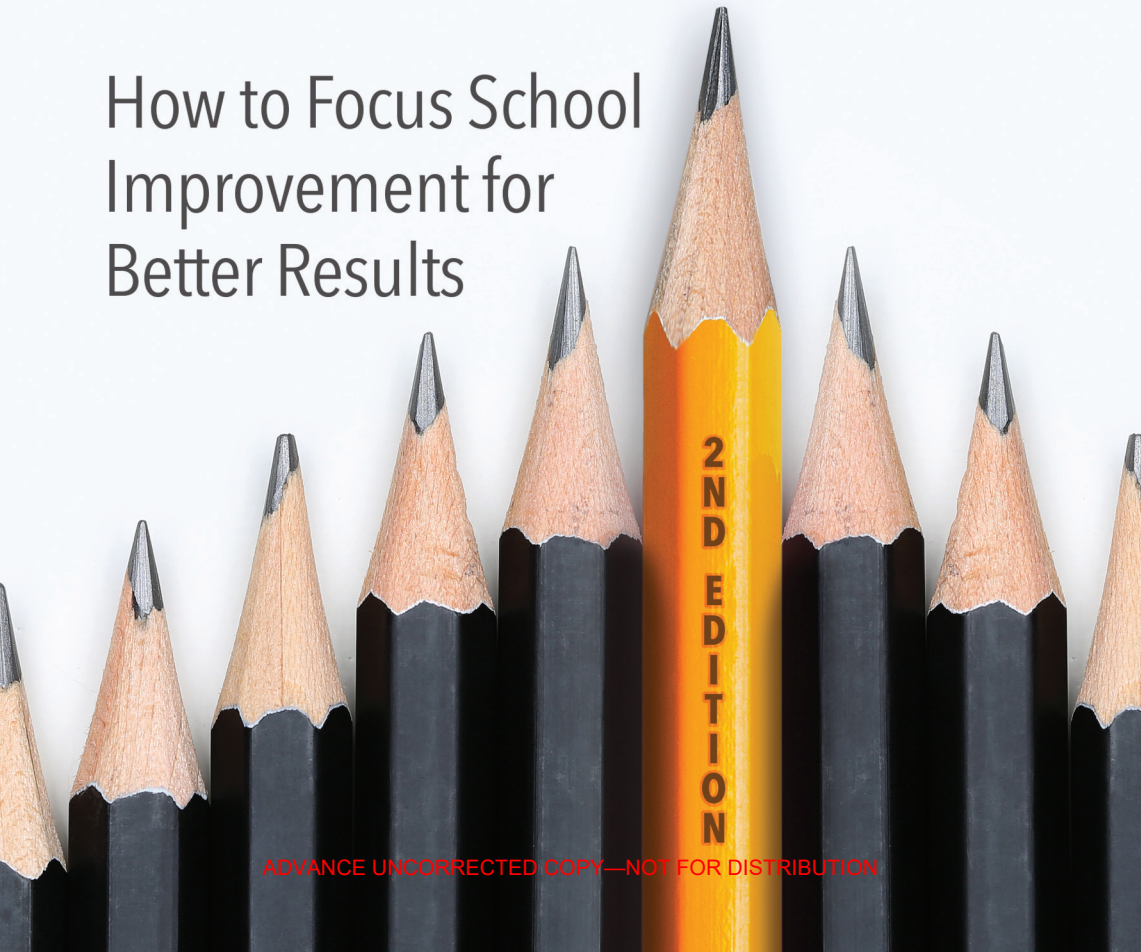


Douglas B. Reeves

# The Learning Leader

How to Focus School  
Improvement for  
Better Results



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# The Learning Leader

How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results  
2nd Edition

Acknowledgments . . . . .	vii
Introduction:	
What the Leadership for Learning Framework Will Do for You . . . . .	1
1. The Results Paradox . . . . .	11
2. Challenging Leadership Myths:	
Hope for the Exhausted Leader . . . . .	18
3. Architectural Leadership:	
Why You Cannot Do It Alone . . . . .	25
4. What Matters Most:	
From Planning to Performance . . . . .	31
5. Transforming Research into Action . . . . .	46
6. Leadership and Effective Feedback:	
The Dilemmas of Grading . . . . .	70
7. Leadership Maps:	
Applying the Leadership for Learning Framework . . . . .	84
8. The Dimensions of Leadership . . . . .	101
9. Putting It All Together:	
The Five Essential Transformations of Leadership for Learning. . .	120
Afterword . . . . .	136
Appendix A: Planning, Implementation, and Monitoring (PIM)	
School Improvement Audit and Scoring Guide . . . . .	137
Appendix B: Creating Your Leadership Map. . . . .	149
Appendix C: Daily Priorities Lists . . . . .	152
Appendix D: Guidelines for Creating Data Walls . . . . .	154
References . . . . .	157
Index . . . . .	167
About the Author . . . . .	172

# INTRODUCTION

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## What the Leadership for Learning Framework Will Do for You

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As the year 2021 dawns, leaders around the world are dealing with crisis and recovery. In the wake of the twin crises of COVID-19 and the global economic collapse, leaders are taking one of two courses of action. The first is to be resolute about values and hyperfocused on meeting the needs of students. The second is to abandon values, diminish expectations, and blame inadequate technology and staff expertise for the failure to lead. The first choice is the path toward empowerment; the second choice is the path toward futility and excuses.

One thing that neither health threats nor economic calamity will ever change is the need for value-based leadership, characterized by decision makers who share their successes, admit their mistakes quickly, and demonstrate to every stakeholder that no external condition stopped the imperative for learning. In sum, we need Learning Leaders now more than ever.

In times of crisis, a leader's time is at a premium, and it is therefore a fair question to consider why this book is worth your time. Indeed, every book must respond to the following questions from readers:

- Why me? I have specialized needs and I'm tired of the generic pabulum about education, learning, and leadership.
- Will it work? Spare me the undocumented historical speculation or the "education-lite" aphorisms. I need substance, evidence, practical applications, and 21st century research that supports every claim and recommendation.
- Why this book? Of all the books available on Amazon in March of 2020, over 60,000 address leadership and over 7,000 address leadership in education. What makes this book worthy of my time?

Here's how I would answer these questions for the book you're reading right now:

- *Why you?* If you are a leader or educator in a complex organization, then you have already come to the conclusion that the myths of the singular heroic leader and teacher are unsatisfying and fundamentally flawed. You know that the complexities of your organization and the enormity of your responsibilities demand performance, not platitudes. You want a solid intellectual framework that acknowledges the work of other researchers, but you want a new insight that will provide intellectual rigor and organizational energy. Above all, you want the answer to challenges that are facing you right now. You have an immediate need to improve communication within your organization, enhance staff morale, and boost performance at the individual and organizational level. You are modest enough to know that you cannot achieve the objectives alone, but you are sufficiently confident to know that one person can serve as a catalyst for the entire organization.
- *Will it work?* The Leadership for Learning Framework is the result of extensive fieldwork and research. As in the first edition of this book, I use authentic cases and real data to make my case. In addition to presenting research and fieldwork from each of the 50 states and more than 40 countries, this edition introduces a new study analyzing student achievement, teaching practices, and

leadership planning for more than one million students in more than 2,000 schools.

This is not a book of ivory tower theory or abstract musings. Leadership for Learning is a framework for success, not a silver bullet or feel-good exercise. The framework will encourage those who are discouraged by providing specific guidance for the most challenged schools and will challenge complacent schools to differentiate between effectiveness and luck.

- *Why this book?* There are many excellent books on leadership, and well over 100 other scholars are cited in the following pages. But there is also a lot of tripe masquerading as insight on bookstore shelves. Applying the lessons of this book will profoundly change your professional practices. From running meetings to evaluating teams to involving parents and community members in your school, the Leadership for Learning Framework will help you reconceptualize both your own role and those of your colleagues. By discovering your strengths and acknowledging your limitations, you and your organization will become more resilient, less stressed, and more successful.

## The Leadership for Learning Framework

What is the Leadership for Learning Framework? Take a look at Figure A. On the vertical axis is the traditional focus on results. High results mean you're effective and low results mean the opposite—or at least, so goes the conventional wisdom. Such a superficial analysis neglects to distinguish between those who achieve high results out of luck versus those who are especially effective. On the horizontal axis are the “antecedents of excellence”—those observable qualities in leadership, teaching, curriculum, parental engagement, and other areas that help us better understand how results are achieved.

FIGURE A The Leadership for Learning Framework		
Achievement Results	<b>Lucky</b> High results, low understanding of antecedents Replication of success unlikely	<b>Leading</b> High results, high understanding of antecedents Replication of success likely
	<b>Losing</b> Low results, low understanding of antecedents Replication of failure likely	<b>Learning</b> Low results, high understanding of antecedents Replication of success likely
	Antecedents of Excellence	

The Lucky Quadrant

Leaders and teachers in the upper left-hand quadrant of the matrix probably achieved high results before walking into school in the morning; they just don’t know how their practices influence achievement. In “Lucky” schools, educators fail to realize that anyone will achieve good results if students arrive in 1st grade reading fluently. These schools tend to treat their best teachers shabbily because they do not recognize their extraordinary qualities. Those who choose the path of least resistance, who prefer popularity over effectiveness, or who deploy a forest’s worth of worksheets will achieve the same results as those who work their hearts out, analyze individual student results, and give ample doses of love, encouragement, and coaching to their lowest-performing students.

The Losing Quadrant

In the lower left-hand quadrant are the self-defeating leaders and teachers in “Losing” schools, who keep doing the same thing and expecting different results. Not only do these teachers have low results on the vertical axis, but they are clueless about the antecedents of excellence on the horizontal axis.

One example of a school in this quadrant is the middle school I visited where over 80 percent of students were not reading on grade level. When I asked the leadership team how much time had been devoted to reading in the previous year, they were highly specific: 90 minutes every day, they said. Now that they were equipped with data showing how poorly their students were doing, surely they would do things differently, right? Wrong. When I asked how much time they would spend on reading next year, the answer was exactly the same: 90 minutes every day.

I recognize that time is not the only variable that influences literacy performance. No amount of time will make up for the impact of fragmentation inflicted on teachers. Although 90 minutes may be sufficient for the implementation of some literacy programs, it is never enough to address the simultaneous demands of a half-dozen different reading and writing programs, each of which requires 90 minutes for full implementation and none of which can achieve success when implemented simultaneously. Worse yet are the purported “intervention” programs in which students are removed from the literacy block to get “extra” literacy support.

Educators in the Losing quadrant will do whatever it takes to improve student results—except for changing the schedule, modifying the curriculum, improving teaching practices, or altering leadership behavior. I might as well tell my physician that I am committed to losing 30 pounds as long as I can maintain a steady diet of fried chicken and martinis, sleep through my exercise class, and have a tailor close at hand who will adjust the waistband of my pants. This is an attitude I call “belligerent indifference.” What better way to describe professionals who persist in leadership and teaching practices that don’t deliver results? We will not lure people out of the Losing quadrant until they confront one essential question: Is what you’re doing working?

Leaders and teachers stuck in this quadrant believe that performance failures must be the fault of anyone except themselves: the students, their parents, their ethnicity, their culture, their environment, their peer group. This is a path of determined impotence and voluntary

victimhood. At the very least, it represents a decidedly unpleasant way to lead a professional life. At the worst, it reflects a toxic blame-the-victim mentality. Nobody chooses to fail.

## **The Learning Quadrant**

The focus of this book is on the quadrants on the right-hand side of the matrix. Although educators in the lower right-hand “Learning” quadrant have not yet achieved desired results, they nevertheless possess deep insights into the antecedents of excellence. These are the leaders and teachers who will look at data and, rather than blaming the students or expressing bewilderment at their lack of success, dig deeply into the data on student performance and teaching practices. Whereas those in the Losing quadrant leave it at “beats me—must be the kids,” those in the Learning quadrant tend to follow this kind of thought process:

I’ve analyzed the data deeply, and here are my preliminary conclusions. First, although our average scores are disappointing, I’ve noticed that we have exceptional success in some isolated areas. Mr. Jasper’s 4th graders excel in geometry, and Ms. Fitch’s 2nd graders made enormous gains in vocabulary. I’ve conducted some extensive observations of both of their classes and noted that they are engaging in some remarkably different teaching and classroom assessment practices. Our collective challenge is to conduct a treasure hunt and find other pockets of excellence and then determine how we can identify, document, and replicate these practices.

## **The Leading Quadrant**

Those in the “Leading” quadrant enjoy an optimal combination of high results and a deep understanding of the antecedents of excellence, yet they are perpetually seeking opportunities to improve. “Even if more than 80 percent of our students are meeting state standards, we still have a lot of work to do,” say these leaders. “Not only do we need to work on the 15 to 20 percent of our students who are not yet proficient, but we



clearly need to challenge those students for whom our state standards are a floor, not a ceiling.”

The Learning and Leading quadrants offer hard work but scant recognition. I have seen very hardworking educators and leaders who are clearly in the Learning quadrant but who have not yet attained the results that their governing bodies and policymakers demand. The central message of this book is that it is precisely at this very frustrating intersection of hard work with little external reward that we must persevere.

Some readers may reply, “This is all quite nice, but all anyone cares about are test scores—the results—not how we got there.” That sentiment may reflect the testing craze of the late 20th and early 21st century, but it is not an accurate reflection of national policy, at least in the United States, since 2017. The Every Student Succeeds Act explicitly repealed broad swaths of No Child Left Behind and offered states the opportunity to create accountability systems focused on learning—not just on scores (DuFour, Reeves, & DuFour, 2017).

It has become popular to advocate for the social-emotional learning of students. I believe we must pursue with equal vigor the social-emotional learning of adults by providing them with the professional support and emotional nurturing they need to persevere in their work.

## Three Takeaways

There are three main takeaways from the research in this book: that leadership, teaching, and adult actions matter; that certain leadership actions are proven to raise student achievement and educational equity; and that leadership is neither a unitary skill nor a solitary activity.

### Leadership, Teaching, and Other Adult Actions Matter

This is no mere aphorism; it’s the statistical truth. Although it is true that demographic variables are directly linked to student achievement, adult actions, including the professional practices of teachers and

decision-making leaders, are far more important (Chenoweth, 2017, 2019; Reeves, 2016b, 2019; Zavadsky, 2009, 2012).

## **Certain Leadership Actions Are Proven to Raise Student Achievement and Educational Equity**

Our research suggests that school improvement plans need to include specific, actionable elements if they are to succeed. The three most important elements are inquiry, implementation, and monitoring:

- *Inquiry* is the degree to which leaders correctly analyze the underlying causes of deficiencies and successes in student achievement and equity. Our analysis makes it clear that successful inquiry attributes causes to adults in the educational system—teachers, school leaders, and policymakers—whereas unsuccessful inquiry attributes causes to students. In other words, “blame the victim” is not only a morally reprehensible position but also statistically untrue.
- *Implementation* is the degree to which school improvement processes are implemented at the student and classroom level. Successful planners recognize that implementation is a continuous process with varying degrees of effectiveness rather than simply something we either do or don’t do.
- *Monitoring* is an essential component of school improvement. The research is clear: frequency of monitoring is strongly associated with improvements in educational achievement and equity (Barabási, 2018; Centola, 2018; Reeves, 2019). It is important, however, to distinguish between appropriate and insightful monitoring (i.e., assessment) and actions that merely function as compliance drills for external authorities (i.e., testing). Assessment is designed to improve teaching and learning, to provide immediate feedback for students and teachers, and to be narrowly focused on specific objectives. Testing, by contrast, is designed to evaluate, and what feedback it provides is typically late, unfocused, and destructive. There is a broad consensus that many classrooms are

“over-tested” as a result of national, state, and district mandates devoid of practical classroom insights, but I would suggest that those same classrooms are also woefully “under-assessed.”

## **Leadership Is neither a Unitary Skill Set nor a Solitary Activity**

The Leadership for Learning Framework engages a variety of people throughout the organization, whether or not their official job titles suggest a leadership role. If you are conducting a book study with your colleagues, you can download a free book study guide at [www.ASCD.org](http://www.ASCD.org). You can also read and subscribe to our blog at [www.CreativeLeadership.net](http://www.CreativeLeadership.net), where you'll find research, case studies, and practical ideas of how to make the Leadership for Learning Framework a reality for you.

## **A Roadmap to the Book**

The first chapter introduces the results paradox, the principle that says when we exclusively focus on a measure, systems will find ways to elevate that measure, regardless of the impact on other vital parts of the system. This is followed by direct challenges to prevailing leadership myths, some of which have remarkable endurance despite decades of contrary evidence.

We then explore the collaboration imperative. Although movies are made about heroic leaders and teachers who burn themselves to a cinder in the pursuit of their goals, heroism is not a sustainable strategy. Particularly in the nation's most challenging schools, leadership turnover—and the accompanying negative impact on staff morale—is a persistent phenomenon. Perhaps a hero can win a battle here and there, but it takes a team to prevail over the long term.

Subsequent chapters include a focus on what matters most: the specific leadership actions that are most linked to improved student results. Toward the end of the book, we consider the emotionally charged issues of grading and feedback. Even in the spring of 2020, as COVID-19 claimed tens of thousands of lives, an astonishing volume of Twitter and

email is devoted to grading. If that's a critical leadership issue even in the midst of a global pandemic and economic crisis (as it was 20 years ago), then it's logical to assume it will still be an issue requiring clear leadership in future years.

We conclude with some practical tools that help you apply the lessons of this book (including the Leadership Map) and the appendixes, which provide useful tools and reproducible handouts to help leaders and teachers transform research into action. In order to become a Learning Leader, results are not enough. And it's precisely that subject to which we now turn our attention.

# 1

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## The Results Paradox

This chapter is about the limits of “results”—or what passes for results in the worlds of business, education, and national policy. Leaders respond to what is measured, especially when what is measured determines their professional longevity. Unfortunately, as examples from business, medicine, and education show, the maxim “what gets measured gets done” has disastrous effects. We pursue success by clamoring for results, and that pursuit often leads to calamity.

A well-known aphorism, variously attributed to Mark Twain, Herbert Hoover, Will Rogers, Josh Billings, Walter Mondale, and others, goes as follows: “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble, it’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.” What are the things in education that we know for sure that “just ain’t so”? After decades of test-based accountability, you might think that standardized test scores are one of those things we know for sure are not accurate reflections of teaching, leadership, and learning.

Indeed, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) essentially repealed the test-based regimen of No Child Left Behind, giving states ample latitude to devise new accountability indicators beyond standardized test scores to reflect the quality of student learning. Yet in the 2020s, two decades after the signing of No Child Left Behind in 2001, most jurisdictions tenaciously cling to testing as the best way to measure student success (DuFour, Reeves, & DuFour, 2017). Even the completely discredited method of evaluating teachers based on test scores remains popular in the evidence-free environment of educational policy (Ross, 2019).

## Lessons from Gambling

As tax revenues plummet—when schools and other governmental entities face financial shortfalls and legislators are reluctant to raise taxes to pay for vital services such as schools—there’s an easy and seductive answer: gambling. After all, it’s voluntary—nobody is forced to enter a casino or play the lottery, and it’s consistently lucrative for state and local governments. At least until it isn’t. Charles Ponzi, for whom his eponymous scheme is named, was arrested in 1920 when authorities finally realized his scheme consisted of taking the fortune of one person to pay illusory profits to previous investors. More than a century later, Ponzi’s fundamental insight—that people love free money—prevails. Only now, it is the authorities and not the criminal underworld who embrace his logic.

Forty-eight states (all except Hawaii and Utah) have embraced legalized gambling as a source of revenue, jobs, and economic development (Online United States Casinos, 2020). The appeal is seductive—it’s free money to the states, paid voluntarily by people who choose to gamble. No involuntary taxes need to be levied, as people will line up to play the slots, buy lottery tickets, and fork over their hard-earned cash to share with the casino owners, the state, and their lucky fellow players. Add to the mix heartwarming stories about the down-on-her-luck waitress or the hardworking hourly laborer who became rich overnight, and you have the makings of the perfect solution to strained state coffers.

More money for the states, no need for taxes, and everybody wins! Except they don’t (Frum, 2014). Actual revenues have consistently fallen short of predicted revenues (Cazentre, 2019; Rosen, 2019; Schmelz, 2020), and no wonder! Massachusetts built a multimillion-dollar casino because too many Bay State residents were taking their gambling dollars to Connecticut. But it doesn’t take a Harvard economics professor to explain that when the demand (the amount of available gambling dollars) is constant and the supply (the number of casinos) expands, the amount of dollars available to each casino will decline.

But what about the heartwarming stories of the down-on-her-luck waitress and hard-scrabble laborer who became millionaires? That's no miracle. These stories prevail because low-income people are far more likely to play the lottery, put money in the slots, and play the game, participating in a regressive tax scheme because state authorities are too cowardly to tax the wealthy—choosing instead to take money from the poor.

What does this have to do with education? A great deal, as we shall see. Where popular sayings are concerned, there are many variations on the concept of being driven by results alone: "Every system is perfectly designed to get the results it gets," "What gets measured gets done," "You inspect what you expect." If the expectation and measured variable is revenue, then the system will achieve it, no matter the cost. In the case of gambling, the evidence is clear that the social costs in terms of crime, addiction, unemployment, mental health, homelessness, and a variety of other consequences far outweigh the gain in revenue (Frum, 2014; Hyde, 2015). But if revenue is all you measure, then revenue is what you will get. After all, results are all that matter.

Educational results have been similarly disrupted. When states started to measure high school graduation rate as an important indicator of success, schools miraculously reported improvements. Students who had failed classes were able to make up classes and, in a flash, attain the credits necessary for high school graduation. I watched one school in which students were able to achieve in three hours the credit that previously required a full semester of work. This is no more credible than the state treasurer who assures the governor and legislature that the coffers will miraculously grow by millions of dollars without raising taxes.

At the elementary school level, similar distortions result from a focus on results. If reading and math are all that matter, then we forget about science and social studies, notwithstanding the research that concludes that reading comprehension is best achieved with background knowledge in the content areas (Willingham, 2018). And what of the nontested grades and subjects? The evidence is overwhelming that early

childhood education has a profound and multigenerational impact on learning (Reeves, 2020a; Zannoni & Johnson, 2019), yet when accountability starts only at 3rd grade, prekindergarten and kindergarten are systematically ignored and devalued in many systems.

The lessons of history are clear: The “results paradox” shows us that when we focus only on results without focusing on the causes behind the results, the achievements we celebrate will be illusory. If the only results that matter are stock prices, we reward accounting fraud, as was the case with Enron in the late 20th century. If the only results that matter are test scores, then we reward cheating or, at the very least, a distorted and narrowly focused curriculum.

The pernicious impact of the results paradox goes well beyond mismeasurement and distortion. There is a real effect on students’ lives. For example, if the only objective is improved test scores, it’s much faster and easier to have underperforming students drop out of school than to craft effective intervention programs for them. It is the same when the illusory rewards of gambling focus only on short-term revenues and ignore the long-term social consequences on the health, housing, employment, and family disruptions that gambling leaves in its wake.

Although the folly of gambling is easy to spot in hindsight, today’s leaders in business, education, nonprofit, and government organizations still cling to their illusions (Buckingham & Goodall, 2019), believing that some mystical insight bathed in the language of precision can help them accurately evaluate the performance of their peers. Yet we all intuitively know what a reliable scale looks like. If you were to step on the scale and it read 150 pounds one day, 410 pounds the next day, and 75 pounds the day after that, you would know that the problem was with the scale rather than you. But this kind of thing happens all the time in education: the very same teacher can be rated as highly effective one year, ineffective the next, and then highly effective again the year after that. This wild inaccuracy is replicated around the nation as legislators and policymakers pursue the illusion of accurate evaluation without a scintilla of reliability.



The prevalence of high-stakes testing *could* lead to improved teaching, leadership, and learning—but it could also lead to cheating. There is no excuse for cheating, but the fact that educators caught in cheating scandals received longer prison sentences than white-collar criminals involved in multibillion-dollar fraud reflects how warped our sense of justice and priorities has become. Let us stipulate that cheating—either in business or in education—is bad. But there is little evidence that prison or public humiliation is the answer. Rather, what we must do is reconsider the meaning of the term *results*.

## The Limits of Results

This book is not a screed against testing, and I certainly don't mean to suggest that focusing on results is inappropriate. Rather, I believe that results can be improved by applying the Leadership for Learning Framework, which posits that multiple factors (teaching, leadership, resources, policy, parents, community support) affect student results. Here's how Mike Schmoker, author of *Leading with Focus* (2016), once framed the issue for me:

When you are really obsessed with results, you don't just stare at the data and display some colorful charts. You don't just talk about what the kids are doing. You display courage and you are willing to do unpopular things. The only schools that truly get results are the ones that say, "I know that the buffer serves to protect teachers from outside inspection or scrutiny. Nonetheless, I'm going to inspect and scrutinize, and I'll encourage my colleagues to do this as much as they can themselves. I'll ask the uncomfortable questions, make sure certain things are happening, and confront the people who are not doing them. I'll do it as tactfully and painlessly as possible, but if the good things are not happening, there will be a confrontation"... We have to shock the system. We are required to expose the system as being ineffectual. If enough people say the emperor has no clothes, we will prove it. But as things are now, we don't even pretend to improve most of our schools, we only talk about it.

Schmoker's pessimism is not without merit. The curricular anarchy of our system allows teachers to take credit for student achievements that are really due to factors like affluence or parental involvement and to blame poor achievement on hormones, television, or video games rather than inadequate instruction. In such a system, leaders elevate the care, comfort, and convenience of adults above the interests of children.

It is necessary that we challenge dominant notions of leadership success. As I've noted in writing about what I call the "results paradox" (Reeves, 2005),

The more myopic the focus on results, the lower the probability that the results will improve. An important corollary is this: A myopic focus on process rather than results yields neither improved results nor improved processes. Only a comprehensive focus . . . leads an organization to achieve an optimal, multifaceted view of both results and the antecedents of excellence. (pp. 4–5)

## The Limits of Intelligence

Dissatisfaction with analytical intelligence as a leadership characteristic is hardly new. Howard Gardner (2006) suggested that the traditional view of intelligence as a unitary element, commonly called *g*, for "general intelligence," is inadequate. Sternberg and Sternberg (2018) have provided an enormous research base to support the contention that practical intelligence is distinct from analytical intelligence, and the former is vital to survival in any walk of life. Yet even though some school curricula nod to the notion of multiple intelligences, the prevalence of analytical intelligence remains predominant in graduate schools and, in particular, leadership training programs.

The link between emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness was documented by Daniel Goleman (2019) and Richard Boyatzis and colleagues (Boyatzis, Smith, & Van Oosten, 2019). The latter cite more than three dozen studies on what effective change looks like and how individuals and organizations can promote meaningful change. Despite

the incessant talk about different kinds of intelligences, the prevailing practices in leadership training, development, and evaluation are firmly rooted in favor of the concept of general intelligence and are therefore inadequate.

When there is clear and convincing evidence of leadership strategies that are effective in motivating staff and stakeholders, and there is equally clear evidence on the characteristics of effective educational leadership, it is worth asking why leadership myths are so persistent. In the next chapter, we will address how to challenge these pernicious and counterproductive myths.

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# Index

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The letter *f* following a page locator denotes a figure.

- achievement, factors affecting
  - data monitoring, 40, 41*f*
  - leadership teams attitudes and beliefs, 44*f*
  - nonfiction writing, 48–49
  - school focus on, 47–48
  - teachers on, 34
- achievement, factors correlated with
  - demographics, 42–43
  - gains in, 33–34
  - leadership actions, 8–9
  - plan format, 36, 37*f*
- achievement gaps, 20–22
- analytical leadership, 115–117
- announcements, time-wasting, 65
- assessment. *See also* grades
  - collaborative scoring of student work, 51–52
  - frequent common, 49–50
  - of leaders, 102
  - reliability in, 133
  - time limits in, 133
  - time-wasting, 68
  - validity in, 133
- behavior, 82–83
- Being Wrong* (Schulz), 102
- bell curve, transforming to the mountain curve, 129–135, 130*f*, 132*f*, 134*f*
- change
  - buy-in required for significant, 57
  - challenge of, 60
  - collaboration for, 62, 62*f*, 63*f*
  - time, allowing for, 61–62
- change resisters, irrationality of, 56–57
- Citizenship Grades, 83
- cognitive distortions in education
  - buy-in required for change, 57
  - challenging, 55–56
  - change resisters are irrational, 56–57
  - on perfection for plan implementation, 60
  - on perfect research for plan success, 57–59
  - on teacher helplessness, 54–56
  - on unsuccessful teachers, 56
- collaboration
  - change and, 62, 62*f*, 63*f*
  - in group success, 116
  - in scoring student work, 51–52

- collaborative leadership, 113–115
- Common Core State Standards, 123
- communication
  - hierarchical, 117–118
  - personal, 118–119
- communication skills, 107–108
- communicative leadership, 117–119
- confirmation bias, 54
- COVID-19 pandemic, 26, 123
- culture, 33
- Daily Prioritized Task List, 152–153
- data analysis, constructive, 50–51
- data monitoring, achievement and, 40, 41*f*
- data walls, guidelines for creating, 154–156
- decision making, perceptions of, 115*f*
- decision-making structure, levels in the, 113–114, 116*f*
- demographics-achievement correlation, 42–43
- efficacy, 34–35
- emotional intelligence, 106
- empathy through inquiry, 108–109
- equity
  - data monitoring and, 40, 41*f*
  - leadership and, 8–9
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 11
- frantic leadership, transforming to focused, 127–128
- gambling, 12–15
- girls, grading practices for, 76
- grade point averages, 72–74, 73*f*
- grades. *See also* assessment
  - meaning of, 72–76
  - grades—(*continued*)
    - performance relationship to, 74–76, 74*f*, 75*f*
    - as punishment, 79
  - grading practices
    - averages, 78–80, 79*f*, 81*f*
    - de-privatizing, 71–72
    - effective, 71
    - gender and, 76
    - kindergarten model, 82–83
    - relevance of, 70
    - zero, use of, 77–78
  - grading systems
    - distortions in, 75
    - six assessment, four-point scale, 81–82
  - groups, wisdom of, 26–27
  - incivility, workplace, 107
  - inquiry
    - empathy through, 108–109
    - for school improvement, 8
  - inquiry score, PIM study, 43–44
  - instruction, cross-disciplinary, 52–53
  - intelligence, limits of, 16–17
  - islands of excellence, transforming to systemic impact, 121–124, 124*f*
  - kindergarten teachers, 82–83
  - Law of Initiative Fatigue, 63–64, 64*f*
  - leaders
    - assessing, 102
    - key requirements for, 23
    - role of, 103
  - leaders, characteristics of effective
    - confidentiality, respect for, 108
    - empathy through inquiry, 108–109
    - focus, 120, 127–128
    - listening, 107–108

- leaders, characteristics of effective—  
(*continued*)  
passion, 109  
questioning, 117  
time management, 127
- leadership  
achievement, equity and, 8–9  
essential challenge of, 24  
pace of, 101  
perfection model, 101–102
- leadership, myths of  
analytical models, 20–22  
historical models, 19  
relationship models, 23  
a solitary enterprise, 26–27
- leadership, types of  
analytical, 115–117  
architectural, 27–30  
collaborative, 113–115  
communicative, 117–119  
concentrated, 31  
distributed, 29  
reflective, 112–113  
relational, 105–109  
systems, 109–111  
visionary, 103–105
- leadership for learning, essential  
transformations  
bell curve to the mountain curve,  
129–135, 130*f*, 132*f*, 134*f*  
frantic to focused leadership,  
127–128  
introduction, 120–121  
islands of excellence to systemic  
impact, 121–124, 124*f*  
nodes to hubs, 124–127, 126*f*  
private practice to public prac-  
tice, 128
- Leadership for Learning Framework  
(LLF)  
functions, 84
- Leadership for Learning Framework  
(LLF)—(*continued*)  
leading quadrant, 6–7  
learning quadrant, 6  
losing quadrant, 4–6  
lucky quadrant, 4  
overview, 4*f*, 84*f*  
study guide URL, 9
- leadership journals, essential ques-  
tions for, 112–113
- Leadership Map  
in action example, 87–92, 88*f*,  
89*f*, 90*f*, 91*f*, 92*f*  
benefits, 86–87  
creating a, 86, 149–151  
essential questions to consider,  
99–100  
horizontal axis, 86–87  
nodes, 85  
requirements for using a, 86  
vertical axis, 85–86
- Leadership Map node patterns  
challenging continuum, 94,  
95*f*  
cluster patterns, 92, 93*f*  
continuum patterns, 93–94, 95*f*,  
96–97, 96*f*  
factors influencing, 98–99  
resilient continuum, 94, 95*f*  
scattered patterns, 97, 98*f*, 124*f*  
victim-playing continuum, 94,  
96, 96*f*
- Leadership Performance Matrix,  
25
- leadership tools  
Daily Prioritized Task List,  
152–153  
Project Task Analysis, 153
- Leading with Focus* (Schmoker), 15
- lines, wasting time in, 127
- listening, value of, 107–108



- meetings, wasting time in, 65–66, 127–128
- Merchants of Doubt* (Oreskes & Conway), 26
- mission statements, 32
- monitoring for school improvement, 8–9
- mountain curve, 129–135, 130*f*, 132*f*, 134*f*
- myths, belief in, 18. *See also* leadership, myths of
- No Child Left Behind, 11, 123
- node patterns, Leadership Map
  - cluster patterns, 92, 93*f*
  - continuum patterns, 93–94, 95*f*, 96–97, 96*f*
  - factors influencing, 98–99
  - scattered patterns, 97, 98*f*, 124*f*
- nodes
  - Leadership Map, 85
  - transforming to hubs, 124–127, 126*f*
- nonfiction writing, 48–49
- normal distribution, 130–131
- The 100-Day Leader* (Reeves & Eaker), 101
- The One Thing You Need to Know* (Buckingham), 24
- paperwork, time-wasting, 66–67
- Planning, Implementation, and Monitoring (PIM) study
  - about the, 36–37
  - audit and scoring guide, 137–148
  - correlation analysis, 38–40
  - data sources, 37–38
  - demographics-achievement correlation, 42–43
  - Planning, Implementation, and Monitoring (PIM) study—(*continued*)
    - inquiry score, 43–44
    - limitations, 41–42
    - plan format-achievement relationship, 37*f*
    - reliability, 38
    - research context, 40
    - validity, 38
- plans/planning
  - achievement and, 36, 37*f*
  - cognitive distortions regarding, 57–60
  - implementation, organization needed prior to, 60
  - strategic, 31–34
  - successful, 8–9, 57–60
  - ugly, virtues of, 35–36
- private practice, transforming to public, 71–72, 128
- professional learning communities (PLCs), 53–54
- Project Task Analysis, 153
- Race to the Top, 123
- reflective leadership, 112–113
- results
  - focusing on, result of, 13–15
  - limits of, 15–16
  - truth of, 11
- results paradox, 14, 16
- schools, characteristics of successful
  - achievement focus, 47–48
  - data analysis, constructive, 50–51
  - frequent common assessments, 49–50
  - instruction, cross-disciplinary, 52–53
  - nonfiction writing emphasis, 48–49

- 
- schools, characteristics of successful—  
    (*continued*)  
        organized as professional learning communities, 53–54  
        student work, collaborative scoring of, 51–52  
science fair for grownups, 59, 156  
self-esteem, 106  
*Shakespeare in a Divided America*  
    (Shapiro), 54  
study halls, 67  
*The Surprising Science of Meetings*  
    (Rogelberg), 65  
systems leadership, 109–111  
  
teacher helplessness, 54–56  
teachers, unsuccessful, 56  
  
teaching practices, changing private to public, 71–72, 128  
Temple of Concord, 28–30, 28*f*  
time, change and, 61–62  
time management methods, 65–68, 127–128, 133  
transiency, 101  
treasure hunt, 50  
  
*Upstream* (Heath), 18–19  
  
vision statements, 32, 104–105  
*Vivid Vision* (Herold), 32  
  
why, asking, 116  
writing, nonfiction, 48–49

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## About the Author

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