

Foreword

A few years ago I visited a Florida middle school to meet and talk with the principal. I was in for a surprise.

I arrived at the office and asked the secretary the whereabouts of the school's leader. He was in the library at a faculty meeting. I joined the meeting-in-progress and stood unobtrusively at the back of the room where a lively discussion was in progress, relating the curriculum of each grade to that of the other grades. The surprise wasn't that the group was wrestling so successfully with this consequential, often contentious, matter in a forthright, thoughtful, even cordial way. The surprise was that more than an hour passed before it became clear which of these educators was the principal!

That scene has always provided for me a vivid working definition of "teacher leadership."

The volume you are about to encounter is not about that remarkable school. It *is* about the nature of the crucial relationship between faculty and principal that must exist in order for teacher leadership to flourish in a school. It is about the principal relinquishing control. It is about what else a principal does that enables teachers to take responsibility for the important matters within their schoolhouse. It is about the host of impediments that teachers must overcome in order to see themselves and be seen by others as leaders. It is about why some teachers choose to have a positive influence upon the larger school as well as within their individual classrooms. And why some do not. And it is about just why a culture of shared leadership is so vital to principal, teachers, and to the learning of youngsters.

Teacher Leadership. Shared Leadership. Distributed Leadership. By whatever name we call it, the concept of a school as a community of leaders is an idea whose time has come. Why?

Dependency Training: If the John Wayne or Joan of Arc school of heroic, solitary leadership ever existed, it no longer does. Schools are much too complex and demanding places and have way too many needs for any one person to address them all. I wish that more principals could recognize what one wisely confided to me: "The more adept I get at solving the problems of this school the weaker the school becomes." The true mark of the leader is not how many followers one begets but how many leaders!

An Overabundance of Underutilized Talent: Teachers are rightly demanding these days to be treated as professionals, invited to sit at the table with grownups where they can bring their abundant strengths to decisions that will affect them and their students.

Leadership and Learning: The most powerful learning for all of us comes when we don't know how to do it, we want to know how to do it, and how we do it will affect the lives of many others who depend upon us. With leadership comes learning. The teacher who leads—who assumes responsibility for the new computer center, for overseeing parental involvement, or for the science curriculum—is the teacher who is an insatiable learner.

School Reform: I have just finished reading a book whose authors studied many successful and unsuccessful attempts at school improvement. A major conclusion: "Schools that made the greatest progress in reform were democratic; they cultivated strong distributed leadership. In each of the schools we studied, school improvement was more likely to occur when key leadership tasks were performed by multiple actors in the school community, especially teachers."

Leadership Succession: Principals of even high performing schools will leave one day. All too many schools thereupon revert to low performing ways—unless a cadre of leaders from within the schools is prepared to take over. Henrick Ibsen put it best: "A community is like a ship. Everyone must be prepared to take the helm."

Pupil Achievement: And, finally, of course, there is lots of evidence of the strong relationship between a school culture hospitable to teacher leadership and to student accomplishment. For instance, a Rand Corporation study of 1000 schools concluded: "In high-performing schools (low discipline, high pupil achievement) decision making and leadership are significantly more democratic. The teachers are more involved and influential in establishing discipline, with selecting text books, designing curriculum, and even choosing their colleagues than are teachers in low performing schools."

These are among the compelling reasons I have found teacher leadership to be so vital to the health of our profession and to our illusive goal of promoting profound levels of learning among students and their educators.

James McGregor Burns, a prolific writer about leadership, once observed that "Leadership is one of the most discussed and least understood phenomenon on earth." The words that follow have made teacher leadership for me a *most* understood phenomenon. I am confident they will prove valuable to you as well.

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