Leadership for Lasting Reform

Principals and teachers travel through three phases as their schools build high leadership capacity that sustains improvement.

Linda Lambert

A number of years ago, as I anticipated my fourth and final year as principal of San Jose Middle School in Novato, California, vice principal Joel Montero and I discussed our concern about the sustainability of the good work that members of the school community had done together. Teacher leadership in the school was strong—but was it strong enough to survive a major change in administration?

To ease the transition, Joel and I decided to switch many of our roles. During that school year, I found out how difficult the job of vice principal was. And Joel prepared himself magnificently for the principalship that he assumed the following September. For the next 15 years, every principal at San Jose Middle School came from within the school. San Jose continues to be at the forefront of school improvement today.

In the meantime, as I moved on to other administrative roles, the challenge of sustainability continued to intrigue me. What had been the pathway to sustainable school excellence at San Jose? Did other successful schools follow the same pathway? Working with thousands of school leaders over the years as an instructor, coach, advisor, and presenter, I have encountered the same question again and again: Once you create a great school, how do you maintain a close approximation of that high quality for the long term?

Study of High Leadership Capacity Schools

Some colleagues and I recently set out to discover how 15 schools made the

© Lisa Henderling/Images.com

journey toward *high leadership capacity,* which we defined as broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership.[1] I had worked personally with some of the schools in the study; other schools were nominated by colleagues working with initiatives that emphasized the characteristics of high leadership capacity schools. We gathered information for the study by visiting the schools and interviewing principals and teachers. Through a set of open-ended questions, we invited participants to describe the leadership capacity of their schools, including obstacles and factors affecting sustainability. In two daylong conversations, our group of researchers identified patterns, made inferences, and drew conclusions about what promotes high leadership capacity.

The participating schools were located in North Carolina, Ohio, Missouri, Kansas, Texas, California, Washington, and Alberta, Canada. They included 3 high schools, 1 junior high school, and 11 elementary schools. All shared key elements related to leadership capacity. At each school, a system of shared governance and distributed leadership supported a dynamic leadership culture built around a vision-driven, student-focused conceptual framework for school improvement. Student performance data served as the heart of each school's inquiry approach to school improvement. Each school had design features—structures, processes, and roles—that promoted leadership capacity.

Most of the schools in the study were urban and high-poverty. One-third of them had consistently been high-performing schools and continued to show improvement; two-thirds had transformed themselves from low-performing schools to successful schools in the last few years. Some had hit bottom and had nowhere to go but up. For example, in 1999, Vantage Elementary[2] earned 315—one of the lowest ratings in California—on the state's Academic Performance Index (API), a numeric scale that defines a school's performance level on the basis of statewide testing results. Even the school's mascot—a trout—was uninspiring. Despite the fact that the nearby creek had hosted an occasional trout decades ago, this mascot evoked little school pride. By 2002, however, Vantage Elementary boasted significantly higher student performance, having raised its API to 447. Teacher professionalism had improved, and the trout mascot had been replaced by a bold graphic that symbolized the school's renewed hope and pride.

Once you create a great school, how do you maintain a close approximation of that high quality for the long term?

In each of the 15 schools we studied, the principal played a major role in building shared leadership and a professional culture. As one principal commented,

> I'm trying to lead for whenever I may not be here any longer—by building both the capacity of systems through school design choices and people's capacity for leadership.

Evolving Phases of School Improvement

Of course, the principals in the study schools differed in their personalities and in their management strengths and weaknesses. But all the principals shared certain characteristics that contributed to their schools' evolving culture of leadership, including

- Understanding of self and clarity of values;
- A strong belief in equity and the democratic process;
- Strategic thought about the evolution of school improvement;
- A vulnerable persona;
- Knowledge of the work of teaching and learning; and
- The ability to develop capacity in colleagues and in the organization.

These characteristics played out differently during three major phases of development that we defined as *instructive, transitional,* and *high capacity.* The three phases did not end and begin with clean borders; on the contrary, many behaviors emerged, dissolved, and reappeared as the struggle to build leadership capacity progressed.

The Instructive Phase

School improvement begins with a period of organization as the school initiates new collaborative processes that relate to norms, teams, vision, use of data, shared expectations, and ways of working together. In the instructive phase, the principal's roles are to insist on attention to results, start conversations, solve difficult problems, challenge assumptions, confront incompetence, focus work, establish structures and processes that engage colleagues, teach about new practices, and articulate beliefs that eventually get woven into the fabric of the school.

The principal of Kinder Elementary School jump-started change by gathering teachers together on a borrowed houseboat to develop a school vision to which they could all commit. At Johnson Junior High School, the principal helped establish a steering committee and cadres to involve everyone in the process of leadership.

Principals in the study reported that they encountered some patterns of teacher resistance, disengagement, and dependence during this stage. More than one principal struggled with a staff message of "You just tell us your vision for the school, and we'll act on it."

Most of the principals displayed "strength" as a purposeful strategy during this phase. Although they believed that they needed to demonstrate assertive leadership to jump-start the process of moving out of low-performance status, they also understood that this assertive leadership was a temporary stage in building schoolwide leadership capacity.

The Transitional Phase

During the transitional phase, the principal's role is to gradually let go, releasing some authority and control while providing continued support and coaching as teachers take on more responsibility. Teachers often feel tempted to abandon the effort at this point—it seems too hard. The principal provides support by continuing the conversations, keeping a hand in the process (rather than accepting quick fixes), coaching, and problem-solving within an atmosphere of trust and safety. To navigate this phase successfully, the principal must engage in a strategic thought process, understanding where the school culture is going and when to pull back as teachers emerge as leaders.

In the study schools, teachers emerged as leaders at varying rates. Many were more than ready to think differently about their work and expand their identities to incorporate teacher leadership; others moved more cautiously and deliberately. Because of the wide range of teachers' development as leaders, principals often found the transitional phase to be the most challenging. Some teachers still clung to their dependent behaviors, expecting the principal to continue to play an instructive role; other teachers were awakening as more independent professionals; and still others had advanced to the high leadership capacity stage and displayed self-organizing behaviors.

The transitional phase was a time of epiphanies for both principals and teachers in our study. The principal of Caravell High School noted that her strategy of strength may have been getting in the way of others' growth. As a result of this insight, she pulled back, encouraging more collaboration and peer conversations to diminish the staff's reliance on formal authority. When the California State Department of Education identified Caravell as a low-performing school, a dramatic turning point occurred. The principal laid out the harsh reality of the school's low-performing status at a faculty meeting and declared, "I don't know what to do. We'll have to figure this out together."

They did. Teachers and parents joined action teams to examine student performance data and student work, conducted action research to discover new data, developed a cadre of peer coaches, and expanded their staff development program. Teachers abandoned their isolated practice by turning to one another.

The willingness of the principal to be vulnerable was a crucial motivator during the transitional phase. When teachers became aware that the principal didn't claim to have all the answers, they actively increased their participation.

Study principals provided encouragement to teachers during this phase through both direct and subtle approaches. The principal of Garson Elementary School framed the need to address the achievement gap more aggressively:

> Just remember that a change in practice or instruction will always

Principal's Role in High Leadership Capacity Schools

Displays the following personal attributes and behaviors:

- Learns continually.
- Thinks strategically.
- Is value- and vision-driven.
- Continues and expands behaviors initiated in earlier phases.

Participates with other members of the community to

- Share concerns and issues.
- Share decisions.
- Monitor and implement shared vision.
- Engage in reflective practices (reflection/inquiry/dialogue/action).
- Monitor norms and take self-corrective action.
- Think strategically.
- Build a culture of interdependency.
- Self-organize.
- Diversify and blend roles.
- Establish criteria for self-accountability.
- Share authority and responsibility (dependent on expertise and interest rather than on role).
- Plan for enculturation of new staff and successor.

Uses his or her formal authority to

- Implement community decisions.
- Mediate political pressures.
- Work with less-than-competent staff.
- Work with legal and reform challenges.

come from the outside if you don't create it from your own action research.

The principal's declaration of the consequences of inaction clarified the reality of the situation for teachers and encouraged them to act. Together, principal and teachers formed Peer Enquiry Program (PEP) teams. These teams used constructivist conversations to pose questions about groups of students who lagged behind, to locate and organize data, and to design new practices. Their conversations took place in faculty meetings as well as in separately organized team meetings.

One of the most challenging aspects of the transitional phase is the need to break through dependencies. In a dependent culture, teachers believe that they need to ask the principal's permission for most actions—and they come to expect the principal to make the decisions and take care of them. During the transitional phase, principals need to hand decisions and problem solving back to the teachers, coaching and leading for teacher efficacy while refusing to hold tight to authority and power.

The principal of Toledo Elementary School asked teachers to decide what to do when the vice principal position was eliminated. They resolved the issue by voluntarily dividing the vice principal's tasks among themselves. After Riverside Elementary staff had evolved to a high level of self-responsibility, they suggested to the district that they could do fine without a principal—and they did. And at Verde Elementary, the principal willingly relinquished responsibility for convening meetings and coordinating tasks when the teachers came to her and said, "We think it is time for you to let go."

The High Leadership Capacity Phase

During the high leadership capacity phase, the school encourages the teachers to play more prominent leadership roles. The principal takes a lower profile and focuses on facilitation and coparticipation rather than dominance. Teachers begin to initiate actions, take responsibility, discover time for joint efforts, and identify crucial questions about student learning.

Strikingly, principals and teachers often become more alike than different during this phase. A leveling of relationships occurs as reciprocity develops between the principal and the teachers.

When teachers became aware that the principal didn't claim to have all the answers, they actively increased their participation.

Teachers find their voices, grow confident in their beliefs, and become more open to feedback. The principal no longer needs to convene or mediate the conversations, frame the problems, or challenge assumptions alone. Principal and teachers begin to share the same concerns and work together toward their goals.

For example, teachers and administrators at Poe High School developed leadership rubrics to guide their work. And Riverside Elementary teachers developed a set of agreements that guided their shared leadership work: (1) No one is above the other; (2) We are teachers first; (3) We are a community; and (4) We must learn together.

Teachers Take On Leadership

An intriguing criterion for deciding whether a school has reached the high leadership capacity phase may be its ability to exist and thrive without a principal, whether or not it chooses to do so. Of the 15 study schools, 2 had progressed to the point where they operated with a part-time principal, and 1 operated without any principal.

Is it desirable to operate without a person in a full-time, formal role as principal? It depends. There are many reasons for having a principal. One person can more easily take responsibility for convening and facilitating conversations, securing focus, monitoring progress, working through personnel-related or legal difficulties, working with the district, and handling political pressures. In spite of the problems that may arise from giving so much responsibility to one person, principals continue to be the key to school improvement. Unless a school has already developed high leadership capacity, teacher behavior is often a function of principal behavior.

Schools that have developed high leadership capacity take on a different character, however. Even if the principal is reassigned while the school is still in the transitional phase—which often happens—staff commitment can survive the change and even energize the new principal. Teachers find leadership in one another, assigning both credibility and authority to their peers. They tap into mutual authority by expecting others to identify problems and bring them to the group.

When principals lead for "whenever they will not be there," as most of the principals in our study did, teachers share responsibility for the effectiveness of the school. Broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership contributes to lasting school improvement that is all too rare. EL

[1]For a more detailed discussion of the study, see *Lasting Leadership: A Study of High Leadership Capacity Schools* (Lambert Leadership Development, 2004).

[2]The names of all schools and educators in the study are pseudonyms. San Jose Middle School and Joel Montero are actual names.

Linda Lambert is Professor Emeritus at California State University at Hayward; linlambert@aol.com. She is the author of *Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement* (ASCD, 2003).