

Introduction

THE NEED ■

We face the urgent and compelling need for a polar shift in school leadership: from the principal as lone leader, to a model of shared leadership between the principal and teacher leaders. The age of the global marketplace, with its demands for graduates who are competitively college and career ready, has overlapped—although not eclipsed—the age of accountability where a school's worth is measured by test scores. The advent of the Common Core State Standards, or other, newly revised standards in some states, has brought both increased potential to meet the new demands and the heightened challenge of implementing yet another large-scale initiative. The principal can no longer lead this work alone. Researchers led by Timothy Waters at Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (2009a) stated, “The future demands on the school principal are massive. In order to meet the needs of all stakeholders, the principal needs to learn to share leadership responsibilities while understanding the implications of introducing change.”

Some schools have made, or are making, the shift to shared leadership already. This is evidenced by the fact that, by a variety of measures, including but not limited to test scores, they have become increasingly effective in ensuring that all students, regardless of home background, leave the system fully prepared for college and the global 21st century workforce. They have become constantly improving learning organizations, led by a principal who is a “learning leader.” The concept of professional learning communities (PLCs) has become widely used and embraced, thanks to the seminal work of leaders such as Richard and Rebecca DuFour, who have educated thousands in the concept and processes.

The PLC structure has become well documented as a vehicle for improving schools, compellingly evidenced in the meta-analytical research of John Hattie (2009). But Richard DuFour stated to *Phi Delta Kappan* editor Joan Richardson (2011), “Research is not a good driver (of change in school); practice is. My belief is that you should immerse yourself in practice first and then plug yourself into research second.” The purpose of this book is to serve as a *practitioner's* guide for principals who are ready to transition to shared leadership.

Accordingly, those who want to know more about the practice can go to www.allthingsplc.info and click on “See the Evidence” for an ever-growing cohort of schools—currently over 200—from the United States and Canada that have been practicing those processes.

PLC processes have come to be recognized as cutting-edge educational reform. When a principal takes a group of teachers to a PLC conference, they are likely to leave with something approaching evangelical fire to transform their school. The road is actually not that complicated. It is not an exotic departure from what we know as schooling. In many respects, it is actually fairly simple. But like many simple things, it can be unexpectedly hard to do. Once the team returns to campus, the sheer daily demands of teaching for the teachers, and running the school for the administrators, may overwhelm their initial enthusiasm and best intentions.

Becoming a PLC requires some structural shifts in the use of resources—time, money, and people. However, more significant are the cultural shifts necessary to enable the structural shifts to occur. The most successful leaders and schools address both structure and culture simultaneously.

■ FROM TRADITIONAL SCHOOLING TO A PLC

In the culture of traditional schooling, the principal, sometimes with an administrative team, runs the show. He or she directs the production, and teachers play their assigned instructional roles in their autonomous, individual classrooms. A foundational structure for schools that are becoming PLCs is the formation of teacher-led teams of teachers who accomplish specific kinds of work interdependently—all in support of the overall school mission, vision, and goals—but typically with no administrator present. This may be a new structure for some schools, where department meetings or traditional grade-level meetings have been the norm since the dawn of living memory.

Unfortunately, teacher preparation programs historically have offered nothing to prepare teachers to lead teams of peers in these new kinds of group tasks: analyzing student work and achievement data, facilitating discussions about improved instructional practices to produce better learning, comparing results for various tried strategies, putting structures in place to hold each other accountable for trying and using the strategies, and the development of classroom and team level student interventions for the short and longer terms.

Expecting teachers to know how to collaborate in this high-level fashion reminds me of myself as a young teacher expecting my students to know how to work in cooperative groups. They didn't! Each table group task quickly deteriorated into arguing, sulking, and one or two students doing all the work. After trying this a few times, I just gave up and put the desks back into rows. It took some honest self-examination to stop blaming them for being so uncooperative and accept the fact that they needed *instruction and practice* in the skills of cooperative learning from me—just as they did for academics! Also, I liked being in charge—after all, I was the teacher, right?

In time, I got better—and so did they! I introduced cooperative skills and they practiced them *while* they worked on math, language arts, and other subjects. Key to our success was my ability to see my own role differently. The parallel I am attempting to draw is that principals may likewise have trouble relinquishing control and may also need to develop a whole new skill set to develop their teachers as leaders.

I have also observed the opposite extreme—misguided principals abdicating important aspects of leadership, leaving to their wholly unprepared leadership teams vital school-wide decisions and responsibilities.

Shared Leadership Is Not Delegation

Shared leadership involves sharing some decision-making and other responsibilities, but it is not abdication, and it is quite different than simple delegation. Assuredly, there are certain routine tasks and responsibilities that a principal can and should delegate to experienced staff members, including classified staff. But developing the depth of *shared* leadership necessary for transforming a school into a PLC so that all students can achieve at the highest levels is very different. It is not an event or an action, like delegating a task to someone. It is a developmental process. It does not happen overnight or in a few months. Deliberately planned, developmentally shared leadership will be more effective after 2 years than after 1 and will continue to blossom and grow—along with student outcomes—the longer it is thoughtfully and intentionally fostered.

Principals who have taken this journey describe it as a rewarding adventure; seeing their teachers develop as leaders is intensely satisfying. Shared leadership is transformative for teachers, but its ultimate beneficiaries are the students. Today's school leaders have a moral imperative to lead differently and more effectively, and shared leadership is the vehicle.