Improving Schools:
Making Instructional Leadership a Priority

BY LINDA L. CARRIER

America's public schools are failing. It's a call to arms that has sounded throughout the history of public education in this country. Amidst the modern era of widespread educational reform, multiple constituencies and stakeholders have sought to develop solutions to America's perceived public school shortcomings. Researchers, policy makers, and teachers have independently and collectively sought to ask and respond to the points of urgency and host of questions and answers, identified by reports like *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) and legislation like the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the Race to the Top program of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (The White House, 2009), of *failing schools* in America. As a result of the questions and concerns posed by the authors of these documents, state-level policy makers have answered the call to arms waged by their constituencies by developing policies for improving America's schools. A significant part of these policy initiatives during the last decade has been the identification of *under-performing* schools, sanctions for under-performance, and the implementation of state intervention strategies for improving identified schools (Anderson & Lewis, 1997; Krueger, Snow-Renner, & Ziebarth, 2002; Mintrop, MacLellan, & Quintero, 2001; Seder, 2000). In all cases, these policies have dictated the practices of school districts and educators.

The most recent wave of policy initiatives has stemmed from the ability of states to seek waivers from the requirements of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (ESEA), otherwise known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB). A requirement of the waiver is that each state applicant "develop and adopt guidelines for local teacher and principal evaluation and support systems" (USDOE, 2012). This policy wave has provided a new and focused spotlight on the relationship between student achievement and principal effectiveness through the required linking of the performance assessment of principals to student growth and outcomes (USDOE, 2012, p. 2). The literature is clear: effective leadership is essential to the development of both the organizational capacity and coherence of schools, both of which are necessary to effectively implement reform initiatives (Elmore, 2000, 2002; King, 2002; Krueger et al., 2002; NAESP, 2001; Newmann, King, & Rigdon, 1997). Additionally, researchers are reaching consensus that the standards movement in education necessarily requires principals be instructional leaders (King, 2002; Elmore, 2000; NAESP, 2001; USDOE, 2012). Sadly, in the field there is little agreement on what instructional leadership (IL) looks like in practice (King, 2002; Quinn, 2002; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Reactive to the political pressure of public demands to *fix* America's schools, the rapidly changing educational policy environment has greatly contributed to the lack of clarity due to the shift in focus away

from leadership and toward the more easily identifiable technical skills deemed necessary for effective instructional leaders to possess. This shift has left us with policies that lack guidance on how to put the necessary technical skills into practice in a manner that will consistently produce the desired level of effectiveness.

The Conundrum of Instructional Leadership

It has long been the case that school leaders have struggled with the idea of what it means to be an instructional leader and what being an instructional leader looks like in practice (Elmore, 2002; King, 2002). As we consider each state's educator evaluation policies and emerging models for evaluating school leaders, it is imperative that we consider the implications for what it means to be an instructional leader in this developing educational environment. In order to more fully conceptualize the ambiguity school leaders face as they attempt to develop their IL practice, one need only look at the perspectives of a few of the more notable, contemporary national educational organizations.[1] Figure 1 provides a comparison of the identified qualities of effective school leaders.

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from four such organizations. What is clear from this comparison is that although each has its nuances, all agree that learning for students and adults, high expectations for student achievement and instructional practice, the use of data for guiding the work of the school, and the need to develop a school community that

1. The Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003), the National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP), National Institute for School Leadership (NISL), and Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC).

Figure 1. Behaviors of Effective School Principals

McREL (Waters et al., 2003, p. 4)	NAESP (2001)	NISL (2004)	ISSLC (2008)
Involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies	Leads in a way that places student and adult learning at the center of the school (p. 5)	Engages in strategic and systemic processes for school improvement, including empowerment of school teams and coherence in all directions (p. 17)	Standard 1: Setting a widely shared vision for learning
Willing to challenge the status quo	Demands content and instruction that ensure student achievement of agreed-upon academic standards (p. 7)	Sets high expectations for student achievement (p. 17)	Standard 2: Developing a school culture and andinstructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth
Monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning	Sets high expectations and standards for the academic and social achievement of all students and the performance of adults (p. 6)	Monitors the alignment of clear, high standards, fair assessments, curriculum frameworks, instructional materials, aligned instruction, and safety nets in order to ensure all students achieve at high levels (pp. 1–10)	Standard 3: Ensuring effective management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment
Is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems	Uses multiple sources of data as diagnostic tools to assess, identify, and apply instructional improvement (p. 9)	Uses data to enrich classroom instruction, increase the effectiveness of school improvement plans, and foster instructional decision making (p. 17)	Standard 4: Collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources
Ensures that faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices and makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school's culture	Creates a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other goals (p. 8)	Builds and sustains a collaborative learning culture and a shared decision-making structure in the school (p. 17)	Standard 5: Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner
Fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation; advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders	Actively engages the community to develop shared responsibility for student and school success (p. 10)		Standard 6: Understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, legal, and cultural contexts

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is unified in its vision and mission for the school are essential for the work of today's principals and key areas in which technical skill sets must be developed. While they each identify the work that principals should engage in, with the exception of standard 5 of the ISLLC standards, what is glaringly missing from these typologies are the leadership behaviors necessary to support and ensure the effectiveness of the work being done.

Elmore (2000) argues that "leadership tends to be romanticized in American culture, especially in the culture of schooling, both because we subscribe heavily to trait theories of success—people succeed because of their personal characteristics more than because of effort, skill, and knowledge—and because we like our heroes to have qualities that we think we don't have" (p. 13). In practice, there is some truth to Elmore's argument. As he has pointed out, educators have been vastly unprepared for the work they are being asked to do. Practitioners reading this no doubt have been party to conversations in their career on this very topic, with consensus of how a particular school leader got their job resting on their charisma as opposed to their skills or leadership ability. In response, Elmore has called for the "de-romanticizing" (p. 13) of leadership in order to improve America's schools and a refocusing on the development of the skills necessary to implement the current demands of the educational environment.

In 2011, I was fortunate to conduct a study that sought to understand the IL construct. My work focused on elementary school principals who had turned around schools that had been identified as chronically underperforming by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. What I found in the principals studied was that the technical skills identified as necessary by previous research and policy were not enough to move schools forward. While the principals in the study either directly or indirectly engaged in each of the four identified technical domains necessary for instructional leaders, it was their leadership behaviors that made the most significant difference. In particular, their willingness to do whatever it took, regardless of personal impact, to ensure the success of their schools and the overwhelming sense of personal humility with which they conducted themselves were key. These leadership behaviors were identified over and over by teachers as making the most significant difference in why, as an organization, they were able to successfully implement the substantial and sustained changes that positively impacted student achievement.

Discounting leadership behaviors as necessary to the construct of IL has left us with schools in which principals are frantically trying to include all the identified essential components of the work of the principal, and yet student achievement still remains low. These principals have seemingly accepted the idea identified by Militello, Rallis, and Goldring (2009) that to be a school principal in today's educational environment requires that one be a superhero. Collins (2001) would agree with the need to de-romanticize the concept of leadership. His work provides advocacy for us to move away from seeking leaders who display leadership traits that create a larger-than-life hero persona even though they may possess the requisite core knowledge (p. 28) and to move toward the identification of what he identified as "Level 5" leaders, or those leaders who "build enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of humility and professional will" (p. 20). I would agree with Collins, as it was those very leadership behaviors that made the most significant impact on the ability of my subject schools to make and sustain the needed changes for improvement (Carrier, 2011).

Educator Evaluation Systems and Models in New England

As we consider the latest call to arms for the *fixing* of America's schools, we must consider the latest round of practice-defining policies—specifically, the new educator evaluation models that are being developed across the country in response to ESEA flexibility waivers. All but one of the New England states has either developed or is in the process of developing educator evaluation systems in response to seeking and being awarded an ESEA flexibility waiver, and the remaining state, Vermont, is developing a model independent of an ESEA waiver (see Figure 2). While each of the models has their differences, two key commonalities across the six states are the use of a set of either state-determined or -approved professional standards against which principals will be evaluated and the use of either state-determined or approved student learning data to determine some *truth* about the effectiveness of the professional practice of principals (CT DOE, 2012; MA DESE, 2011; ME Legislature, 2012; NH DOE, 2012; RI DOE, 2012; and VT DOE, 2012).

Figure 2. Principal Evaluation Reform Implementation in New England States[1]

State	Pilot Educator Evaluation Model (school year)	Full Implementation of Educator Evaluation (school year)	Inform Personnel Decisions (school year)
Connecticut	2012–13	2014–15	2014–15
Maine[2]	2014–15	2015–16	2015–16
Massachusetts	Summative Performance Rating: 2012–13 Student Impact Rating: 2013–14	Summative Performance Rating: 2014–15 Student Impact Rating: 2014–15	Summative Performance Rating: 2014–15 Student Impact Rating: 2015–16
New Hampshire	2012–13	2014–15	2014–15
Vermont[3]		2014–15	
Rhode Island	NA	2012-13	2012–13

1. Reforms in Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island are linked to ESEA flexibility waivers.
2. Progress in Maine at the state level is currently stalled by the need for final approval of state law that would direct the DOE to develop the guidelines and identify the standards for districts to utilize in order to design their evaluation processes. At the time of the writing of this article, state law only provides for the local development of evaluation processes (Maine DOE, 2013).
3. Vermont withdrew its ESEA flexibility waiver application but is pursuing elements of the waiver, including the evaluation system, independently (USDOE, 2012; Vermont DOE, 2012).

The use of student learning data to explicitly and formally make a statement about the effectiveness of principals is a new and developing element in the evaluation of the professional practice of school leaders. In each of the New England models, the use of student learning data is handled differently, with some states placing significant weight on student data and others providing a contextual application for the use of data (see Figure 3). The models being implemented by the states of New Hampshire and Rhode Island place the most significant weight on student data as a measure of principal effectiveness by weighting student achievement data equally with assessment of professional practice when determining the effectiveness rating of principals. The implication here is that student achievement is as much an indication of effective instructional leadership as performance against the identified professional standards. At the opposite end of the spectrum Massachusetts utilizes assessment of student learning to essentially validate the performance rating of principals, and Vermont is taking a more holistic approach by utilizing student learning data to triangulate the assessment of performance.

The ESEA waiver process and all six state policies call for the inclusion of valid and reliable measures of student learning to be included in evaluation models. While the requirement that assessment of student learning produce valid and reliable data in order to be included in the evaluation models is important, as we think about how these policies define practice we must also consider the validity and reliability of the identified data for being an indicator of principal effectiveness. Although the comparatively softer approach to utilizing student data being implemented in Massachusetts and Vermont to assess educator

Figure 3. Weight of Student Learning Data in Evaluation Model

State	Student Learning Data Points	Weight of Student Learning Data Points in Model
Connecticut (CT DOE, 2012)	Student growth on state administered assessments of core areas At least two locally determined indicators of student learning, with at least one coming from subjects or grades not assessed through state system	Student Growth 22.5% Locally determined indicators 22.5%
Maine (ME DOE, 2013)	Student learning and growth measures	At least 20% of the educator's total score in the first year and 25% or more in subsequent years
Massachusetts (MA DOE, 2011)	Student growth percentile metric; locally determined measures of student achievement	Separate rating from performance; principals are rated as having low, medium, or high impact on student learning
New Hampshire (NH DOE, 2012)	Student growth measures	Equally weighted with assessment of professional practice
Vermont (VT DOE, 2012)	Student growth and learning outcomes encompassing classroom, school, district, and state assessments, as well as trends in growth scores (VT, DOE, 2012, p. 3)	Used as part of process of triangulating information gathered from observation and review of examination of artifacts
Rhode Island (RI DOE, 2013)	Student learning objective attainment and state growth model metric	Weighted equally with professional practice and foundations ratings

effectiveness would seem to place greater emphasis on the performance elements of the evaluation process, the questions of reliability and validity about the use of student achievement data for this purpose facilitate keeping this element of the evaluation systems as a focal point for educators. Massachusetts and Rhode Island have attempted to relevantly link student achievement data to performance by including student learning objectives (SLOs) in their evaluation models. SLOs provide a useful tool for meaningfully linking student learning data to performance, but they do not satisfy the need to establish validity and reliability of student data as a measure for principal effectiveness. The argument can be made that a skilled and reflective evaluator could utilize a solid system of data inquiry to utilize student learning data as a tool for assessing the overall performance of principals, but to discretely consider the leadership of an individual would still be a challenge.

Leadership behaviors, unlike technical skills, are often difficult to identify and assess. Subsequently, the question of how to assess the leadership, or, more specifically, the leadership traits and behaviors that Collins (2001) and I (2011) have identified as necessary to support and ensure the effectiveness of the work of principals, remains a challenge. Not taking up the challenge will facilitate the continued development of an IL model that does not include the development of leadership behaviors as a priority and will subsequently ensure the continued failings of student achievement currently being identified. The use of stakeholder feedback in the evaluation of principals is a potential source of data for assessing leadership behaviors. Both Massachusetts and Connecticut have required stakeholder feedback as part of their evaluation models. While the Massachusetts stakeholder feedback survey still has not been released, the Connecticut model does not necessarily provide for the gathering of data relative to leadership behaviors although it has the potential to be crafted in such a manner. Sadly, this element of the model is only weighted as 10 percent of the total rating, an indication that the data gathered through the survey will have low significance in the performance determination. Void of a well-thought-out tool for gathering information about leadership behaviors, the process of collecting feedback from stakeholders is fraught with limitations to be identified and addressed, a mandate that we as a profession must take up if we are to ensure a focus on the development of the leadership behaviors of school principals.

Conclusion

The role of the school principal has long been considered to be an important component in the process of schooling (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Quinn, 2002; Waters et al., 2003). Elmore (2000) identified that school leadership is "the guidance and direction of instructional improvement" (p. 13). As we consider the implementation challenges of the plethora of reform initiatives and establish our personal and professional priorities for reform, we must not only identify the needed technical skills for principals but we must carefully consider the leadership needs of our schools. How we define and assess effective IL practice through our policies and evaluation systems will significantly impact what we do in the field. To be shortsighted and strictly focus on task-oriented performance evaluations that utilize a set of data not valid or reliable for the purpose it is being used for will only reinforce an ineffective model of IL that will leave us wanting and needing more from our principals. If we want to really improve our schools, we need to make leadership a priority for instructional leaders. Our call to arms as a profession and as a community committed to the success of every child needs to include an imperative that we make the development of leadership behaviors a reform priority both through the policies that define professional practices and the tools we use to assess them. As we consider the demands of current reforms, like the implementation of the Common Core State Standards, it is critical that the question we ask and answer is, What does an effective model of instructional leadership look like in practice when we place a value on both the work and leadership of principals?

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