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Research Summary: Courageous, Collaborative Leadership

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COURAGEOUS, COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

In support of *This We Believe* characteristic:

- Courageous, collaborative leadership

Public demands for higher performing, academically excellent schools have focused attention on the critical role of leadership. Almost all educational reform reports have concluded that the nation cannot attain excellence in education without effective leadership (Edmonds, 1979a; Fullan, 1993; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Leithwood, 2003; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). In the 1970s, responding to the famous Coleman report, *Equality of Educational Opportunity* (1966), leadership was identified (see Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979b) among those qualities deemed essential for creating effective schools.

While most would agree that they know effective leadership when they see and experience it, defining it is somewhat problematic. Cronin (1993) described leadership as “one of the most widely talked about subjects and at the same time one of the most elusive and puzzling” (p. 7). It has been defined as the process of influencing the activities of an organized group in its efforts toward goal setting and goal achievement (Stogdill, 1974) and “personality in action under group conditions” (Bogardus, 1934, p. 3). Schein (1992) defined leadership as the creation and maintenance of an organization’s culture. Despite hundreds of definitions and the nearly universal acclaim for strong and effective leadership, there is no common definition of leadership. Addressing this issue, Yukl (1994) argued that the definition of leadership is “arbitrary and very subjective. Some definitions are more useful than others, but there is no correct definition” (pp. 4–5).

Rather than searching for a common definition, researchers from both the fields of education and business have developed different models of leadership, which are described in the literature using adjectives like “instructional,” “participative,” “moral,” “managerial,” “democratic,” “developmentally responsive,” and “transformational.” Each of these models focus on different aspects of schooling, with instructional leadership emphasizing teaching and learning and participative leadership highlighting the inclusion of all stakeholders in the decision making processes. Although these models are presented as “pure” in form, they are, in fact, mixed and matched in the real world of organizations like schools. While these models have different foci, they have in common two essential qualities that are at the heart of what leadership means: (1) helping the organization to establish appropriate and defensible goals, and (2) influencing members to accomplish these goals.

National Middle School Association (NMSA), in its position paper, *This We Believe: Successful School for Young Adolescents* (2003), advocated for courageous, collaborative leadership. NMSA fused what is known through research about courageous leadership and collaborative leadership into a new model that is applicable for middle schools. As defined by NMSA, courageous, collaborative leadership implies understanding, action, and advocacy. Courageous, collaborative leaders are those who understand the theory behind and the best practices for middle grades education. They understand young adolescents and the society in which they live and are able to link effectively this understanding to middle grades curriculum, instruction, and assessment and the learning environment of the middle school (e.g., block scheduling, transition programs, interdisciplinary teaming, and so on). Courageous, collaborative leaders act by building an inclusive and communicative learning community with the appropriate and necessary structures. Finally, they advocate for, nurture, and sustain effective instructional programs for every young adolescent and work with parents, stakeholders, and policymakers to ensure academic excellence, developmental responsiveness, and social equity (see National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, 2002).

What the Research Says

While courageous, collaborative leadership has not been formally recognized as a “model” by those who study educational leadership, there is a wealth of information about collaborative (i.e., participatory) leadership and a growing corpus of literature focused on courageous leadership. As in the development of the ideas connected to collaborative leadership, the world of business is taking the lead in delineating what courageous leadership means. Some of this literature has even surfaced in the realm of religious studies (Hybels, 2002).

Simply defined, courageousness in leadership addresses the necessity to step outside the box and take chances to help the organization establish appropriate and defensible goals. It also clearly places those who are leaders in a position to confront adversity. Collaborative leadership refers to inclusiveness—teachers, staff, administrators, parents, and other stakeholders—in decision making related to organizational



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goals. Research in both of the areas of courageousness and collaboration should advance a fuller understanding of what courageous, collaborative leadership is. Since courageous, collaborative leadership is by its very nature effective leadership, this research summary will also briefly review the literature regarding effective leadership.

Courageous Leadership

Some organizations are filled with excitement, enthusiasm, and positive energy, while others seem to be comprised of people who are complacent and attempt to simply make it through the workday and week. In vibrant organizations, leaders are willing and able to engage people, listen, and keep learning. It takes courage to step down from the “I am right, and I know the way” pedestal—to move from an authoritative position to one of collegiality and collaboration. Courageous leaders recognize that there is a wide variety of circumstances—some favorable, some adverse, and some neutral—that affect the functioning of an organization like a middle school. The key to courageous leadership is how one responds to what arises during the journey, rather than whether individual circumstances are defined as good, bad, or indifferent. Courageous leaders are those who foster an increased alignment of the organization with its true values, purposes, and potential; provide greater momentum toward a revitalized vision and a renewed sense of the group’s purpose; strengthen morale among employees; infuse new ideas and recalibrate outdated structures and processes; and facilitate more authentic, dynamic, and effective communication.

Powerful acts of courage include (a) providing honest input and counsel, (b) presenting and being responsive to outside-the-norm ideas, (c) sharing alternative viewpoints, (d) speaking up, and (e) not settling for the status quo. Undoubtedly, many other acts of courage depend on an organization’s culture and operational norms.

Those who write about courageous leadership (Blankstein, 2004; Goldring, 2005; Kessler, 2001) note that it develops from a true sense of vision and a commitment to that vision. It is this vision that sustains a leader through the fear that precedes courage. In short, at the heart of leadership is the courage to do the right thing.

Collaborative Leadership

Collaborative or participative leaders stress the decision making processes of the group. One school of thought within this approach to leadership argues for collaboration on the grounds that it will enhance organizational effectiveness. A second school rests its case for participation on democratic principles. In this approach to leadership, authority and influence are potentially available potentially to any legitimate stakeholder in the school, based on their expert knowledge, their democratic right to choose, and their critical role in

implementing decisions. With schools facing increasingly complex situations, uncertainty, ambiguity, and high expectations for innovation and reform, Murphy and Hallinger (1992) and Hallinger (1992) concluded that school leaders needed to adopt more collaborative forms of leadership, which involve parents, teachers, students and other stakeholders in the process. Educational reform efforts such as site-based management (SBM) were established on the idea that teachers, principals, and other stakeholders working together, rather than in isolation, could bring about positive changes for student learning. Deal and Peterson (1999) found that teachers in schools with a culture that encourages collaboration are more positive about their profession, have higher expectations for their students, enjoy their jobs more, and have greater confidence and commitment to improvement. Additionally, school effectiveness and productivity increase, communication is improved, and what is important and valued come into sharper focus.

Researchers (Fullan, 2001; Villa & Thousand, 2000) identified mutual trust, effective communication, active empathy, access to help, lenience in judgment, and courage as the elements necessary to the formation of collaborative organizations. Additionally, creative problem solving and conflict management skills have been added to this list.

Effective Leadership

Courageous, collaborative leaders are effective leaders. Effective leadership is fundamentally about developing people, setting directions, and redesigning the organization (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). *Developing people* involves identifying those persons both within and outside the organization who could be potential leaders and helping them gain the skills and knowledge necessary to advocate for and implement best practices (Clark & Clark, 2004; Williamson & Johnston, 1991). Building the leadership capabilities of others includes learning the skills and acquiring the dispositions related to team building, shared decision making, and collegiality (Sergiovanni, 1992).

Leadership in *setting directions* focuses on developing shared goals, monitoring organizational performance, and promoting effective communication (Leithwood et al., 2004). Setting directions is about leaders who have a vision, can create action plans, and can energize others to achieve a better community (Sergiovanni, 1992). *Redesigning the organization* means creating a productive school culture, modifying organizational structures that undermine teaching and learning, and building collaborative processes (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Research indicates that leadership has a strong relationship with (a) the extent to which a school has a clear mission and goals (Bamburg & Andrews, 1990; Duke, 1982), (b) the overall climate of the school (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979), (c) the attitudes of teachers (Oakes, 1989; Purkey & Smith, 1983),



(d) the classroom practices of teachers (Miller & Sayre, 1986), (e) the organization of the curriculum and instruction (Cohen & Miller, 1980; Oakes, 1989), and (f) students' opportunity to learn (Duke & Canady, 1991; Murphy & Hallinger, 1989). Leithwood and associates (2004) confirmed that "leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school" (p. 7).

Many researchers (Blum, Butler, & Olson, 1987; Hallinger & Murphy, 1986; Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Sammons, Hillman, & Mortimore, 1995) have offered lists of the characteristics of effective leaders. Among these characteristics are (a) has a clear vision, (b) establishes a safe environment, (c) knows quality instruction, (d) monitors school performance, (e) coordinates curriculum, (f) invites divergent points of view, (g) acquires necessary school resources, (h) uses participatory management approach, (j) selects and participates in professional development, and (k) trusts and treats colleagues as professionals. In summary, effective school leaders recognize teaching and learning as the main business of the school, communicate the school's mission and vision clearly and consistently to all constituents, promote an atmosphere of trust and collaboration, and emphasize professional development (Bauck, 1987; George & Grebing, 1992; Weller, 1999).

The Implications of Courageous, Collaborative Leadership for Middle Schools

Courageous, collaborative leadership in middle schools results in

- Shared ownership of goal setting and decision making.
- Shared responsibility for each other (Cassellius, 2006).
- Empowered teachers (Thompson, 1999).
- Effective communication (Leithwood et al., 2004).
- Effective educators who have a large repertoire of effective practices and the capacity to choose from that repertoire as needed to respond productively to the unique demands of the contexts in which they find themselves (Leithwood et al.).
- A productive school culture (Leithwood et al.).
- Exemplary middle schools that are developed, maintained, and refined by a collective of educators (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2004).

Educators know that leadership matters and that it is second only to teaching among the school-related factors that impact student learning. Nevertheless, there is still much to learn about effective leadership for America's middle schools.

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ANNOTATED REFERENCES

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Effective leadership is needed to carry successfully those educational reforms that result in improved student achievement. This book reviews the leadership models that currently exist in the literature and presents a new model of leadership, "developmentally responsive leadership." This model is presented in the context of the need to evaluate school leaders for school improvement initiatives and for the personal, professional development of the principal. Developmentally responsive middle level leadership involves three factors: the school, the students, and the teachers. Moving beyond a theoretical discussion of this new model, an instrument for measuring the "developmental responsiveness" of the leader is provided. Detailed instructions for scoring the instrument are included as well as follow-up activities for principals and their staffs.

Valentine, J., Clark, D., Hackmann, D., & Petzko, V. (2004). *A national study of leadership in middle level schools: Volume II: Leadership for highly successful middle level schools*. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

The findings presented in this volume are from the second phase of the National Association of Secondary School Principals' National Study of Leadership in Middle Level Schools. After a historical review of the development of middle schools, this book focuses on six highly successful principals and their schools. Personal leadership qualities, leadership for change, leadership for teaching and learning, and leadership for resource management are discussed. Specific leadership behaviors like providing vision, modeling behavior, fostering commitment, providing individualized support for teachers, communicating effectively, serving as a resource provider, and acting as an instructional resource are covered. Likewise, information about the change process, collaboration, and teacher leadership are included. Implications for practice are offered.

Weller, L. D. (1999). *Quality middle school leadership: Eleven central skill areas*. Lancaster, PA: Technomic.

Weller focuses on the skills necessary for effective middle school leadership and on the components of quality middle schools. The author explores the important facets of a middle school principal's leadership role. The chapters are organized around 11 central skill areas including leadership effectiveness, interdisciplinary teaming, designing curriculum content, quality advisor/advisee programs, scheduling, community and home involvement, and homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping practices. The result of years of research and evaluation, this essential guide is one that new and experienced middle school principals can implement in their schools to provide a better education and a safer learning environment for their students.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Alexander, W. M., & George, P. S. (1981). *The exemplary middle school*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES (continued)

Little, A. L., & Little, S. F. (2001). *How to become an exemplary middle school principal: A three step professional growth handbook*. Westerville, OH: National Middle School Association.

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CITATION

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