

Preface

Diversity is the greatest strength of public schools, and their greatest challenge. As the country has grown more diverse, many communities have divided themselves based on race, diversity, culture, and language. But public schools provide opportunities for students from different cultural, economic, and social backgrounds to work side by side, excel, and appreciate one another's strengths and weaknesses, similarities and differences. This exposure has the potential to broaden student understanding and overcome prejudice based on race, (dis)ability, culture, or family background. More important, diverse learning environments have the potential to accelerate learning for all students (Darling-Hammond, 2007). And yet, few public schools have been successful in overcoming obstacles to learning associated with poverty and diversity. Significant gaps in learning opportunities and outcomes persist and adversely impact all of us.

The premise of this book is that school leaders can significantly raise student achievement and successfully overcome opportunity gaps. Addressing achievement gaps and significantly advancing learning for all students is not only possible, it is a moral and economic imperative.

A departure from a checklist of popular interventions, this book describes the findings from an intensive process of documenting mastery in leadership practice undertaken by the University of Wisconsin–Madison between 2002 and 2008. During that time, we sought input from hundreds of educational leaders, reviewed research on educational leadership, examined the contents of the few professional development programs that exist for master educational leaders in the United States and England, and worked intensively with about 75 principals and district administrators responsible for significantly advancing equity in student learning in their schools and districts.

Throughout this process, we worked to refine a definition of mastery in educational leadership, including consideration of work done by numerous highly skilled scholars in the field, who have themselves defined various

forms and characteristics of expert educational leadership. These scholars have advanced notions of instructional leadership, distributed leadership, trust, integrity, credibility, reciprocal or transformational leadership, and moral leadership, including a focus on leaders' internal decision-making structures and the ways in which they relate to others.

Our goal was to describe the ways in which leaders significantly improve the performance of students in their schools, including closing achievement gaps among diverse student groups. Looking across schools, we found common themes in the ways leaders approach decision making; the ways they motivate and engage teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members around a clear and focused goal of high-level learning outcomes for all students; the ways they create energy and enthusiasm for collaborative learning among staff; and the ways they focus their work. There were important differences in context that leaders had to be responsive to, including the length of time the leader had spent in the school, the history of the school, resource levels, teacher and student demographics, and level of community support for and involvement in education. These context factors shaped leader behaviors, educational interventions, and political dynamics in important ways. Despite these important differences, there were clear themes in the ways school leaders approached the work of significantly improving student learning. We believe these approaches can be readily learned and applied to any educational setting to make significant improvements in learning outcomes. (In fact, the principals we describe reflect good leadership practice in any learning organization, not just in schools.) In short, they describe an approach to mastery in educational leadership that can provide a guide for leader preparation and development. Even the master principals we worked with extended and strengthened their practice by documenting and reflecting on their work using the *Learning First* framework.

This work reflects a true marriage of research and practice. We gratefully acknowledge the intellectual contributions of the master administrators who participated in this work with us. Out of our commitment to them, and in gratitude for their willingness to share problems and struggles as well as joys and accomplishments, we have committed to sharing what we learned from them in this volume. They worked to shape and refine our understandings, enabling us to develop this roadmap of leadership for learning.

WHAT IS LEARNING FIRST LEADERSHIP?

Broadly, we define educational leadership as the ability to build school or district organizations that produce learning environments in which all

students can experience the highest levels of academic success, and the school community strives to continuously improve and meet the needs of all learners. *Learning First* leadership is shared problem solving focused on closing achievement gaps and advancing learning for all students.

Prior research on mastery in educational leadership defines expert leadership as problem solving (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995). *Learning First* extends this conception of the leader as expert problem solver to leadership as a social process involving shared problem solving in a community of learners. *Learning First* describes the leadership practices of principals who have made quantum improvements in student learning and closed persistent achievement gaps. In our view, much of the leadership literature is devoted to lists of administrator characteristics, principles, and practices intended for universal application. Too often, such principles and practices are applied without careful consideration of the problem and the context.

Learning First leadership is a social process of defining and solving problems that is sensitive to the unique context of a particular school. It is a way of thinking, interacting, and learning. It is shared leadership focused on learning in a community.

Learning First provides educational leaders with a cognitive framework for building communities of practice that strengthen teaching and learning through three related elements:

1. *Socio-Cognitive Leadership* describes the shared cognitive approach to decision making present in schools that have succeeded in closing achievement gaps.
2. *The Dimensions of Leadership for Learning* describe where school leaders focus their attention to move student learning forward.
3. *Levers of Change* describe the individual, organizational, and community levers that master principals use to advance the Dimensions of Leadership for Learning.

At the heart of the model, the leader builds a school community that shares a common approach to problem solving. Socio-Cognitive Leadership provides a cognitive framework shared by the individual leader, the school, and community members that defines, frames, and supports change efforts. Socio-Cognitive Leadership involves building a school community that approaches decision making collaboratively by developing *a shared vision of the preferred state, problem setting with data, identifying evidence-based plans, assessing value-added results, and reflecting for continuous improvement*. This is the way Socio-Cognitive Leaders and their learning communities define and solve problems. As Socio-Cognitive

Leaders reflect on their work and self-assess, they examine what value has been added by leadership interventions in terms of student learning gains and other relevant outcomes.

Thus, Socio-Cognitive Leadership relates to key principals of learning, cognition, and motivation: all learning is social (Bandura, 1976; 1997; Vygotsky, Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner & Soubberman, 1978; Wertsch, 1985); learning is based on experience (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999); an engaged community with a shared cognitive framework for moving forward will be motivated to pursue high levels of learning for all students (Wenger, 1998).

School leaders apply Socio-Cognitive Leadership to the four Dimensions of Leadership for Learning: *advancing equity and excellence in student learning, developing teacher capacity, managing and aligning resources, and engaging community*. The core dimension is Advancing Equity and Excellence in Student Learning. This dimension focuses the school community on outcomes and helps to define and address existing gaps between the vision for equity and excellence in learning for all students and the current reality. The three process dimensions provide mechanisms to address these learning gaps by focusing on critical dimensions of leadership: improving instruction, acquiring and aligning resources targeted to improve student learning outcomes, and engaging community to support student learning.

The Levers of Change address the social nature of leadership and the interaction between the leader, the school organization, and the larger school community. The Levers of Change highlight the reciprocal nature of leadership and learning. The leader impacts the school and community and is impacted by them. Caring, respectful relationships are needed to support learning. The Levers of Change emphasize building shared understandings, expectations, and commitment to the success of every child.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

Throughout the book, we provide case examples of schools that have closed achievement gaps to illustrate how school leaders put *Learning First* into practice. We provide tools that school and district leaders can use with their school communities to build shared understandings and advance learning for all students. For each of the four Dimensions of Leadership for Learning, we provide audits with guiding questions that help school communities effectively examine school data and processes and identify areas of focus for improvement efforts. We provide a list of best practices that research evidence—and the experience of our *Learning First* leaders—shows can overcome hurdles to advancing learning for all

students. And we provide tools shared by *Learning First* schools that can be used to advance learning for all students.

The book is divided into four sections. Chapters 1 and 2 make up the introduction, which provides a context and overview of the *Learning First* framework. This introduction lays the foundation for the remainder of the book, which provides more detail about the *Learning First* framework, and how to carry it out. This framework enables school leaders to build communities of practice that can work effectively together, focus on dimensions of leadership that improve school effectiveness, and produce significant gains in learning outcomes for all students, including the students who traditionally struggle the most.

We have found the *Learning First* framework to be more powerful than a list of knowledge, skills, and dispositions for principals because it provides guidance on how to approach the role of leader for learning: specifically, how to approach leadership and decision making, where to focus leadership efforts, and what mechanisms are most likely to move change efforts forward. *Learning First* is a systematic approach to leadership grounded in learning theory and leadership practice, focused on the development and use of the learning community as the preeminent strategy for school improvement. It provides clear direction and guiding questions to focus the work of the leaders and emphasizes individual, organizational, and community aspects of moving a change process forward.

Socio-Cognitive Leadership is introduced in Chapter 2 and described more fully in Chapters 3 and 4. Chapters 5 through 8 examine how to advance each of the dimensions of leadership for learning. Throughout the chapters, we provide case examples of master principals and tools that can be used by the leader individually and/or in collaboration with the school community to address specific goals that advance student learning.

Next, we examine three Levers of Change: the individual leader, the school organization, and internal and external community. Chapters 9 and 10 examine the roles of the principal and district in advancing *Learning First* through the Levers of Change and provide example tools that principals and districts can use to support the change process at the individual, organization, and community levels.

The Table of Cases and Table of Tools enable easy reference to the examples and instruments provided throughout the text. In addition, at the end of the text are two resources that summarize the *Learning First* framework. Resource A is a Socio-Cognitive Leadership Rubric that provides a set of questions that focus work on the four Dimensions of Leadership for Learning and a rubric that can be used to formatively assess the implementation of Socio-Cognitive Leadership at the novice, journey, and master levels.

Resource B is a friendly observer site-visit protocol to assist school communities in identifying areas of focus for leadership development and school improvement. Our view is that leadership can only be assessed by understanding the school context and the school community. Leader effectiveness is a reflection of the extent to which members of the school community share a clear vision, understand and use data to address the dimensions of leadership for learning, and pursue evidence-based interventions designed and evaluated to address vision gaps. Thus, we view the site visit as a critical tool to support leadership development and school improvement.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is a guide for principals, superintendents, and school communities to close achievement gaps and advance learning for all students. The book is designed to guide principals and leadership teams in the implementation of the *Learning First* framework. After the team works through Chapters 2 through 4 familiarizing themselves with the *Learning First* Framework, Chapters 5 through 8 provide case examples, tools, and resources that enable the team to apply Socio-Cognitive Leadership to the four Dimensions of Leadership for Learning tailored to your individual school context.

Each chapter provides a description of leadership practice that puts learning first and examples of how master principals have applied the framework to advance learning in their schools. Audit tools designed to be tailored to the school's specific context and vision provide guidance on the types of data the team should analyze to clearly define the status quo and identify vision gaps that need to be addressed. Examples of evidence-based practices provide an initial menu of ideas for strategies the school might take to address vision gaps.

As the leadership team works through the model, they should identify strategies for building shared understanding of the model throughout the school community, so that teachers in classrooms see themselves as part of the community of practice committed to advancing learning for all students. From the boardroom to the classroom, members of the school community share a common approach to problem solving that involves establishing a clear vision, defining vision gaps through data analysis, identifying an evidence-based plan that specifically addresses those gaps, assessing value-added results, and reflecting to reframe the vision or plan for continuous improvement.

A second use of this book is for districts to build the leadership of their principals. This book would be an excellent book study for a team of principals from across the district. The team could work together to apply the *Learning First* framework districtwide and work through an initial application of the framework to their own individual school data as part of a school improvement planning process, a reflective self-assessment, or to establish individual leadership goals for themselves and their school communities. The book could also be used as a manual for a leadership development program for all employees including school and district-level administrators, school board members, teachers, and teaching support staff.

Resource A at the end of the book provides a rubric for formative assessment of schools and school leadership, which can be used by the principal, the school leadership team, the district, or by a team of friendly observers to provide feedback and strengthen principal leadership. A template and description of a friendly observer site-visit process is described fully in Resource B.

Finally, this book provides an excellent resource as a text in leadership preparation programs for school and district leaders. It brings together in one place a clear, cognitive approach to the principalship, emphasizing important features of strong leadership that focus and build a shared approach to problem solving and target the efforts of the individual leader, the school, and the community. For a beginning principal or as professional development for an experienced principal, the model guides and focuses principal leadership practice.

Throughout, the book provides a clear description of how to embark on a school improvement process that builds and engages the school and community to put learning first. Our premise, consistent with our research in schools and our work with master principals, is that school communities, focused on learning and shared leadership, hold high expectations and achieve high outcomes for all students. Through focused analysis of data and strident commitment to the vision of learning for all, they succeed in meeting the nation's moral commitment to all learners by closing achievement gaps and producing quantum improvements in teaching and learning for all students.