

A Collaborative Enterprise

In the late 1990s, renowned Cape Town archbishop and social activist Desmond Tutu introduced the South African term *ubuntu* to a global audience. Roughly translating to, “I am because we are,” it reflects a belief in the importance of interconnectedness among human beings. Doris Candelarie, one of the National Distinguished Principals profiled in this issue, shared this concept with us as her chosen inspirational theme for the current school year.

When I heard about this philosophy of *ubuntu*, it struck a particular chord with me, as it seems to so aptly crystallize both the message and spirit of professional collaboration that we explore in this issue of *Principal*. After all, this network of human relationships and support across school, district, community, and beyond is the key enabling factor when it comes to successfully serving the students in our charge.

Research backs this up. Studies such as the Wallace Foundation’s 2010 *Learning from Leadership* confirm a strong connection between high-performing schools and decision-making structures that include input from a range of stakeholders. In particular, the study highlights the key role of teacher leaders, finding direct links between principal-teacher leader collaborations and higher standardized test scores, and increased staff trust in principals—all without the loss of a principal’s clout.

Teacher leaders are helping principals become more effective instructional leaders through collaborative team leadership, including sharing resources and strategies, observing and providing feedback on lessons, facilitating professional development, and acting as data coaches to help drive instruction. Teacher leaders also extend the eyes and ears of a principal on campus by functioning as liaisons between the administration and grade-level or subject-area professional learning communities.

The concept of a broader decision-making structure in schools is not new, with terms such as “distributed,” “shared,” “collective,” and “democratic,” appearing in research over the past 70 years. But, as we’re reminded by the 2012 Wallace study, *The School Principal As Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*, these adjectives don’t amount to much more than slogans without a clear understanding that any effective leadership model relies on the officially accountable individual—the principal—to shape a clear schoolwide vision of academic success and to manage the people, data, and processes that foster school improvement.

Such successful vision and direction requires that prin-



cipals possess the key elements of authority, autonomy, and district support. *The Three Essentials*, a 2010 study from the Southern Regional Education Board, found that the most successful schools were in “highly supportive” districts where top administrators and school board leaders had a clear vision of

what constitutes a good school. They also had frameworks that allowed principals to make decisions about resource allocation, instructional improvement, common planning time, and other practices supporting the goal of student achievement. The study also found that principals had the greatest impact in environments with the greatest need and that adding to the leadership capacity of schools, especially those at risk, contributed greatly to their improvement.

With high teacher turnover an ongoing challenge, retaining veteran and gifted classroom teachers is another proven benefit of collaborative school leadership. The *Learning from Leadership* study found that teachers in successful schools prized professional learning communities and schoolwide collaborative cultures where they help and guide one another.

The *Teacher Leader Model Standards*, developed in 2011 by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, acknowledge the importance of giving teachers a stronger voice in school decisions and providing them with opportunities to grow and acquire higher-level leadership skills, such as negotiation and consensus-building, gained through principal coaching.

In the same spirit of supporting teachers, last spring U.S. Secretary of Education Arne

Duncan announced the Teach to Lead initiative, designed to examine best practices in providing teachers opportunities to lead changes and to have more input in policies affecting their work.

In a recent conversation I had with Duncan, he shared survey results showing nearly 25 percent of teachers are interested in hybrid roles that involve work both inside and outside of the classroom. “We have to figure out different steps, different rungs on the career ladder,” he said. He hopes that harnessing the skills of master teachers, mentor teachers, and veteran teachers to support and mentor colleagues and novice teachers will not only reverse the high level of teacher turnover, but also principal turnover, as well.

Circling back to the idea of *ubuntu*, education seems ready for this philosophy now. Just as this concept can add a new dimension of awareness to our national culture, it can also provide us with a finer understanding of the crucial role of widespread support and collaboration in our schools’ culture. ■

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