Principals and superintendents who forge a solid partnership will more effectively determine what to do and how to go about doing it.

By Cathie E. West

School Leadership Team

A somber group of principals gathers around the superintendent to discuss the district’s newly released state assessment results. Every school, from elementary to secondary, experienced an unsettling drop in student achievement. One of the elementary principals looks crestfallen. Inexplicably, after several years of an upward trend, his school’s reading scores took a nosedive. Now he worries about meeting the adequate yearly progress requirements stipulated by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).
“I don’t get it,” this principal laments, “last school year my teachers and I tracked the progress of every at-risk learner and implemented a bundle of new interventions.” A high school principal nods in sympathy. “I hear you,” she says, visibly stressed. “We did a lot of culture building at my school and then zeroed in on the meaning of school pride. Our efforts took us nowhere!” Another principal chimes in, talking animatedly about his middle school’s efforts to align math curriculum. Yet no progress was made.

After listening empathetically to these and similar stories from her other principals, the superintendent was astute enough to throw a lifeline to her dejected school leaders: “It’s time to rethink the approach our administrative team is taking. I’ve come across powerful information about team effectiveness—it’s not what we are doing but how we are going about it. We need to become a more effective team.”

**Why Team Effectiveness?**

Improving team performance has been a hot topic in the business world for decades. There are countless books devoted to the subject and should you open a popular business journal, you will likely find a substantive article devoted to it. The interest in team effectiveness is now growing among school leaders. Why all the attention? ESEA has been the major impetus. According to the Educational Research Service’s *K–12 Principals Guide to No Child Left Behind*, this tough accountability mandate precipitated a web of rigorous curriculum standards and assessments in schools across America, making high student achievement the focal point for every administrator. This is not to say high achievement for some students, but for all students.

This laudatory goal, however, has proved to be elusive. According to the U.S. Department of Education, despite an arsenal of educational interventions—research-based instruction, student progress monitoring, and state-of-the-art technology—many schools have failed to make significant gains or, if they have succeeded, have been left with glaring inequities that fall along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. What else can be done to ensure that all students learn?

The research is clear: Robert Marzano and his colleagues explain in *School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results* that to improve student achievement schools need the leadership of knowledgeable, highly skilled, and visionary principals and superintendents. Exemplary school leadership doesn’t develop in isolation, however. As Mary Lynne Derrington and I write in *Leadership Training: The Superintendent-Principal Relationship*, strong leadership grows from dynamic, collaborative, and intentional interactions between superintendents and their principals. These savvy administrators form an interdependent relationship that brings a team approach to challenges and strengthens the competence of every school leader.

**Barriers to Successful Teaming**

Becoming a competent team is not as easy as it sounds. Superintendents must forge solid relationships with their principals that begin by getting to know each on a personal level. It also includes recognizing principals’ unique talents, remaining open to their differing viewpoints, and incorporating team members’ diverse ideas into a collective vision for the future.

Likewise, principals must build healthy relationships with their superintendent. This involves knowing and understanding their leader’s interpersonal style, administrative approach, core beliefs, and mission. How is this accomplished? An in-depth interview with the superintendent is a good starting point. Questions might include: What is your vision for the school district? How do you see principals supporting your efforts? Do you have specific initiatives in mind for your administrative team? Additional insights can be gained by observing their boss in action, serving on superintendent-directed committees, and reading school district communiqués such as vision statements, newsletters, and school board reports.

Effective superintendent-principal teaming also requires every administrator’s commitment, dedication, and professionalism. The major barriers that impede team success follow.

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**Access the following web resources by visiting Principal magazine online:**

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

The complete version of the *Performance Expectations and Indicators for Educational Leaders* can be downloaded free of charge from the Council of Chief State School Officers.

The Washington State Leadership Academy provides training to superintendent and principal teams. Its website has a comprehensive list of books, articles, and online references that will enhance school leaders’ professional practice.

“Leaders: Are You Coachable?” by Gene Sharratt is an insightful article in *Washington State Kappan* that addresses the power of leadership development through coaching.
Substandard performance: Carrying out job responsibilities half-heartedly or ineptly, supervising teachers and support staff ineffectively, or missing assignment deadlines.

Unprofessional behavior: Failing to support the school district’s mission, follow school board policy, or conduct business in an ethical manner.

Negative attitudes: Complaining about work load and challenges, staff members and clients, and the superintendent or peers.

Lack of trust: Withholding information from the superintendent or colleagues, violating confidentiality, or undermining team decisions.

Poor communication skills: Speaking ill of the superintendent or fellow principals, avoiding face-to-face communication when conflicts arise, or conveying ideas in a contentious manner.

How Solid Teams Develop
The suggestions that follow will help principals and superintendents overcome barriers and create a powerful, enduring partnership.

Adhere to professional standards. Administrative team performance is strengthened when guided by professional standards such as those stated in the Council of Chief State School Officers’ Performance Expectations and Indicators for Education Leaders. This compendium of competencies provides exemplary expectations for every leadership concern, including vision, mission, and goals; teaching and learning; managing organizational systems and safety; collaborating with families and stakeholders; ethics and integrity; and the education system.

Create workplace norms. Developing a code of ethics and collaboration (CEC) should be the first step for leadership teams wanting to improve team relationships. A CEC is a collection of workplace norms that govern attitudes, responsibilities, and behavior. The administrators in my school district developed a CEC that spells out expectations for interpersonal relationships, climate, professionalism, communications, conflict management, governance and decision-making, and team effectiveness. The CEC guides our everyday interactions and gives us criteria against which we evaluate team success.

Set team goals. Ideally, a school leadership team is composed of highly competent, dedicated, and ambitious individuals. But this could be a problem if administrators work in isolation. The principals featured earlier provide an instructive example. The principals were well intended but their school improvement goals were unaligned and consequently less powerful. The probability that administrative endeavors will succeed increases when team goals are set and implemented in a coordinated fashion.

Engage in collective professional development. Administrators can become more proficient through individual pursuits such as reading professional journals or completing coursework. As important as this kind of learning is, however, it does not build a strong administrative team. Strong teams grow from collective learning. This richer kind of learning comes when principals and superintendents participate in professional development activities together. Shared professional development precipitates a collective understanding that enriches team knowledge, skills, and effectiveness.

Professional Development
Here are six professional development strategies for principals and superintendents striving to become a high-powered team.

Engage in professional book studies. Choose books that teach concepts and skills needed by the team. Leadership Teaming: The Superintendent-Principal Relationship, for example, will help principals and superintendents perfect team performance. Other books, such as Connecting Leadership with Learning: A Framework for Reflection, Planning, and Action, will give a boost to school improvement efforts.

Hold case study meetings. Administrators can present the steps they took to improve the performance of a student, teacher, or support staff member.

Use administrative meetings for research reviews. Discuss, debate, and apply promising ideas from educational research. The book School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results provides an excellent starting point.

Share leadership practices. Time should be scheduled for team members to talk about the strategies they are using in their schools to advance team goals.

Do classroom walkthroughs. Entire teams should visit a school to tour classrooms. Look for specific instructional techniques and discuss their impact on student learning.

Engage in professional in-service. Attend conferences, workshops, and seminars and discuss how to put best practices into action.

If the foregoing team development activities are not already in place, principals should not hesitate to suggest them to their superintendent. Most are low cost and all are easy to implement. To get things going, principals might offer to lead an activity or two, such as a book study or research review. Superintendents will appreciate this kind of professional development support.

The savvy superintendent highlighted earlier began her team-building journey by enrolling her principals—and herself—in a year-long leadership academy. This career-invigorating opportunity provided the superintendent and her principals with the coaching, training, and resources they needed to develop team skills, address student achievement challenges, and coordinate school improvement efforts. As a consequence, they strengthened team competence and their capacity to fulfill their mission. Lessons learned? If you and the administrators you work with are looking to perfect performance, think team!

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