Principal Leadership in Highly Successful Middle Grades Schools

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Overview and Common Themes

- Context for understanding ML leadership in today’s educational environment
- Major research summaries about effective principal leadership at all levels
- Research specific to ML principal leadership in highly successful ML schools
- Note the common themes throughout:
  - Student-centeredness
  - Collaborative, participative leadership
  - Persistence to “best practice” and “what’s right”
  - Development of relationships across all groups
Context: ML Education in 3 Minutes

- **Goal:** Meet the developmental needs of young adolescents
- **1900-1960 JH Era**
  - Dissatisfaction of existing elementary/secondary programs
  - Recommendations for program changes and organizational patterns
  - Beginning 1909 (Columbus and Berkeley)
  - 1927 (2,000 JHs); 1947 (10,000 JHs)
  - 1950s-60s: Concerns JH falling short of expectations
- **1960-1990…MS Era**
  - 1960’s Birth of MS Movement
  - 1970s decade of debate JH vs MS;
  - evolution of “middle level” and “middle grades”
- **MS Movement**
  - “largest and most comprehensive effort at educational reorganization in the history of American public schooling.” (George/Oldaker, 1985)
  - Recommendations for program changes and organizational patterns
  - 1968 (1,101 MSs); 1991 (6,168 MSs); 2004 (10,687 MSs)
Context: Today We Face Unprecedented Challenges in ML Education

- Environment of Students
  - Poverty vs wealth
  - Substance abuse and physical/social “closeness”
  - Respect for self and others
  - Parental trust and confidence in educational system
  - High pressure to excel in school and life vs indifference

- Environment of Educators
  - Standards-driven academic achievement for all students
  - Externally established goals for all schools
  - Expectations of continuous, significant growth and change
Pertinent Middle Level Issues: Now and into the future….  

- Standards-based academic expectations not disappearing  
- Student/societal challenges becoming more complex  
- Numbers of ML Schools continuing to grow  
- Increasing emphasis on quality, not presence, of “MS concept” programs  
- Increasing accountability of principals to lead a productive school  
- Increasing critics of MS until research more deeply documents the value-added nature of MSs on student achievement  
Effective Principal Leadership at All Levels: Major Syntheses of the Research

- **Exploring the Principal’s Contribution to School Effectiveness: 1980-1995**
  - Phillip Hallinger and Ronald Heck (1998)
  - 40 studies of leadership with achievement as dependent variable

- **Principals and Student Achievement: What the Research Says**
  - descriptive, narrative review of 81 studies

- **How Leadership Influences Student Learning**
  - descriptive, narrative review

- **School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results**
  - Robert Marzano, Timothy Waters, and Brian McNulty (2005)
  - Meta-analysis of 61 studies of leadership with achievement as dependent variable
Hallinger and Heck 1998

- Principals exercise a statistically significant (though indirect) effect on school effectiveness and student achievement
- Contributed clear conceptual explanation of impact models:
  - Direct effects
  - Direct effects with antecedent effects
  - Mediated effects
  - Mediated effects with antecedent effects
  - Reciprocal effects (all arrows going in both directions)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Safe and orderly environment</th>
<th>Collaboration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vision/goals focused on high levels of student learning</td>
<td>Professional development opportunities and resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High expectations for student achievement</td>
<td>On-going pursuit of high levels of student learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self-confidence, responsibility, perseverance</td>
<td>Support of teachers’ autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility and accessibility</td>
<td>Norms of continuous improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive and supportive school climate</td>
<td>Protecting instructional time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication and interaction</td>
<td>Support of risk-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional and interpersonal support</td>
<td>Role modeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared leadership/decision-making and staff empowerment</td>
<td>Use of student progress for program improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rituals, ceremonies, symbolic actions</td>
<td>Recognition of student and staff achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom observation and feedback to teachers</td>
<td>Monitoring student progress and sharing findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional leadership</td>
<td>Parent/community outreach and involvement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion of instructional issues</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
High quality leaders achieve school success by:

- **Setting direction** — charting a clear course that everyone understands, establishing high expectations, and using data to track progress and performance

- **Developing people** — providing teachers and others in the system with the necessary support and training to succeed

- **Making the organization work** — ensuring that the entire range of conditions and incentives in districts and schools fully supports rather than inhibits teaching and learning.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marzano, Waters, McNulty (2005)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21 Key Principal Responsibilities associated with Student Achievement (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The extent to which the principal…</th>
<th>Avg. r</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Situational Awareness Is aware of the details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems</td>
<td>.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility Adapts leadership behavior to the needs of the current situation and is comfortable with dissent</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline Protects teachers from issues and influences that would detract from their teaching time or focus</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring/ Evaluating Monitors the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student learning</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outreach Is an advocate and spokesperson for the school to all stakeholders</td>
<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change Agent Is willing to challenge and actively challenges the status quo</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture Fosters shared beliefs and a sense of community and cooperation</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Input</td>
<td>The extent to which the principal...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Input</td>
<td>Involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of Curriculum, Instruction, &amp; Assessment</td>
<td>Is knowledgeable about current curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order</td>
<td>Establishes a set of standard operating procedures &amp; routines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resources</td>
<td>Provides teachers with materials and professional development necessary for the successful execution of their jobs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contingent Rewards</td>
<td>Recognizes and rewards individual accomplishments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Establishes clear goals and keeps those goals in the forefront of the school's attention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intellectual Stimulation</td>
<td>Ensures faculty/staff are aware of most current theories/practices and makes discussion of these a regular aspect of school culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The extent to which the principal…</td>
<td>Avg. r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishes strong lines of communication with and among teachers and students</td>
<td>.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideals/Beliefs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicates and operates from strong ideals and beliefs about schooling</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement in Curriculum, Instruction, &amp; Assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optimizer</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Inspires and leads new and challenging innovations</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has quality contact and interactions with teachers and students</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizes and celebrates school accomplishments and acknowledges failures</td>
<td>.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
National Study of Leadership in ML Schools (NSLMLS)

- Multi-year study sponsored by NASSP
- Part 2 focused on Leadership in Highly Successful Middle Level Schools
- General criteria for inclusion in study of Highly Successful ML schools
  - High Levels of Academic Achievement regardless of school demographics (e.g. SES, grade configurations, community type)
  - Implementing high quality Middle School (concept) programs
  - Transitioning through changes...environment of continuous improvement
National Study of Leadership in Highly Successful ML Schools

Definition of highly successful:
- A school that is effectively meeting the unique needs of its students through a variety of developmentally appropriate programs and practices befitting the students and the community.

Selection process ensured that the schools in the study were of high quality and they were:
- Implementing programs reflective of current research about middle level education
- Making a conscientious effort to improve their programs as their knowledge expanded
- Studying and using student achievement data as well as other forms of student and school data to inform purposeful changes

They were good schools that were getting even better and were selected based upon goodness not cronieism or reputation.
ML Decade Studies

1980-1982 Middle Level Principalship
1991-1993 Leadership in ML Education
2000-2003 Leadership in ML Schools

2000-2003 Study:
- Phase I: National Survey of Schools
  2000: 14,107 > 1,423
- Phase II: Study of Highly Successful Schools
  2001-02: 273 Nominated > 100 Selected > 6 Site Visits
NSLMLS School Selection Process

- Nominated Schools from 50 States
  - 273 schools nominated by 200+ leaders
  - Highly successful at meeting student needs by addressing at least 2 or 3 recommendations from Turning Points
  - Principals completed survey re change, vision, goals, challenges, evidence of success, details re TP recs.

- Selection of 100 Highly Successful ML Schools
  - Panel of 7 experts analyzed the data from nominated schools
  - 100 schools invited to participate; 98 accepted

- Data Collection from the 98 Schools
  - Principal, Teacher, Student, Parent Surveys

- Selection of Six Site-Visit Schools
  - Three days of interviews and observations (Spring, 2002)
Principals of Highly Successful ML Schools

Professional Characteristics vs Norms

- Began careers as assistant principals and principals at younger age
- Served more years as ML principals
- Served more years as principals
- Served more years as principal in current school
- More likely to have been assistant principals
- Have higher levels of formal graduate education
- Have taken more “middle level” specific courses
- Value professional development experiences more
- Spend more time on the job…hours per work week
Collaborative Leadership was a Critical Variable Throughout NSLML Study

More effective ML principals:

– “are more skilled in staff relations and involve more faculty and a broader array of persons in the planning process” (Keefe, Valentine, Clark, Irvin, 1994)

– “and their teachers share a common perspective about teachers’ input into the decision making practices, particularly the degree of teacher involvement” (Whitaker and Valentine, 1993)
Quantitative Data from NSLMLS: Leader and School Variables

- **Collaborative Leadership**: the degree to which school leaders establish and maintain collaborative relationships with school staff.
- **Teacher Collaboration**: the degree to which teachers engage in constructive dialogue that furthers the educational vision of the school.
- **Unity of Purpose**: the degree to which teachers work toward a common mission for the school.
- **Professional Development**: the degree to which teachers value continuous personal development and school-wide improvement.
- **Collegial Support**: the degree to which teachers work together effectively.
- **Learning Partnership**: the degree to which teachers, parents, and the students work together for the common good of the student.
In Highly Successful ML Schools Collaborative Leadership Correlates directly with the following Student Variables

Principal Variables  Direct  Student Variables

- Participation in School Activities (.28)
- Student Academic Self-Esteem (.29)
- Student Academic Self-Efficacy (.22)
- Schoolwide Student Behavior (.40)
- People in Students’ Lives—Adults at School (.41)
In Highly Successful ML Schools Collaborative Leadership Correlates directly with the following Intervening Variables (that then correlate with Student Variables)

- Teacher Collaboration (.77)
- Unity of Purpose (.76)
- Professional Development (.77)
- Collegial Support (.75)
- Learning Partnership (.68)
In Highly Successful ML Schools
Intervening Variables Correlate directly with the following Student Variables

Teacher Collaboration correlates with:
- Schoolwide Student Behavior (.38)
- People in Students’ Lives—Adults at School (.39)

Unity of Purpose correlates with:
- Schoolwide Student Behavior (.40)
- People in Students’ Lives—Adults at School (.29)

Professional Development correlates with:
- Participation in School Activities (.28)
- Student Academic Self-Esteem (.30)
- Student Academic Self-Efficacy (.27)
- Schoolwide Student Behavior (.40)
- People in Students’ Lives—Adults at School (.33)
In Highly Successful ML Schools
Intervening Variables Correlate directly with the following Student Variables (NSLMLS)

Intervening School Variables → Direct → Student Variables

- **Collegial Support** correlates with:
  - Student Academic Self-Esteem (.38)
  - Student Academic Self-Efficacy (.26)
  - Schoolwide Student Behavior (.40)
  - People in Students’ Lives—Adults at School (.36)

- **Learning Partnership** correlates with:
  - Student Academic Self-Esteem (.24)
  - Student Academic Self-Efficacy (.23)
  - Schoolwide Student Behavior (.50)
Six Highly Successful Schools: A Very Close Look at Leadership Excellence

- Identified six highly successful schools
- Demographically representative of the set of 98 schools but very high on the “success quotient”
- On-site visits for three days each
- Interviews with teachers, students, parents
- Observations of classrooms
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schools</th>
<th>Grade Levels</th>
<th>Enroll.</th>
<th>Comm. Type</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>% F/R Lunch</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Einstein Academy</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>Small City</td>
<td>Eur/Am: 69%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Afr/Am: 29%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fourstar MS</td>
<td>5-8</td>
<td>309</td>
<td>Small Suburb Town</td>
<td>Eur/Am: 94%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Afr/Am: 3%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Kent MS</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>1046</td>
<td>Metro Suburb</td>
<td>Eur/Am: 48%</td>
<td>29%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Afr/Am: 17%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>His/Am: 18%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asi/Am: 16%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mark Twain MS</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>Small Rural Town</td>
<td>Eur/Am: 96%</td>
<td>40%</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Afr/Am: 2%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Pioneer MS</td>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>1485</td>
<td>Metro Suburb</td>
<td>Eur/Am: 72%</td>
<td>12%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Afr/Am: 9%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>His/Am: 10%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Asi/Am: 8%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Southside Intermed.</td>
<td>7-8</td>
<td>589</td>
<td>Small City</td>
<td>Eur/Am: 37%</td>
<td>66%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Afr/Am: 13%</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>His/Am: 50%</td>
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Commitment to Academic Excellence through Collaboration

- Collaboratively establish shared values, beliefs, and commitments
- Maintain ongoing dialogue to internalize beliefs
- Collaboratively establish a vision of what the school will need to look like in the future
- Vision guides the work of the school
- Knowledge of best practices informs the vision
Commitment to Academic Excellence through Use of Best Practice

- Understanding and commitment to best ML programs and practices
- Understanding and commitment to effective curricular and instructional practices
- Understanding and commitment to effective organizational structure practices that support learning
- Use of data to change curriculum and instruction and to promote student success
- Monitor to ensure that the written curriculum is the taught curriculum
- Ensure the use of formative assessments of learning on a regular basis for remediation and enrichment
- Ensure the use of a variety of instructional strategies
Commitment to Academic Excellence through Modeling Beliefs and Convictions

- Principals aggressively model beliefs and conviction that all students can/will learn
  - Express personal passion and commitment
  - Create and lead conversations among faculty
  - Demonstrate beliefs/convictions via decisions
  - Establish high expectations per beliefs/convictions
  - Hire teachers with the beliefs/convictions
  - Ensure PD fits beliefs/convictions
  - Serve as the “keeper of the school’s vision”

- Take a stand for what “you believe is right”
- Faculty members who do not “get on board” should work elsewhere
Commitment to Academic Excellence

- Principals work with teachers to establish school structures and procedures that align with conviction that all students can/will learn.
  - Establish teaming, flex schedules, common planning times, advisory, extended academic time
  - Establish communication and leadership structures: committees, cadres, vertical teams, advisory teams, school improvement teams, task-forces
  - Ensure effective/efficient day-to-day operations
  - Establish teacher leadership as nucleus for continuous improvement
Develop People & Relationships

- Principals foster the development of individuals and relationships:
  - Share responsibility for leadership
  - Small groups and whole faculty study and discuss current research and best practices in middle level schools
  - Use interdisciplinary teams to create small learning communities
  - Create “faculty discussion/work room” that fosters collaboration about vision/goals
Develop People & Relationships

- Principals foster the development of individuals and relationships:
  - Collectively discuss and identify relationship enhancing behaviors
  - Conduct study groups to address student needs
  - Collect and discuss climate data
  - Engage in staff retreats
  - Establish small learning communities
  - Aggressively reach out to parents and members of the community
  - Communicate TWO ways
  - Are a role model for interpersonal relationships
Principals modeled and expected it: “The number one thing is relationships”

- **Principals took the initiative** to build outstanding relationships with teachers, valued their work, provided support. They empowered teachers as well as knew them personally. They knew “who needed a pat on the back, who needed a kick in the pants, and who needed both”

- **Teachers valued** collegial, collaborative work environments, sharing of knowledge, strategies and ideas, caring for each other, being a family. A personal and professional bond had developed through working toward a common purpose.

- **Teachers were attentive to students’** needs, attended school activities, tried to understand the home lives of students. They worked to get to know each student individually, to establish a personal bond. This enabled teachers to push students, reduced discipline problems and increased the students’ admiration of teachers.

- **Principals valued parents/community** members, involved them in decision making, and provided opportunities for learning about adolescent development and middle level programs. They demonstrated an understanding of community groups/issues, effective communication and “personal touch.”
Principals of Highly Successful ML Schools Understand that:

- ML Programs/structures alone are not enough…
- Teaming is more than an instructional strategy…
- Developmental readiness and rigor are compatible…
- Data-based decision-making is not adequate…
- What you believe is what you get…
Principals of Highly Successful ML Schools

- were highly committed to middle level concept and programs (teaming, exploratory courses, advisory, co-curricular, intramurals)
- went beyond these components, looking to other programs that complemented the middle level concept, to bring instructional and curricular coherence to their schools
- had a strong vision about how young adolescent learners could be successful in their schools
Highly Successful ML Principals

Understand best practice and measure against that benchmark:
- Middle level education
- School improvement and change
- Collaborative/distributive leadership

Collect and analyze data per goals/vision
- Student achievement
- Written and taught curriculum
- Instructional practices
- School environment/relationships/perceptions
Developmentally Responsive Leadership

Brown and Anfara recommend a three dimensional model of “developmentally responsive leadership.”

(1) **Responsiveness to needs of middle grades students**
- Responsiveness to appropriate curriculum, instruction, assessment
- Responsiveness to school culture and commitment to community versus bureaucracy
- Responsiveness to at-risk behaviors of ML students
- Responsiveness to role of parents trying to understand their student’s journey through young adolescence

(2) **Responsiveness to the developmental needs of faculty** who support learning for middle grades students
- Responsiveness to employing and educating faculty who understand developmental needs of students and connect with them
- Responsiveness to the developmental needs of faculty as they mature through their career and life cycles

(3) **Responsiveness to the development of the middle school life itself** as a unique innovating entity
- Responsiveness to the needs of the school to innovate and sustain change to meet learner needs
- Responsiveness to comprehensive school reform compared to merely first order change
Synthesis

Three broad categories of leadership behaviors provide a framework for understanding effectiveness

- Managerial Leadership
- Instructional Leadership
- Transformational Leadership

Major themes throughout research on ML Principals

- Student-centeredness
- Collaborative, participative leadership
- Persistence to “best practice” and “what’s right”
- Development of relationships across all groups
“no single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades school students’ performance than the school principal.”

p.10
References


Valentine, J. (in preparation). Understanding the relationships between middle level leadership and student success in highly effective middle level schools. (manuscript in preparation for publication...for specifics prior to publication contact ValentineJ@missouri.edu or see the web site of the Middle Level Leadership Center [www.MLLC.org](http://www.MLLC.org))


Q/A and Closing Comments

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