

# Issue Brief

Professional Association of Georgia Educators  
Vol. 9 No. 1  
September 2006



**PAGE**  
Professional Association  
of Georgia Educators

## Distributed Leadership: An Evolving View of School Leadership

Principals face turbulent change and high levels of uncertainty reflecting their evolving roles, unclear expectations, escalating demands of high stakes accountability, and competing priorities from multiple stakeholders. Such challenges create near impossible job conditions for those who go it alone. Effective principals recognize the power and promise of engaging and focusing the leadership potential of all teachers through distributed leadership structures in order to create collaborative cultures, a school wide collective will for student learning and a sustainable legacy of continuous improvement.

### Leadership Matters

Leadership counts. Recent research cites leadership as second only to teaching among school-related factors impacting learning. Further, leadership effects are largest in schools where the learning needs are greatest. Not surprisingly, strong leaders figure centrally in turn-around school success. (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004, p.7.) Put simply, a high performing school is likely led by a strong instructional principal who creates a shared vision of learning, sets clear direction, hires and supports talented staff, engages stakeholders in improving student learning, and ensures organizational effectiveness. While the centrality of strong leadership to school improvement is good news, diverse issues are converging that challenge traditional definitions of solo leadership and demand new approaches that support and sustain a new view of leadership for student learning.

### The Graying of the Principalship

With Baby Boomers at or near retirement age, demographers

predict up to 60 percent of school leaders will leave the profession within the next few years. Georgia, like the rest of the nation, faces the dilemma of recruiting and retaining highly qualified principal candidates for a job with challenging working conditions.

Many superintendents find the challenge of securing quality principal candidates daunting. According to Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GAPSC) data, attrition among the administrative ranks is acute, even more so than among teachers. There was a 15.9 percent administrator attrition rate of FY04, higher than the teacher attrition rate of 9.2 percent. Data show that 23.5 percent of FY04 exiting principals were 51 years or older and had 25 or more years of experience. The GAPSC points out that almost one in every four principals of that age and experience group will need to be replaced every year (GA PSC, 2005).

### Emerging Leaders are Young and Less Experienced

Compounding the challenge is an increasingly young and new workforce taking the reins of leadership in a highly charged, high stakes environment of increased complexity. While 48 percent of both principals and assistant principals are 31–40 years old, 18 percent of principals are new (GAPSC, 2005). Retired administrators may fill the short term gap, yet districts and schools need a long term succession plan for how to develop sustainable leadership in schools. While administrators frequently look to teacher ranks to first fill assistant principal vacancies, then principal job openings, current job conditions lead fewer teachers to view the principal role as embraceable.

### Changing Times, Rising Expectations

In the past, the principal's role was to serve primarily as building manager overseeing the budget, buses, vendors, operations, legal issues and parent, student and staff relations. Principals were

expected to be competent building holders who kept order, protected teachers from outside interference and managed relationships. With the emergence of the Effective Schools Research in the late 1970s, the principal's role changed to that of instructional leader whose job was to focus the attention of the entire school on instruction and student learning. Since the school-reform movement began in the 1980s, literature has continued to stress the importance of the principal as instructional leader. Therefore, many administrators who were trained as building managers now must master new work required by a vaguely defined instructional leadership role (Page, 2006). While instructional leadership is broadly defined in the literature, there is little direct help for principals in identifying, practicing, and mastering the specific leadership behaviors expected of instructional leaders.

Also, with the accelerated rate of change, shifting demographics, influx of non-English speaking students, increased mobility, advanced technologies and competition in a global economy, principals increasingly feel the pressure to meet the demands of these changes in order to address the unique needs of all students. Changing times and rising expectations demand a highly adaptive and enhanced skills set. Consequently, many feel ill equipped and under supported to meet these escalating needs.

### **Evolving Roles for School Leadership**

From 2002 – 2006, Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) conducted a comprehensive job and task analysis of the role of the principal and identified and documented 8 key roles (GLISI, 2003) which principals must lead or must tap teams of teachers to lead. These roles and their related job tasks begin to define the new work of leadership for school improvement as leading teams and individuals in

- analyzing data, causes and systems,
- leading change for continuous improvement,
- leading faculty to implement and sustain aligned curriculum, assessment and instruction in a standards-based environment,
- developing relationships within and outside the school to support the mission, vision and goals of the school,
- leading the high performance of individuals, groups and the school,
- leading and supporting the professional learning and performance development of faculty and staff,
- engaging team members in improving processes that support teaching and learning, and
- managing the effective, efficient, ethical and safe operation of the school.

The analysis concluded that few tasks in the traditional work of school principals have disappeared. Instead, the principalship has grown in scope and complexity. The analysis identified dozens of tasks under 8 Roles of School Leaders™ which need to be performed well to create the conditions which support teaching and learning, and for which school leaders must acquire specialized knowledge and skills that are not usually acquired on the job by teachers without opportunity to lead work in the school.

In short, the demands on principals today are simply too large and too complex to do alone. Further, the Institute concluded that teachers who do not participate in leadership work in the school before transitioning to the role of assistant principal may take longer to reach competency in formal leadership roles than teachers who have participated in leadership roles in the school. For teachers to be successful in leadership, district and school leaders need to engage teachers systematically in the practice and mastery of these leadership roles in supportive environments both within and beyond the classroom (Page, 2006).

### **A New Vision of School Leadership**

Traditional school leadership thinking conjures images of the Super Hero - the charismatic principal who single-handedly leads a school that serves students well. The problem with this mythology is that teachers offer considerable leadership from their classrooms through curriculum, assessment and instruction expertise that contributes significantly to student learning - the ultimate goal of schools. Further, solo leadership scenarios are not sustainable once the Super Hero principal leaves. Super Heroes in the real world are in short supply. The sheer magnitude of leadership roles and tasks required for schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century demands shared leadership approaches. Such shared approaches do not, however, diminish the need for strong principals who must create the conditions for teaching and learning to succeed in a culture of collaboration. Shared leadership approaches will, however, require principals to think differently about their role as leader.

According to Joseph Murphy, Professor of Education and Associate Dean at Peabody College of Education at Vanderbilt, a new definition of school leadership is emerging that supports teacher leadership and is not based on position, authority, or hierarchy, but rather on expertise and influence. Murphy and others describe this emerging role of leadership as interactive, web-like, collective and vested in many as opposed to a few. Because such leadership is based on interactions between and among

individuals for the common good of improved student learning and school improvement, leadership becomes woven into the organizational fabric of the school (Murphy, 2005). An emerging view of distributed leadership suggests engaging teams of teachers who bring expertise to bear on a shared goal of improvement. Schools then leverage unique teacher leadership expertise toward the collective achievement of targeted school improvement goals.

Leadership thus becomes an organizational resource open to the many, as opposed to the few. Teachers can continue to serve as leaders within their classrooms, as well as exercise leadership on a broader scale. Those who later choose to move to the administrative ranks will have better practice and preparation, thus reducing time to competency.

### **Distributed Leadership: A Promising Practice**

The key to moving beyond shared leadership to distributed leadership is to match expertise with leadership work that makes a difference to student achievement and organizational effectiveness. Because teachers have considerable instructional expertise, common sense suggests engaging them in the crucial aspects of leadership of instruction and school improvement. There are, however, degrees of engagement. While some might simply hand off some of their responsibilities to others in the school (thus sharing leadership), other leaders create the conditions for professionals to work and learn together to create a synergy greater than the sum of individual efforts (Bennett, Wise, Woods, & Harvey, 2003). In such a culture, individuals contribute their expertise, build their knowledge and skills and strive collectively toward the achievement of a shared school improvement goal. Capacity building deeply re-cultures schools for shared accountability and real improvement in the fundamental mission of schools – student learning.

James Spillane and co-authors take distributed leadership beyond the concept of shared leadership by defining distributed learning as “distributed cognition” which describes thinking as a social rather than an individual activity (Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, April 2001). For example, principals are expected to exercise curriculum, assessment, and instructional leadership. This complex work requires in-depth knowledge and skills. Not even the best principals can be expected to be expert in everything; therefore, distributed leadership calls for tapping the expertise of others to lead as needed bringing the appropriate expertise forward to address specified issues.

### **If Leadership Is Distributed, What Does the Principal Do?**

It would be a mistake to assume that distributed leadership can operate on its own without a strong principal. Copland (2003) found that no matter the structure employed to distribute leadership, formal leaders played a critical role in creating a learning community to develop a cycle of collective inquiry, hiring and supporting talented teachers, and asking questions rather than drawing conclusions. Likewise, Leathwood *et al.* (2004) contend that the principal and superintendent remain the most influential educational leaders who are inextricably, albeit indirectly, linked to student performance results. These researchers recommend core practices for leaders to build effective organizations: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization to strengthen culture, modify organizational structures and build collaborative processes that facilitate distributed leadership.

Effective leadership can ensure the sustainability of improvement efforts. Research from the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) provides further insight into effective leadership practice with 21 leadership responsibilities that are essential for student achievement when practiced consistently in and responsively to school context (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). *Georgia School Standards* (GaDOE, May 2006), complete with rubrics and scoring analysis tools, reflect Georgia’s blueprint of effective, high impact leadership practices.

### **Conclusion**

Leaders who want to create a sustainable legacy of continuous improvement develop their people. While there is, as yet, no clear empirical evidence linking distributed leadership with student performance results, the possibilities of engaging the expertise and talent of all members of the school community toward the accomplishment of a common goal of high levels of adult and student learning make distributed leadership a promising practice that deserves further study and documentation of successful structures and resulting student performance. ■

*Dr. Gale Hulme is a freelance writer on educational issues and serves as director of programs and systemic initiatives at Georgia’s Leadership Institute for School Improvement.*

## Further Reading

The publications and websites below contributed to the information presented in this issue brief and provide additional information to readers.

Bennett, Nigel, Wise, Christine, Woods, Phillip, & Harvey, Janet A. (Spring 2003). *Distributed Leadership: Full Report*. UK: National College for School Leadership. Retrieved on August 9, 2006 at [www.ncsl.org.uk/media/F7A/87/bennett-distributed-leadership-full.pdf#search='Distributed%20Leadership%20NCSL](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/media/F7A/87/bennett-distributed-leadership-full.pdf#search='Distributed%20Leadership%20NCSL)

Copland, M. A. "The Bay Area School Reform Collaborative: Building the Capacity to Lead." In *Leadership Lessons from Comprehensive School Reforms*, edited by Joseph Murphy and Amanda Datnow, 159 – 183, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2003.

Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement (2003). *The 8 Roles of School Leaders™: Performance Skills to Increase Student Academic Achievement*. Atlanta, GA: GLISI. (See 8 Roles™ information at [www.galeaders.org](http://www.galeaders.org))

Georgia Professional Standards Commission (November 2005). *The Georgia Educator Workforce 2005: A Report of the Supply, Demand, and Utilization of Teachers, Administrative, and Student Services Personnel in Georgia Public Schools*. Atlanta, GA: GAPSC, 137 – 144. Retrieved on July 14, 2006 at [www.gapsc.com/Workforce/2005\\_Report/Full\\_Report.pdf](http://www.gapsc.com/Workforce/2005_Report/Full_Report.pdf)

Georgia Department of Education (May 2006). *Georgia School Standards Condensed Version*. Atlanta, GA: Ga DOE Division of School Improvement. Retrieved on July 14, 2006 at [www.doe.k12.ga.us/support/improvement/index.asp](http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/support/improvement/index.asp)

Lashway, Larry (Summer 2003). *Distributed Leadership*, Research Roundup, 19, 4. College of Education, University of Oregon: Clearinghouse on Educational Policy and Management. Retrieved on July 7, 2006 at <http://eric.uoregon.edu/publications/digests/digest162.html>

Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S. & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. New York: Wallace Foundation. Retrieved on July 7, 2006 at [www.wallacefoundation.org/ideasgoogleeducationleadership01/index.html](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/ideasgoogleeducationleadership01/index.html)

Murphy, J. (2005). *Connecting Teacher Leadership and School Improvement*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 28 – 32.

Page, Deb (2006). *Preparing for a Perfect Storm: Georgia's Leadership Institute for School Improvement Is Building State Readiness to Respond to Challenges to School Leader Quality and Supply*. Atlanta, GA: GLISI.

Spillane, J. P., Halverson, R., & Diamond, J. B. "Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective" *Educational Researcher* 30:3 (April 2001): 23 – 28. EJ 624 230. Retrieved on August 9, 2006 at [http://aera.net/uploadedFiles/Journals\\_and\\_Publications/Journals/Educational\\_Researcher/3003/AERA3003\\_RNC\\_Spillane.pdf](http://aera.net/uploadedFiles/Journals_and_Publications/Journals/Educational_Researcher/3003/AERA3003_RNC_Spillane.pdf)

The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, September 2005 Newsletter. *The Role of Principal Leadership in Improving Student Achievement*, Washington, DC: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) and WestEd. Retrieved July 8, 2006 at [www.centerforcsri.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=145&Itemid=5](http://www.centerforcsri.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=145&Itemid=5)

Waters, J. T., Marzano, R. J., & McNulty, B. A. (2003). *Balanced Leadership: What 30 Years of Research Tells Us About the Effect of Leadership On Student Achievement*. Aurora, CO: Mid-continent Research for Educational Learning. Retrieved on July 14, 2006 at [www.mcrel.org/topics/productDetail.asp?topicsID=7&productID=144](http://www.mcrel.org/topics/productDetail.asp?topicsID=7&productID=144)

PAGE Issue Briefs are available online at [www.pageinc.org](http://www.pageinc.org)

Professional Association of Georgia Educators

P.O. Box 942270

Atlanta, GA 31141-2270

770-216-8555 (Metro-Atlanta) or 800-334-6861 (Outside Atlanta)

[www.pageinc.org](http://www.pageinc.org)