

ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management

[Print this page](#)

Research Roundup 18, 3 (Spring 2002)

Rethinking the Principalship

By Larry Lashway

One of the first things new principals learn is that there's always someone eager to tell them how they could be doing their job differently. Usually this unsolicited advice comes from a parent or teacher, but recently scholars, policymakers, and professional associations have begun questioning the very nature of the principalship.

This is partly a result of the continuing ferment over educational reform. As pressure grows for schools to be accountable for ever-higher standards, they are simultaneously struggling to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population and dealing with a number of issues, such as school safety, that would have been unthinkable just a decade ago. Under those conditions, the traditional roles and rules of school administration seem less and less relevant.

The current debate also has been fed by a shortage of qualified candidates for principalships. Although the shortage has not yet reached crisis proportions, many individuals who possess the necessary credentials see the principal's job as impossible—a stressful, thankless endeavor that doesn't pay nearly enough to compensate for the frustrations.

So far, the discussion has centered around two major themes. First, the principal's role is increasingly being defined in terms of instructional leadership, a concept that first surfaced in the 1980s but that has a very different meaning today. The instructional leader of the '80s was presented as an efficient, task-oriented, top-down manager, albeit one who was focused on curriculum and instruction rather than buildings and budgets. Today's ideal instructional leader is portrayed as a democratic, community-minded leader who builds consensus around a vision rooted in agreed-upon standards for student learning, with a commitment to be accountable for results.

No matter how desirable it is for principals to be instructional leaders, their managerial responsibilities aren't going away. Someone still has to order supplies, reconcile budgets, and make sure the buses arrive on time. Given the existing demands on the principal's time, it isn't realistic to simply add a whole new layer of expectations to the role. For that reason, much of the current discussion has focused on new ways to allocate the workload. One suggestion is to split the principalship, with one person handling the

managerial tasks while another serves as instructional leader. Another suggestion is to develop leadership teams involving teachers, parents, and community-service agencies.

Neither of these ideas has enough support to be called a movement, but there is clearly a growing consensus that the principalship needs a major retooling if it is to thrive. The documents reviewed for this *Research Roundup* provide a variety of perspectives on this issue.

Kenneth Leithwood and Daniel Duke identify six major themes in a recent scholarly work on the principalship.

The Institute for Educational Leadership lays out a proposal for reinventing the principalship.

The National Association of Elementary School Principals presents a new set of standards focused on instructional leadership.

Mark Goldberg identifies five common themes synthesized from interviews with 43 educational leaders.

Steve Farkas and colleagues probe the views of principals and superintendents on the role of the principal.

Leithwood, Kenneth, and Duke, Daniel. "A Century's Quest to Understand School Leadership." In *Handbook of Research on Educational Administration*. Second Edition. Edited by Joseph Murphy and Karen Seashore Louis: 45-72. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999. 576 pages. Available from: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Distribution Center, 1 Wiley Drive, Somerset, NJ 08875-1272. 800-956-7739; fax 800-605-BOOK (2665). \$100.00. Web site: <http://www.josseybass.com/>

Although their title makes it clear that the search to define school leadership has deep roots, Leithwood and Duke concentrate on recent views, examining all articles on educational leadership published in four major administration journals from 1985 to 1995.

They conclude that recent thinking has focused on six distinct forms of leadership:

Instructional leadership is designed to influence the work of teachers in a way that will improve student achievement.

Transformational leadership seeks to increase the commitments and capacities of school staff.

Moral leadership is rooted in the values and ethics of the leader, who influences others by appealing to notions of right and wrong.

Participative leadership is focused on decision-making processes that seek to involve other members of the school community, such as site-based management.

Managerial leadership focuses on the functions, tasks, and behaviors of leaders, with an emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness.

Contingent leadership focuses on the ways school leaders respond to specific sets of circumstances, adapting their behavior to fit the situation.

Leithwood and Duke suggest that we do not need new definitions of leadership as much as a better understanding of these six themes. Noting that each reflects a different emphasis, the authors suggest that they should be viewed from a perspective that focuses on the connections among leaders, followers, organizations, and the outside environment, rather than seeing the leader as an autonomous collection of skills and traits.

Institute for Educational Leadership. **Leadership for Student Learning: Reinventing the Principalship.** Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000. 30 pages. *Available from:* Institute for Educational Leadership, 1001 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 310, Washington, DC 20036. 202-822-8405; fax 202-872-4050. Single copies free of charge. *Available online at* <http://www.iel.org/pubs.html#21st>.

While serious principal shortages appear localized for the moment, many individuals with administrative credentials choose not to pursue jobs. This report from the Institute for Education Leadership tells why, and suggests some solutions.

At one time, says the report, principals were mostly expected to comply with district-level edicts, address personnel issues, order supplies, balance program budgets, keep hallways and playgrounds safe, put out fires that threatened tranquil public relations, and make sure that busing and meal services were operating smoothly.

That still holds true, but now they are also expected to mobilize the entire school community around the goal of improved student performance. Because principals have not been trained in this new role, and because they are not always supported by their districts, the job is often viewed as impossible by potential candidates. The authors assert that nothing short of reinventing the principalship will avoid a catastrophe.

For that reason, IEL recommends exploring forms of "distributed leadership" that would engage the talents of many members of the school community, either by using a team approach or by allocating responsibilities to different individuals. For example, a lead teacher could coordinate instructional development and a service agency representative could coordinate community relations, leaving the principal time to focus on curriculum

The report provides numerous recommendations aimed at filling the pipeline with qualified candidates, supporting the professional development of current practitioners, and ensuring results. It argues that many people and groups have a responsibility to address these concerns, but that principals themselves can make a contribution by focusing on their own professional development, working with their associations to strengthen the profession, and using the new accountability systems to demand more resources, support, and autonomy.

National Association of Elementary School Principals. **Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do.** Alexandria, Va.: National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001. \$14.95 members; \$19.95 non-members plus \$4.50 shipping and handling. *Available from:* National Principals Resource Center, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314-3483. 800-386-2377; fax 800-396-2377 *Web site:* <http://www.naesp.org/>.

The urge to redefine the principalship often leads to specific standards that attempt to transform philosophical inclinations into concrete behaviors. This new document from NAESP builds on the Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards by sharpening the focus on the principal's role as an instructional leader.

Unlike the ISLLC standards, which are aimed at beginners, NAESP's six standards are designed to provide a professional development agenda for practicing principals. Successful principals are those who put learning at the center; set high expectations for students and adults in the school community; implement content and instruction that achieve agreed-upon standards; create a culture of continuous learning; use a variety of diagnostic tools to evaluate instructional improvement; and actively engage the community to support student success. The document provides a clear description and rationale for each standard, together with concrete examples, questions for self-analysis and reflection, and references for further research.

Beyond the help it offers to individual principals seeking self-improvement, the document also recognizes the need for others to support these efforts. It establishes an action agenda for policymakers and central-office administrators, ranging from improved preparation programs to alternative leadership structures.

Developed in consultation with principal practitioners, NAESP's standards are not designed to be prescriptive, and there is no suggestion that they be tied to principal evaluation. Instead, principals are provided with a user-friendly guide that encourages them to reflect on their individual performances. Its most effective use might be as a discussion agenda for small groups of principals who want to consider the implications of the standards for their own schools.

Goldberg, Mark F. **Leadership in Education: Five Commonalities.** *Phi Delta Kappan* 82:10 (June 2001): 757-61. Available online at: <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0106gol.htm>.

The principalship presents unique challenges to practitioners, but it also requires the basic leadership qualities needed in any field. In this article, Mark Goldberg synthesizes 43 interviews with educational leaders of all types, including principals, teachers, researchers, and politicians, and finds that they share five traits.

First, these leaders have *bedrock beliefs* that inspire and guide their words and actions. The beliefs differed from leader to leader, spanning the ideological spectrum, but there was always a conviction that their ideas mattered and could make a difference.

Second, these convictions give leaders *courage to swim upstream*, persevering in unconventional paths that might take years to bear fruit. Goldberg cites such examples as Albert Shanker, who pushed for strong teacher unionism when the climate was negative, and E. D. Hirsch, who challenged the educational establishment by advocating a core curriculum.

Third, the leaders he interviewed displayed a strong *social conscience* that motivated their actions and made them sensitive to inequities and injustice, not only in schools but in the larger society.

Fourth, these leaders displayed a *seriousness of purpose* that led them to keep a steady focus on central issues and not be distracted from their mission. Most had spent decades working toward their goals and had set high standards for themselves, as well as others.

Finally, these leaders had *situational mastery* of the environments they worked in. This mastery goes beyond generic skills that could work as well in other settings. In fact, Goldberg believes that many of these leaders would not be as successful if they traded places.

Farkas, Steve; Johnson, Jean ; Duffett, Ann; Foleno, Tony; and Foley, Patrick. **Trying to Stay Ahead of**

the Game: Superintendents and Principals Talk About School Leadership. New York: Public Agenda, 2001. 54 pages. ISBN 1-889483-74-5. *Available from:* Public Agenda, 6 E. 39 St., New York, NY 10016. \$10 plus \$2.50 shipping and handling. 212-686-6610 ext. 45. *Order online at:* <http://www.publicagenda.org/specials/leadership/leadership.htm>

Most of the current debate over the principalship has been led by scholars, analysts, and policymakers. A new report from Public Agenda provides some clues on how principals themselves feel about their jobs.

The nationwide survey found that principals were confident of their ability to deal with the challenges at hand, but were hamstrung by politics, bureaucratic regulations, and the sheer volume of tasks. Only 30 percent felt that the system supported them well; the others saw it, at best, as a barrier that they could work around to accomplish their goals.

Principals were generally supportive of standards and accountability, but nervous about inappropriate use of standardized tests. One said, "Accountability is great, but schools should not be judged by what students do on one test on one day in March."

Interestingly, neither the principals nor the superintendents surveyed saw a severe shortage of principals in their districts, though superintendents expressed some concerns about the quality of the candidates they were seeing.

Asked to indicate the qualities of a good leader, more than 90 percent of principals thought it was "absolutely essential" to be able to make tough decisions, to put the interests of children above all else, and to communicate a clear educational vision and priorities. They assigned the least importance to nurturing prospective administrators, making effective use of technology, and having good speaking skills.

Overall, the report identifies some key concerns and issues for efforts to redefine the principalship. However, it also suggests that in most districts the principalship is a long way from being in crisis.

A common theme in all these documents is the growing recognition that while principals play a critical role in school success, they cannot do it alone. Merely strengthening their skills as individuals will not be enough to accomplish today's ambitious reform agenda. The current debate over their role will help no one if it merely piles more expectations on top of already overburdened and under-supported school administrators.

Larry Lashway is a research analyst and writer for the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management at the University of Oregon.