

TRANSFORMING Teacher LEADERSHIP

By Patti Kinney

A Conversation With Douglas Reeves

Douglas Reeves, the founder of The Leadership and Learning Center, discusses his recent book, *Reframing Teacher Leadership to Improve Your School*, and presents a compelling case that teacher leadership is key to implementing and sustaining effective school improvement efforts.

Principal Leadership: Your book speaks about a new framework for teacher leadership, and you state that a radical transformation toward teacher leadership is not an option; it is a necessity. How is this different from past viewpoints on teacher leadership?

Douglas Reeves: Teacher leadership has, of course, been around for a long time, but I don't think we come close to using the potential of teacher leaders. For example, in the past, oftentimes teacher leadership meant giving teachers extra administrative duty and not paying them for it and not giving them the opportunity to grow as administrators. Central offices were populated with teachers on special assignment who had a lot of responsibilities, but sometimes not the authority to go with them. The other concept in the book—action research—has been around for a long time as well, but too many of those projects wind up sitting on shelves in research departments not being used.

It's the combination of teacher leadership and action research that I think is remarkably powerful. In fact, I would go so far as to say that teacher leadership without action research doesn't really lead to changes in professional practice, and action research without teacher leadership winds up as interesting data that is not applied in the classroom. You've got to have both to make it work.

PL: So what relationship has your research found between teacher leadership and student achievement?

Reeves: The research in the book began with 81 separate action research projects that combined teacher leadership and action research. And there was a consistent relationship between those interventions and improved achievement, not just achievement as we traditionally measure it in test scores. There were projects in reading and math and science and so on. But there were also projects in dance and music and technology and special ed—and the collateral finding is not just that achievement improved, but that discipline and engagement improved. And when we have those sorts of improvements, even in a class that may not show up on a AYP report, that's the sort of thing that helps the rest of us.

In other words, even though I happen to be a math teacher, I'm going to do better when students are more engaged, are showing up

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more regularly, have fewer disciplinary problems, and are frankly just more happy to be in school. And if that happened because of the efforts of a colleague of mine in the arts, then that is still very much related to the academic achievement in my class and other classes in the school.

PL: Principals are always encouraged to be instructional leaders, and as a result, management tasks are often relegated to the backseat or not seen as being really important. And yet you argue that truly great leadership requires attention to daily management tasks and that principals often report three of their greatest challenges are people management, time management, and project management. What implications do you see this having as principals work to develop leadership skills in teachers?

Reeves: Well, I think we have to be very careful about avoiding that false dichotomy between leadership and management. Whether you're talking about the leader of a large, complex school system or the leader in a classroom, all sorts of routines and protocols—plain old garden variety management—have a lot to do with allowing us to be successful and creative. I think that people see that there's a divergence between creativity and visionary leadership at one extreme and dull old management on the other.

My argument is, you don't get to do the creative and visionary work, whether you're a teacher or whether you're a superintendent,

without having attended to the nuts and bolts of time management, people management, project management—getting the right thing done in the right order at the right time.

PL: Are there certain knowledge, skills, and dispositions that principals need to look for in teachers to develop teacher leadership?

Reeves: I think the number one disposition is the willingness to learn and the willingness to share. In other words, it is as Rick DuFour has so commonly said, "the transformation from private practice to public practice."

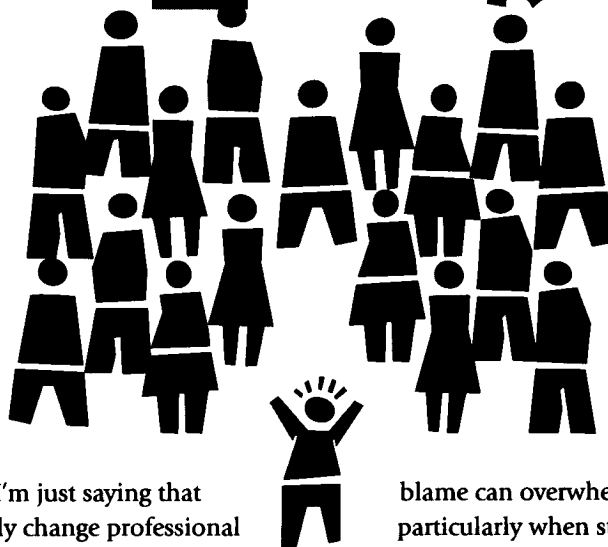
The teacher, whether they've been in the classroom for 1 year or 30 years, who is willing to learn is the sort of person who's always saying, "How can I make next year better?" and is the sort of person who is revising everything from lesson plans and assessments and scenarios that will engage students. The one who's willing to share is the one who routinely brings best practices, not to just a formal professional development setting, but to the way they do business, powered by day-by-day sharing, with genuine enthusiasm, what works.

This is quite related to what I think is the most important definition of teacher leadership—not positional authority, whether in an association or a school system, but rather the ability to influence the professional practices of other teachers. That's what teacher leadership is all about.

PL: So does it take a certain baseline knowledge and skill development to get to that point?

Reeves: I think the direct answer is yes, but I'm very hesitant to get too legalistic about that. And I guess that's because I've seen too many people with lots and lots of advanced degrees who don't influence leadership practice. And I think we need to leave the door open for people whose education may not be plastered with letters after their name, but who have an enormous wealth of experience and influence.

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PL: Practical knowledge.

Reeves: Well, precisely. And one of the things that we saw in the research in this project was that the primary source of influence on professional practices is not traditional books and articles—which is bad news, I guess, for me, for an author—not traditional inspirational speeches or even formal programs. It is, rather, the influence of fellow teachers. That's what influences professional practice.

I'm not diminishing those other things. I'm just saying that we're kidding ourselves to think that we really change professional practice in the dark auditorium or the seminar that is devoid of classroom modeling.

PL: Or the one-shot professional development where you hear a great speaker and then nothing is done with it afterwards.

Reeves: Precisely. One of the things I write about is the "Seven-to-One Rule." For every one hour of classical seminar, [teachers should spend] seven hours of implementation in the classroom. That's what we found has a far greater impact on student achievement and on enduring professional practices.

PL: Let's say I'm a principal who wants to encourage and build a culture of collaborative leadership by bringing teacher leadership and action research into it. What specific actions or steps can I take as a principal to nurture that development to make that part of the culture?

Reeves: I think that one of the things that principals can do is to radically change the way that they do faculty meetings and other meeting time that they control. Everybody is short on time and short on resources, so we have to think about what we can do with the time that we do have. For example, I know of principals whose faculty meetings never involve reading administrative announcements. They say, "Ladies and gentlemen, please see the announcements in writing. You can read them at your convenience." And then they spend that time in genuinely collaborative efforts. For example, they might look at an anonymous piece of student work and evaluate it together. They might redesign a rubric together. They might create a common assessment on something that's really vexing them. They might work on an interdisciplinary assessment. But the time that they have is genuinely spent learning together and creating together, not having the administrator doing 90% of the talking, simply by virtue of having an administrative license.

PL: Changing a school's practices and culture isn't easy. You call the barriers to improving teacher leadership the three Bs: blame; bureaucracy;

and my personal favorite, baloney.

Can you expand on these and what you see to be the principal's role in breaking down these road-blocks?

Reeves: I think we've all seen that

blame can overwhelm a lot of discussions, particularly when student achievement is challenging and when there are many, many other forces at work that influence student achievement. And it's sort of important to take a nuanced approach on that particular subject. I don't want to get off on too much of a rant here, but it really is very much the forefront of educational debate right now.

I would never say that just because I think blame is a pretty bad strategy that I don't also acknowledge that there are multiple impacts on student achievement. Of course, poverty, language, housing, nutrition, and family support all matter. I'm not saying that when people acknowledge that those things are influential that that means that there's blame going on. What I'm saying is that acknowledging those things and having a commitment to social justice, as important as it may be, should not be an excuse to then say, "And therefore, until those things get fixed, I'm just kind of stuck in the classroom." I think the "therefore" needs to be, "And therefore, even though I acknowledge all those things are important, I've got a job to do in the classroom." And the evidence overwhelmingly says that I'm able to make a difference in the classroom with my ability to have a challenging curriculum, accurate feedback, immediate feedback, and great instruction.

PL: About bureaucracy and baloney....

Reeves: You might think bureaucracy is redolent of the 1950s, but I'm telling you it's happening well into the 21st century, where one

person who has got a great idea can't publicly share that great idea unless it goes through proper channels, where great ideas are regularly squelched.

People can't talk to other people across bureaucratic lines. If I'm in curriculum instruction and you're in technology, together we might be able to really create a powerful instructional support that has good technology support without going up to the top and down to the bottom, but those sort of bureaucratic barriers are there all the time.

A lot of these old bureaucratic things are self-imposed as a result of tradition. And I mention that because it's not enough for the superintendent to say, "Now, anybody can talk to anybody about anything." If you really want to have a boundary-free and a bureaucracy-free organization that enhances communication, the superintendent has to continually nurture networks, including boundary crossing networks, so that people cross those boundaries regularly, share ideas, and speak to one another.

PL: And how about baloney?

Reeves: I hear the most astonishing claims made, preceded by "research shows that," and "studies show that," with nary a footnote. Or if there is research, it turns out to be that person's singular experience. And I think we know enough in education and research to draw better inferences than that. Unfortunately, what you see very commonly in professional development—and, alas, sometimes in publications as well—are just bland assertions about everything from the brain to learning processes to what great teaching and leadership is, and they just aren't supported by evidence.

PL: So what are one or two things that principals can do to address this if they see it happening in their schools?

Reeves: I think instead of attacking something negative, they need to crowd out the negative with the positive. Every principal is going to begin with a set of challenges this year. But the

way that you can encourage teacher leadership is giving voice to great ideas.

One good idea that I've seen a principal do is ask every teacher to maintain a journal, just a one-entry-a-week journal, that will have a few lines about a student who is struggling and an intervention that the teacher has tried to help that student—what worked, what didn't work—and about a student who is performing very well, above the grade level, and what the teacher is doing to challenge that student.

Now, secondary school educators who've got 180 kids may say, "My gosh, I can't journal for everybody." No, but you can journal for two. And when you take those two, and every faculty member is just looking intensively at two students, week after week after week, every time there's a meeting, they bring those journals and share them. The principal doesn't have to look at every journal entry, but sharing journals becomes part of the way that they do business and exemplifies their commitment to share good ideas with colleagues.

Even when teachers do something really well, they think that they're isolated, they think that they're alone. If in the next 36 weeks of school, I had the opportunity to hear 36 times that I'm not alone, that somebody else is having either similar frustrations or similar successes, then we start to build a community and give teachers confidence that what they have is more than just a personal anecdote.

PL: If I were to visit a school that had fully implemented this framework for teacher leadership, where we've got teachers being involved in leadership and action research and sharing, what are some of the specific things I would see, and what kind of conversations would I be hearing?

Reeves: I think you'd hear very judgment-free conversations, such as, "I'm really frustrated about what's not working with the students. I've tried this, I've tried this, and I've tried this. But I noticed that you've had success. How would you approach this?" Genuine willingness to listen to colleagues and genuine observations of colleagues' success. Not in a way that sets people up to compete with each other, but in a way that generates intellectual curiosity.

I think you'd hear conversations like, "I noticed on our data wall in the faculty lounge that your special ed kids are doing remarkably better this year than they were before on some open-response items. I've got a terrible time getting my kids with similar learning disabilities to engage in writing. Can you tell me what you're doing, or would you mind if I can arrange somebody to cover for me, so I could just drop in and watch you for 45 minutes?" That's the kind of conversation that I think is the spirit of inquiry, that really is at the heart of great teaching.

PL: You share statistics that we're going to be facing a shortage of administrators in the near future and that not everyone is cut out to be a

The worst that will happen is that you'll say, "Man, I tried this, and it didn't work."

principal or wants to be a principal or school leader. What can we be doing to encourage teacher leaders to consider moving into school administration?

Reeves: Well, first of all, as much as I do respect and revere people who are willing to engage in administrative leadership, we need to make very clear that teacher leadership is not necessarily a track to administrative leadership. Teacher leadership stands on its own as a powerful leadership force, and I think school districts would be very wise to create professional paths for people to excel as classroom teachers, including increasing economic rewards and professional respect, without having to necessarily go into administrative ranks.

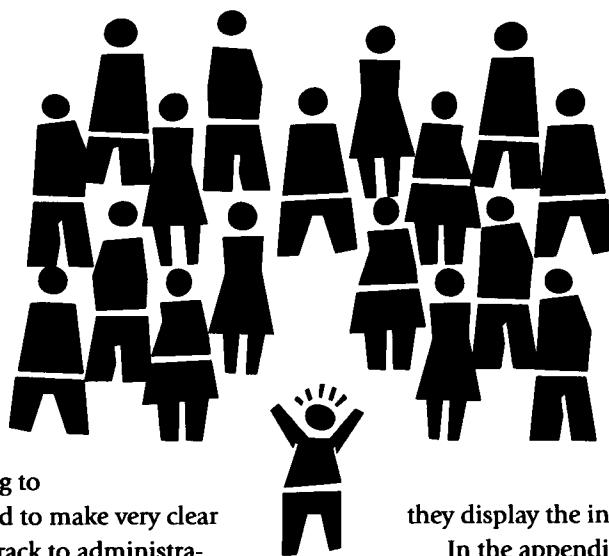
That said, I think we need to make administrative leadership also something that is very attractive. Quite frankly, when I've asked people, "Why don't you do that?" they'll say, "Well, let me get this straight: I get double the hours and I get zero job security, for maybe an extra \$5,000 or \$10,000 a year." Which is going to work out to about 50 cents an hour for what they do...not counting the cost of divorce court and everything else. The expectations that we have for administrative leaders are simply family killers. They're personal killers. And we have to reframe the job. It has become this seven day a week, 24-hour a day job, even beyond the boundaries of the school. You're responsible for what happens on the street, over the fence, in the neighborhood. And that's too much to expect.

One of two things, maybe both, have got to happen. Number one, we have to be clear about what our expectations are and knock off the notion that if you didn't show up for every athletic event and every other activity, no matter how early or late, you somehow disrespected the team and the mascot.

Secondly, I think we need to consider, quite seriously, sabbaticals. I find it astonishing that university faculty members every seven or eight years expect to take a sabbatical from their wearisome schedule of three or four classes a week, and we seem unwilling to provide that to administrative leaders who literally are working 365 days a year.

PL: Do you have any last words of advice for principals who want to increase student learning by tapping into the potential of teacher leadership?

Reeves: I think that there are some things that are very practical. I've already mentioned the idea of the very brief journal. I also think that public display should be done universally, so everybody displays some



data, not a few people who might be accused of showing off. They display what their teaching strategies were, associated with the data. And

they display the inferences.

In the appendices of the book, I have some suggestions for how teachers can do action research very simply in their classroom. But a key strategy is not just doing it, but sharing it and sharing it publicly. It's this transparency imperative that's so important. And when leaders begin the year with a vision, "This spring, we're going to have a data fair"—or as I call it, the "science fair"—or, "We're going to share our best practices with each other, and it's judgment free", the worst that will happen is that you'll say, "Man, I tried this, and it didn't work." And then, the leaders can ask, "OK, so what did we learn from that, how do we get better in this spirit of inquiry, of sharing, of learning?" And when the adults are doing that, I think it makes it much more likely that the students are doing it.

PL: Are there any sites or resources available for school leaders who are interested in learning more about this topic?

Reeves: There are quite a few free articles and free tools that people can download, and they're used by teachers and leaders all over the world. Just go to www.leadandlearn.com, and you can find everything from presentations and research and articles to case studies. They're all free downloads, and we're most happy to share them. **PL**

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