

## **Four Key Factors of Effective School Leadership**

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In a time when schools are being held accountable to the highest level of standards, strong leadership is critical for the school's success. These standards are reminiscent of the Reading First days, when schools were being asked to progress monitor their students and set high goals for every individual. There were several key factors noted in Reading First schools who demonstrated success, despite having challenging student populations (Crawford & Torgesen, 2006). These factors can be applied to these similar times in order to create a school environment that is open and supportive, and where strong leadership is demonstrated not solely by the principal, but rather it is established based on a shared vision with coaches and teachers.

Numerous studies on the topic of effective school leadership focus our attention on four key factors: Organizational Knowledge; Use of Data; Scheduling; and Positive Beliefs and High Expectations.

### **Factor 1: Organizational Knowledge**

Effective leadership begins with extensive knowledge of the instructional environment: individual student needs, strengths and weaknesses of staff members, aspects of the instructional programs, student data, and schedules. It is the manner in which school leaders weave these data sources together that they lay the foundation for effective school leadership.

Researchers exploring the qualities of effective school leadership often begin with the leader's knowledge of the students in his or her school. By developing a data-driven understanding and knowledge of the students, the principal and other school leaders can inform their decisions pertaining to:

- **Resource allocation:** Do I have enough teachers and enough time to meet the

needs of my at-risk students?

- **Scheduling:** Have I scheduled the reading blocks in such a way that my teachers and paraprofessionals have sufficient time to provide instruction, and provide intervention for students in need?
- **Professional development:** Have patterns in student skill gaps revealed a gap in teachers' instructional abilities requiring additional professional development?
- **Funding and procurement:** How do the characteristics of my student population affect the available sources of funding or the ways in which I can allocate my budget?

Effective leaders have a strong knowledge of the range of instructional tools available to address their students' needs. This entails—in many cases—a team-based approach to researching and vetting research-proven programs that address specific needs. Because of the sheer volume of programs available, many school leaders rely partly on their leadership teams to continuously research and share information about new tools and methodologies. Information sources such as the What Works Clearinghouse and the National Center on Response to Intervention provide a shortlist of instructional programs, some of which have extensive efficacy research.

Once an instructional program has been selected, it is imperative that school leaders develop an in-depth understanding of the program in order to ensure fidelity of implementation, drive behavior around proper use levels and ensure that teachers avail themselves of the training and professional development resources provided to them.

## **Factor 2: Use of Data**

Effective school leaders develop their organizational knowledge based, in large part, on their understanding of student data. This includes the use of summative data—analyzing outcome data in the spring to allocate resources and plan for the upcoming school year—as well as a

wealth of real-time formative data. There are a number of assessment products—and even some online instructional programs that gather student data without administering a test—that can provide real-time performance data to inform instructional decisions.

Effective school leaders take an active role in data meetings, ensuring that teachers understand how the data indicate the instructional priorities for each teacher's classroom. Far too many schools focus their data-driven culture on the process of data collection. While frequent measures are important for meaningful formative assessment, the most important aspect of data-driven culture is an ongoing focus on data analysis. Frequent (e.g., weekly, biweekly, etc.) data meetings help schools to effectively inform instruction, accurately identify and monitor students needing intervention, and provide school leaders the opportunity to modify children's instructional programs in real-time. The frequency of the meetings can meet the needs of the individual school. The critical piece is that the meetings are scheduled ahead of time, so they do not get pushed out and missed on a regular basis. It is important to establish these meetings as something that is important to the school leadership, because when student data is closely examined on a frequent basis, teachers understand the importance of driving improvements on these performance indicators.

An important factor of effective data meetings is having the right people in the meeting in order to act on the decisions made about the data. Time spent tracking down the appropriate team member to inform or act upon a particular data point results in missed opportunities to improve student outcomes. Data meetings must include all of the key players, or at the very least, incorporate specific next-steps to ensure that instructional decisions are made and implemented based on the findings at the data meeting.

### **Factor 3: Scheduling**

High-performing schools consistently identify scheduling as one of the key factors of their success. For purposes of this discussion, we will focus on schools' efforts to support an uninterrupted period of at least 90 minutes for reading instruction. Schools place a priority on supporting differentiated, small group instruction for struggling students. Therefore, in resource-constrained scenarios facing many schools, effective scheduling helps maximize

available support staff. This can be accomplished in several ways:

- Some schools schedule a 90-minute reading block across all grades first thing in the morning, regrouping students into homogeneous skill groups in each classroom. Sometimes called the “walk and read” model, this approach helps schools better utilize all of their trained intervention staff by placing them in classrooms with the students most at-risk of reading failure.
- Other high-performing schools stagger their reading blocks, which allows reading specialists to serve multiple grades and classes throughout the day, and enables them to observe and model lessons in more than one classroom or grade level during the reading block.

In addition to scheduling dedicated instructional and intervention blocks, high-performing schools place a high priority on scheduling data meetings. This requires the allocation of sufficient time and resources, such as substitute teachers, when necessary. Data meetings must be considered as equally important to other aspects of the school day—particularly since the effective use of data will inform nearly every other aspect of instruction.

#### **Factor 4: Positive Beliefs and High Expectations**

A factor that is often overlooked in effective schools is a culture of positive beliefs and high expectations. High-performing schools often have a stated, school-wide belief in their students’ abilities to achieve, despite significant obstacles such as limited resources, high ELL population or low parental involvement. Leaders in these schools focus on raising expectations for students, not lowering them. In order to address high absenteeism or high numbers of behavior referrals, many of these schools have started expressing their belief in the students to the students themselves, to the parents, and to the community. By establishing a school culture in which all members of the school community believe that the students will be high achievers, the belief in reaching these high expectations becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Positive beliefs and high expectations may be the most important factor in high-achieving

schools. Not only does it establish a culture of success, but it is also an approach that draws upon a limitless resource. During these difficult economic times, when school budgets continue to tighten, your school's belief system is the one critical resource that cannot be affected by funding sources or staffing levels.

## **Conclusion**

Successful schools highlighted in research consistently demonstrate strong aspects in each of the four key factors of effective school leadership. In these schools, their successes began with the principal establishing a collaborative approach to leadership. As a principal, you don't need to have all of the answers. You need to know the right questions to ask, and you need to foster the environment to empower a shared sense of ownership in the problem, and a shared sense of ownership in the solution.