teachers have the day-to-day knowledge of specific students in specific classroom settings. Since essential knowledge is distributed across many individuals, it makes sense for leadership to be distributed as well.

If everyone is a leader, what keeps a school from fragmenting into conflicting and ungovernable camps? The key is that all of this leadership must be organized around a common task and shared common values. Creating this unity, not micromanaging instruction, is the principal's core responsibility.

Elmore cites the "principle of comparative advantage," which says that people should lead where they have expertise. When this is applied to schools, it means that policymakers should use thier knowledge to balance competing interests by setting overall goals, but not to determine the best way to get there. Superintendents' expertise lies in setting a strategic direction for the district and supporting effective school-level leadership. Principals can create a core culture centered on instruction, and teachers can determine the particular methods needed to help particular students.

Copland, Michael Aaron. **"The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative: Building the Capacity to Lead."** *In Leadership Lessons from Comprehensive School Reforms*, edited by Joseph Murphy and Amanda Datnow. 159-183. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin Press, 2003. 304 pages. *Available from*: Corwin Press, Customer Care, 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320, Paperback $34.95; Hardcover $74.95. 800-818-7243; fax 805-375-1700; e-mail order@corwinpress.com Web site: http://www.corwinpress.com/

While the idea of distributed leadership is appealing, the lack of empirical evidence will make many school leaders cautious. In this chapter from a book on comprehensive school reform, Michael Aaron Copland provides some preliminary findings from the work of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative (BASRC).

BASRC consists of eighty-six schools engaged in data-driven, whole-school reform with a strong commitment to participatory leadership. Faculty members in each school collectively propose a problem statement, identify measurable goals, take action, analyze the resulting data, and repeat the cycle.

Copland found extensive staff involvement and a variety of leadership structures in BASRC schools, including co-principalships, partnerships between principals and reform coordinators, and rotating lead teachers. Whatever the structure, however, formal leaders had played a crucial role in encouraging and modeling nontraditional forms of leadership.

Another key finding was that the inquiry cycle was instrumental. It required involvement at all levels, thus creating a learning community. Essential leadership functions such as vision, planning, and accountability became centered in the collective inquiry, not in the actions of one leader.

Even amid this "decentered" leadership, principals played a strong role in hiring the right people, buffering the school from conflicting district demands, and modeling inquiry by habitually asking questions rather than drawing conclusions. In at least a few schools, the principal was still seen as the "person in charge."

On the most important question-the impact on student achievement-Copland notes that data are still too limited to make a firm link, but he characterizes early returns as "promising."

While Copland's portrait of distributed leadership is encouraging, the Bay Area network has some unique features that may limit the generalizability of their experience, including a rigorous pre-acceptance process and a multimillion dollar Annenberg Challenge grant.

The Education Alliance. **The Bridgeport Story: What Urban School Districts Need to Know About School Leadership Teams**. Providence, Rhode Island: The Education Alliance, June 2002. 45 pages. Available online at http://www.alliance.brown.edu

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With the assistance of The Education Alliance, a school reform network headquartered at Brown University, the Bridgeport (Connecticut) school system instituted formal school leadership teams at a dozen schools in the district. Consisting of a principal, five teachers, and five parents, the teams were

asked to develop school improvement plans based on school performance data.

The report, which documents their results, is largely descriptive. While it characterizes the project as successful, it is an assessment of the team process rather than an evaluation of reform outcomes.

The most valuable part of the report for practitioners may be the appendices, which provide examples of tools used by the Bridgeport schools. These include team bylaws, a principal's task checklist, a leadership team checklist, and a team self-assessment instrument. The bylaws provide clarity on potentially divisive issues (for example, Bridgeport's bylaws preclude teams from discussing individual teacher evaluations), while the checklists give principals and teams a step-by-step listing of essential tasks. The self-assessment instrument encourages participants to reflect on their knowledge, skills, and personal attributes that contribute to team effectiveness.

The report would be most useful to principals looking for practical tools to develop teamwork.

Chirichello, Michael. **"Co-Principals: A Double Dose of Leadership."** *Principal* 82:4 (March/April 2003): 40-43.

One of the biggest barriers to distributed leadership is the entrenched notion that there has to be a leader. With multiple leaders, how will disagreements be resolved? Who will make the final decision? Who is accountable?

Although role ambiguity is often a barrier to shared leadership, a few schools have found ways to effectively share the principalship. This article describes one district's experience with a "co-principalship."

The author focused on two elementary schools, each headed by two co-principals. The co-principals are each involved in staff development, curriculum coordination, teacher evaluation, and communication with parents.

By all accounts, the arrangement is working well. Teachers reported a greater "principal presence" and accessibility, and felt well-supported. The superintendent reported receiving fewer phone calls from parents because they find it easier to reach someone in authority at the school level. The co-principals agreed that parents and teachers find it easier to reach someone with the authority to make immediate decisions. They also reported having more time to focus on instructional issues, and noted that this method of distributed leadership also reduced the usual "lonely-at-the-top" feelings.

On the other hand, co-principals cited a real challenge in finding time to meet regularly and make sure

they were in agreement on schoolwide issues. They also stressed the importance of finding two individuals who shared core values and leadership styles, and were not ego-driven.

The article is too brief to thoroughly evaluate the promise and pitfalls of co-principalship, but it does demonstrate that sharing leadership at the top may be a viable solution for some districts.