

The Next Critical Step: Developing Shared Leadership Across Schools and Districts

By Brian McNulty, Ph.D.

AFTER STUDYING LEADERSHIP in the field of education for nearly 40 years, it is always refreshing to find new and more powerful research that supports the important roles that leaders play in improving the educational performance of both staff and students. As reported by Louis et al. (2010), there have recently been more than ten large-scale quantitative and qualitative studies reporting positive effects that leadership can have on student outcomes. However, we at **The Leadership and Learning Center** (McNulty and Besser 2011) and others have reported that building and district leaders often do not provide the instructional leadership to achieve these important outcomes. While it is understandable that leaders have many pressing priorities, it is critical that they find the time to address what should be their most important work—staff and student success.

The good news is that they do not need to take this on alone. As Lewis (2010) and her colleagues found, collective leadership has a more profound effect on student performance than any single source of leadership. While many of us in education have intuitively understood the benefits of shared leadership, we have often struggled with how to effectively develop shared or distributed leadership across the entire school and district.

Recently, there have been a number of high-quality studies identifying the benefits of teacher-based teams, or data teams, as we refer to them at **The Center** (see Darling-Hammond et al. 2009, Galimore et al. 2009, Saunders et al. 2009, Louis et al. 2010, and McNulty and Besser 2011).

However, it is not enough to just create teams of teachers and expect them to automatically achieve higher performance for all students. We know from the research that there also needs to be effective leadership, structures, and facilitation for the teams to be successful.

It is only when leaders provide these necessary structures and supports that the teams are effective in improving results for students (see Galimore et al. 2009 and Saunders et al. 2009). McNulty and Besser (2011) recommend that to achieve district-wide performance gains, similar broad-based teams must be developed at the building and district levels.

Leaders don't need to shoulder the responsibility for increased student performance on their own. However, they must be willing to provide the leadership and support necessary to create effective teams at all levels of the system that are all focused on the quality of instruction in every classroom.



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