

BUILDING A NEW STRUCTURE FOR SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

By Richard F. Elmore

*Professor, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, and
Senior Research Fellow, Consortium for Policy Research in Education*

How Did We Get Here — the Bane of “Loose-Coupling”

Early in the development of public schooling, the United States, through local elites and national opinion leaders, opted for a form of organization based on locally centralized school bureaucracy, governed by elected boards, with relatively low status (mostly female) teachers working in relative isolation from each other under the supervision of (mostly male) administrators whose expertise was thought to lie mainly in their mastery of administrative rather than pedagogical skills. (*Tyack 1974, Tyack and Hansot 1982*)

By the 1960s and early 1970s, analysts of this institutional structure had converged on a model that came to be called “loose-coupling.” (*Weick 1976; Rowan 1990; Meyer and Rowan 1992*) Derived from institutional sociology, this view, in brief, posits that the “technical core” of education — detailed decisions about what should be taught at any given time, how it should be taught, what students should be expected to learn at any given time, how they should be grouped within classrooms for purposes of instruction, what they should be required to do to demonstrate their knowledge, and, perhaps most importantly, how their learning should be evaluated — resides in individual classrooms, not in the organizations that surround them.

Furthermore, the model posited that knowledge at the technical core is weak and uncertain. (*Bidwell 1965; Lortie 1975*) It cannot be clearly translated into reproducible behaviors, it requires a high degree of individual judgment, and it is not susceptible to reliable external evaluation. Therefore, the loose-coupling argument continues, the administrative superstructure of the organization — principals, board members, and administrators — exists to “buffer” the weak technical core of teaching from outside inspection, interference, or disruption.

Administration in education, then, has come to mean not the management of instruction but the management of the structures and processes around instruction. That which cannot be directly managed must, in this view, be protected from external scrutiny. Buffering consists of creating structures and procedures around the technical core of teaching that, at the same time,

(1) protect teachers from outside intrusions in their highly uncertain and murky work, and (2) create the appearance of rational management of the technical core, so as to allay the uncertainties of the public about the actual quality of legitimacy of what is happening in the technical core. This buffering creates what institutional theorists call a "logic of confidence" between public schools and their constituents. Local board members, system-level administrators, and school administrators perform the ritualistic tasks of organizing, budgeting, managing, and dealing with disruptions inside and outside the system, all in the name of creating and maintaining public confidence in the institutions of public education. Teachers, working in isolated classrooms, under highly uncertain conditions, manage the technical core. This division of labor has been amazingly constant over the past century.

De-romanticizing Leadership

Leadership is the guidance and direction of instructional improvement. This is a deliberately deromanticized, focused, and instrumental definition. Leadership tends to be romanticized in American culture, especially in the culture of schooling, both because we subscribe heavily to trait theories of success — people succeed because of their personal characteristics, more than because of effort, skill, and knowledge — and because we like our heroes to have qualities that we think we don't have. The problem with this romanticized theory of leadership is that the supply of character traits we associate with "good" leaders is, by definition, limited, or we wouldn't envy and admire them so much in other people. Also, character traits are much less amenable to influence by education, training, and practice than are knowledge and skill. Deromanticizing leadership would have a very positive effect on the quality of schools.

A definition of leadership in terms of instruction is also far more focused than most conceptions of leadership in education. Reading the literature on the principalship can be overwhelming, because it suggests that principals should embody all the traits and skills that remedy all the defects of the schools in which they work. They should be in close touch with their communities, inside and outside the school; they should, above all, be masters of human relations. Attending to all the conflicts and disagreements that might arise among students, among teachers, and among anyone else who chooses to create conflict in the school; they should be both respectful of the authority of district administrators and crafty at deflecting administrative intrusions that disrupt the autonomy of teachers; they should keep an orderly school; and so on.

Somewhere on the list one usually finds a reference to instruction, couched in strategically vague language, so as to include both those who are genuinely knowledgeable about and interested in instruction and those who regard it as a distraction from the main work of administration. But why not focus leadership on instructional improvement, and define everything else as instrumental to it? The skills and knowledge that matter in leadership, under this definition, are those that can be connected to, or lead directly to, the improvement of instruction and student performance. Standards-based reform forces this question. It makes leadership instrumental to improvement.

The leadership envisioned here differs from that typically described in the literature on management — leaders, or higher-level managers, who exercise “control” over certain functions in the organization. There are, to be sure, certain routine organizational functions that require control — bus schedules, payroll, accounting, etc. But the term “control” applied to school improvement is a dubious concept because one does not “control” improvement processes so much as one guides them and provides direction for them, since most of the knowledge required for improvement must inevitably reside in the people who deliver instruction, not in the people who manage them. Control implies that the controller knows exactly what the controllee (if you will) should do, whereas guidance and direction imply some degree of shared expertise and some degree of difference in the level and kind of expertise among individuals. It is this problem of the distribution of knowledge required for large-scale improvement that creates the imperative for the development of models of distributed leadership.

The basic idea of distributed leadership¹ is not very complicated. In any organized system, people typically specialize, or develop particular competencies, that are related to their predispositions, interests, aptitudes, prior knowledge, skills, and specialized roles. Furthermore, in any organized system, competency varies considerably among people in similar roles; some principals and teachers, for example, are simply better at doing some things than others, either as a function of their personal preferences, their experience, or their knowledge.

¹ For a more extensive treatment of the theoretical underpinnings of the idea of distributed leadership, see (Spillane, Halverson et al. 1999)

