

Leadership in Smart Systems

Robert Rothman

Ever since Ron Edmonds and his colleagues identified strong leaders as components of effective schools, leadership has occupied a prominent place on the education agenda. But the issue has taken on new urgency in the last decade. Studies have found that leadership is second only to teachers in its effect on student achievement (Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2004), and researchers have identified new conceptions of leadership that more accurately reflect the realities of schools and school systems as organizations.

Specifically, these conceptions focus more on *leadership* than on *leaders*; that is, they look at leadership functions rather than the individuals who perform them. In so doing, these researchers, notably James Spillane of Northwestern University, have suggested that leadership is actually distributed across organizations, and that these functions are not necessarily performed by those at the top of an organizational chart.

This idea has enormous implications for the way schools and districts are run and the way school and district leaders are prepared. Instead of issuing orders down the chain of command, leaders set the vision and hold people accountable for achieving it. Many people throughout the organization take the lead in coming up with ideas and seeing projects through. Leaders – all of them – need a new set of skills.

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The notion of distributed leadership also has particular importance in districts that form partnerships with community organizations and agencies to support children, youth, and families. These systems, which the Annenberg Institute for School Reform calls “smart education systems,” recognize that schools are not solely responsible for children’s development and academic growth. And in sharing responsibility, these systems also share leadership functions.

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* examines the idea of leadership in smart systems from a range of perspectives.

- Deborah King and Margaret Balch-Gonzalez lay out the need for a new concept of leadership to ensure that school systems prepare *all* students to succeed and suggest some strategies for putting those ideas into practice.
- James Spillane argues that leading and managing instruction requires a new mindset for school leaders, one focused on diagnosis and design.
- Andrew Lachman, Richard Lemons, Margaret Terry Orr, and Mónica Byrne-Jiménez describe an initiative to prepare school leaders in four Connecticut districts.
- Philip Weinberg discusses his school’s partnership with a nonprofit organization under a city policy to connect schools with groups in order to provide support and assistance.
- Ben Sherman talks about his role as a leader in a school with multiple partners that provide support for student learning in and out of school.

These articles illustrate many of the ways leadership takes shape in schools and school systems. And they highlight the fact that the current generation of leaders might not be prepared for this new reality. Weinberg and Sherman, for example, both say that their preparation programs focused more on management than on leadership, and that they learned

how to operate as leaders through their experience as apprentices in schools. New preparation programs, such as the Connecticut program, might succeed in preparing a new generation of leaders who are equipped to take on these responsibilities.

Yet initial preparation might not be enough. Leaders need ongoing support as well. The turnover of superintendents remains high, and principals increasingly are burning out and retiring early. New York City's school-support organizations offer an example of one kind of response, but in other districts, such support is hard to come by, particularly in these tough budget times. Yet, if we believe that leadership is critical, support for leaders should be a high priority.

Reference

Marzano, R. J., J. T. Waters, and B. A. McNulty. 2004. *School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.