Kenneth Leithwood · Karen Seashore Louis

FOREWORD BY **MICHAEL S. KNAPP**

Linking Leadership to Student Learning

LINKING LEADERSHIP TO STUDENT LEARNING

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Kenneth Leithwood and
Karen Seashore Louis

With contributions from Stephen E. Anderson, Kyla Wahlstrom, Blair Mascall, Molly F. Gordon, Emanda Thomas, and Doris Jantzi

Foreword by Michael S. Knapp

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Published by Jossey-Bass
A Wiley Imprint
One Montgomery Street, Suite 1200, San Francisco, CA 94104-4594—www.josseybass.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leithwood, Kenneth A.
Linking leadership to student learning / Kenneth Leithwood, Karen Seashore Louis ; with contributions from Stephen E. Anderson . . . [et al.].
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-470-62331-2 (pbk.)
1. Educational leadership. 2. School management and organization. 3. Achievement motivation in children. I. Louis, Karen Seashore. II. Anderson, Stephen E. III. Title.
LB2806.L3854 2011
371.200973—dc23

2011032062

Printed in the United States of America
FIRST EDITION
PB Printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is based on the evidence collected as part of a large, Wallace Foundation–funded research project. Without the careful reviews and long-standing support for that research provided by our Wallace Foundation project officers, Dr. Mary Mattis and Dr. Edward Pauly, this book would not be the thorough and comprehensive document that we believe has been produced. We value, in particular, all of the feedback that Mary gave us as we moved into our analysis phase, and her skill at creating consensus about what was needed, both from the perspective of the Wallace Foundation and from the members of our research team.

This book would still be hidden somewhere in our computers if it were not for Gabrielle de Montmollin, whose editorial assistance and general ability to keep things rolling in a large and complex project have been valuable assets since this project began in 2003. A number of people who are not primary chapter authors made substantial contributions to the research in a number of ways. At the University of Minnesota, a very special thanks goes to Dr. Michael Michlin and Judy Meath, who assisted in the development of our sample and of state and local databases, coordinated all survey data collection activities, and provided support for data analysis, and also served as team leaders for site visits. Dr. Beverly Dretzke provided excellent and thoughtful work in conducting path analysis of our data. Additional support has been provided by Dr. Judy Hornbacher and Diane Cirksena, whose expertise in on-site data collection

was invaluable. Graduate research assistants at the University of Minnesota have been essential partners as well in the data collection and analysis activities; they include Sarah Berman-Young, Chad Schmidt, Monica Jacob, and Sarah Frederickson. Andrea Peterson provided excellent administrative and technical support for a myriad of clerical and computer-related tasks throughout the entire project. At the University of Toronto, Dr. Suzanne Stiegelbauer played a substantial role in site-visit data collection and analysis in Texas and New Mexico. Doris Jantzi, Robin Sacks, and Jing Ping Sun contributed significantly to the analysis of our survey results. We are also grateful to professor Stephen Jacobson (SUNY) for his help with first-round site visits in New York. Finally, successful execution of the site visits would not have possible without the assistance of several research assistants from the University of Toronto, including Leanne Foster, Carol Brayman, Carol Slater, and Joelle Rodway Macri. In the end, we produced a long and scholarly document, which was ably edited by Dr. Richard Western.

From start to finish, the project on which this book is based was about teamwork. As a team, we have shared our wisdom, skills, and voices, with each person stepping forward when such leadership was most needed. We have grown in knowledge of ourselves and within our discipline. In the end, our deepest thanks goes to the Wallace Foundation for supporting us in this work, which we hope will be valuable to many others.

Ken Leithwood and Karen Seashore Louis

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FOREWORD

Leadership and learning. The two terms have been in close proximity within educational discourse and national conversations about educational reform for a decade or more now. Rolling off the lips of a number of educators and scholars, the two have been juxtaposed in ways that presume a connection. And long before any scholars tried their hand at demonstrating any such links, the field has long felt intuitively that they belonged together. Why wouldn't the way a school was led have something very basic to do with how much—and what—its students learned? Why wouldn't "good" leadership (whatever that means) be essential for "good" outcomes from schooling, once the nonschool contributors had been stripped away?

The assumed answer has long been: of course it would. But therein lies the challenge to scholars or reformers who would base their ideas and actions on more than hopes, intuitions, and dreams. The flurry of demonstration projects and scholarly activity they have undertaken to meet this challenge seek answers to the next logical questions: *how*—and *how much*—does leadership contribute to teaching practices and the outcomes of schooling, especially those that reside in student learning? *Under what conditions* might these contributions be enhanced or diminished? And *what forms of leadership* are we talking about, exercised at what levels of the system?

Now, moving into the second decade of the twenty-first century, with a significant investment by The Wallace Foundation and others, we have a wide

range of writings that have begun to answer these questions in one or another way. Dozens of reports have probed these matters, and as many or more journal articles. Numerous books, some with titles barely distinguishable from one another—such as *Leading Learning, Leading for Learning, Learner-Centered Leadership, Leadership for Learning: How to Help Teachers Succeed, Connecting Leadership and Learning: Principles for Practice,* and *Connecting Leadership with Learning: A Framework for Reflection, Planning, and Action*—purport to explore the territory (though not always with the goal of demonstrating empirically how what leaders do influences what learners learn).[1] A similarly named non-profit group—The Leadership and Learning Center—regularly beams its messages and services toward schools and districts wishing to work on improving the impacts of leadership on learning. And a flood of international scholarship, now crystallized in a soon-to-be-released *International Handbook on Leadership for Learning,* assembles current understandings on many aspects of this wide ranging territory in sixty-six chapters from scholars around the world, in ways that sensitize us to the different meanings of "leadership," "learning," and their interaction, across national contexts.[2]

In all this talk, it is easy to lose meaning (prompting some to wonder: *How many more books do we need with titles such as these?*). And it is even easier to lose sight of the hard conceptual and empirical bridge-building that will always attend efforts to convincingly link organizational-level activity, which is one or more steps removed from the actual encounter between teacher and learner, to the demonstrated outcomes of that encounter. Anyone who has spent significant time trying to demonstrate these connections knows that compelling "hard" evidence—or even "soft" evidence—connecting the two is exceedingly difficult to come by.

But this book comes closer to meeting that elusive goal than any others to date, and as such it represents a major new landmark in the open space between leadership and learning, one that fully deserves the two terms in its title. In a more comprehensive and rigorous way than any other scholarly work in this line of inquiry, this book explores the "critical connection" between leadership, exercised collectively by formally anointed administrators, teacher leaders, and others, and the teaching and learning that takes place in classrooms. It does so with particular attention to the distribution of leadership that recent scholarship has so aptly underscored as central to the exercise of leadership in complex organizations like schools. Then, to situate these connections in the larger context of reform activity and concern, the study charts various ways that districts and states seek to energize the connection, enhance leaders' sense that they can affect student learning, and develop systems of support for leaders' work.

A scan of the chapter topics in this book and a deeper dig into their contents will reveal the broad scope of contemporary issues related to instructional improvement and educational reform that these analyses touch. In addition to

questions of leadership distribution, and the possibility of constructive district and state roles in educational reform, noted earlier, consider this short list of contemporary issues that this study informs:

- Where principals exert their greatest leverage over the improvement of student achievement
- What "instructional leadership" looks like and how it is supported
- How the leadership for reform of high schools necessarily differs from that for schools at other levels
- How community engagement figures in the leadership equation for educational reform
- How rapid turnover of school principals relates to student achievement and how it can be mitigated
- How school and district leadership contributes to the possibilities for evidence-based practice in schools

These matters and more are explored through judicious combinations of quantitative data and comparative case-based examples that help the reader see the leadership dynamics and its consequences at work. The scope of these analyses is strikingly comprehensive.

The study addresses these matters in a well-constructed, representative sample and with sufficient data, both quantitative and qualitative, collected across a long enough period of time, to represent leadership-learning links in a wide range of contexts in which leaders seek to shape the learning environment and outcomes. Not many scholarly teams have the resources and time horizon to attempt such an effort. The authors of this volume have done so.

As we go forward from here, continuing to explore what will always be a rich and elusive domain and trying to translate our understandings of it into terms that actually improve teaching and learning, this volume will occupy a prominent place in educators' and scholars' thinking, no less in their bibliographies, frameworks, and new attempts to lead education toward more powerful forms of schooling. It will not answer all the questions we have or will continue to devise. But it will answer some of the most fundamental questions and will provoke new thinking by educators for many years to come.

Michael S. Knapp
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University of Washington

PREFACE

This book is an outgrowth of what was, at the time it was conducted, one of the most ambitious studies of educational leadership and its contributions to student learning ever undertaken anywhere in the English-speaking world. Situated in the United States and generously sponsored by the Wallace Foundation, the study was conducted in a large number of states, districts, and schools and collected many different types of evidence. The starting points for the study have been described in Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004). A technical report of results can be found in Louis et al. (2010), and a non-technical summary of those results can be found in Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, and Anderson (2010). Some of our results also have been published, by now, in academic journals, and these articles are cited in relevant chapters of the book.

We, of course, are not alone in trying to examine the way in which leaders and leadership affect schools, and we have been explicit in how we draw on the work of those who went before us—and also those who were carrying out investigations during the same period during which our study was conducted (2004–2010). In addition to its scope, we believe that we have also made some important theoretical contributions. The tradition in leadership studies tends to fall into two camps. The first examines leaders, paying some attention to their context but emphasizing investigations of what they do and who they are. The second starts by examining the context or the organizational setting and then explores the ways

in which leadership may be intertwined with either the processes or the outcomes of the many events and behaviors that can be observed. This study was explicit in its efforts to do both. A second contribution is our explicit attention to integrating perspectives derived from studies carried out in noneducational contexts. We draw on research carried out in for-profit settings, non-profit and government contexts, and in countries other than the United States in order to frame our questions and interpret our findings. Finally, our contribution is important because of our efforts to consistently examine the multiple outcomes of leadership—both on the "bottom line" of student learning and development and also on the adults who work in schools and the communities in which they are located.

For many of our readers, this information will provide sufficient assurance that the claims, recommendations, and guidelines provided within the chapters are well founded. If you are one of them, jump to Chapter One. If you are more curious about how we did our work, read on.

Noteworthy Features of the Research

As compared with most previous studies of educational leadership, particularly noteworthy features of our study include the size of the database, the use of multiple theoretical and methodological approaches to the research, and the comprehensive sources of leadership examined.

Size of the Database

We collected data from a wide range of respondents in 9 states, 43 school districts, and 180 elementary, middle, and secondary schools. Although not a focus of this book, at the state level we conducted interviews with legislators, stakeholders, and members of state education agencies. In districts, we interviewed senior district leaders, elected board members, representatives of the media, and other informants. We used survey instruments and interviews with teachers and administrators, and we conducted classroom observations with most of the teachers we interviewed. Survey data were collected in the first and fourth years of the study, and interviews in districts and schools took place in three cycles over the five years of the project. These efforts yielded, by the end of the project, survey data from a total of 8,391 teachers and 471 school administrators; interview data from 581 teachers and administrators, 304 district level informants, and 124 state personnel; and classroom observation data from 312 classrooms. Finally, we obtained student achievement data for literacy and mathematics in elementary

and secondary grades, using scores on states' tests for measuring Adequate Yearly Progress as mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Multiple Methodological Approaches

We used qualitative and quantitative methods to gain certain advantages associated with multiple-methods research. The advantages typically include "rich opportunities for cross-validating and cross-fertilizing . . . procedures, findings, and theories" (Brewer & Hunter, 1989, p. 13). Our particular use of multiple methods offered opportunities that we had not fully appreciated in the early stages of our work. These included the discovery of significant patterns and relationships in our quantitative evidence, which we then were able to pursue in greater depth, thanks to our qualitative evidence.

For example, from the analysis of our first-round survey data we found that one of the most powerful sources of districts' influence on schools and students was through the development of school leaders' collective sense of efficacy or confidence about their jobs. With this connection well established quantitatively, we then mined principal-interview data to learn in greater detail what districts actually did to develop a sense of efficacy among principals.

Multiple Theoretical Perspectives

In collecting data and working to make sense of our results, we drew on conceptual tools from sociology, sociopsychology, political science, and organizational theory. Sociological concepts informed our understanding of shared leadership, contexts for leadership, and community engagement. Sociopsychological perspectives helped us analyze leader efficacy and (along with organizational theory) the nature of successful leadership practices, as well as the use of evidence in districts and schools, and leader succession. Political science concepts framed our research about state leadership.

Our goal with this seemingly eclectic approach was to draw on the theoretical perspectives best suited to the question at hand—an approach especially useful for a project like ours with multiple principal investigators who had studied and used each strand of theory in their prior work. We shared the view that using multiple methods and theoretical perspectives can provide a powerful antidote to the unintended self-deceptions or oversights that sometimes arise from the use of more unitary approaches. Our approach, however, also challenged us to develop a valid and coherent story line from the data. In that effort, inevitably, we have sacrificed some measure of coherence in order to present a rich account of our findings.

Comprehensiveness of Leadership Sources

Many leadership studies in education focus on a single institutional role. The bulk of it focuses on the principals' role,[1] with a growing but still modest body of attention to district-level leadership.[2] Over the past decade, researchers have also begun to study leadership provided by teachers.[3]

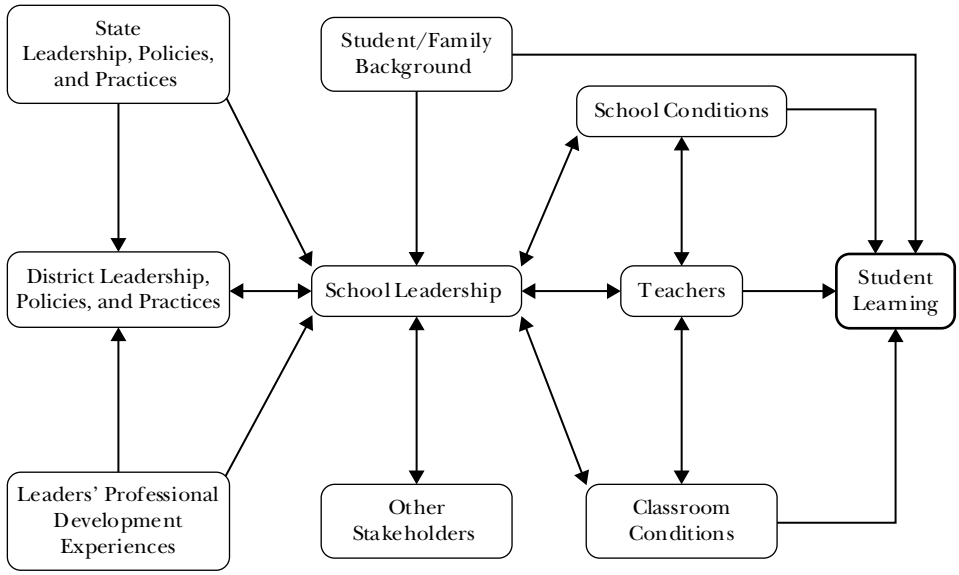
The recent flurry of attention to a broader spectrum or distribution of leadership sensitized us to the remarkable array of people who exercise formal or informal leadership in schools and districts. Research of this sort also shows that the influence of leadership on organizational outcomes arises from the behaviors of these various people acting as leaders in either an "additive" or a "holistic" manner.[4] We could not push our understanding of leadership influence much further without considering the many sources of leadership in the education system and also the web of interactions created by these sources. At the time, our study was one of only a few to have examined leadership at each organizational level in the school system as a whole—state, district, school, classroom, and community.

This comprehensive approach acknowledges an important reality for all leaders: no matter one's hierarchical "level," every leader is at the same time constrained and enabled in some measure by the actions of others, including other leaders, and by the consequences of those actions. Without a better understanding of such antecedents and consequences, we are left with an impoverished appreciation of why leaders behave as they do. Invoking social theory, this more comprehensive perspective has the potential to shift the field of educational leadership research from a dominant preoccupation with "agency" (explaining leaders' behaviors as a function of individual capacities, motivations, and traits) toward a more balanced understanding of how the structures within which leaders work also shape what they do.

Framework Guiding the Study

The framework guiding our study emerged from a review of evidence that Leithwood et al. (2004) completed prior to our data collection and summarized in Figure P.1.[5] As this figure indicates, features of state and district policies, practices, and other characteristics interact with one another and exert an influence on what school leaders do. These features also influence conditions in schools, classrooms, and the professional community of teachers (for the sake of simplicity, we do not connect these variables in Figure P.1). Other stakeholder groups—including the media, unions, professional associations, and community

FIGURE P.1 LEADERSHIP INFLUENCES ON STUDENT LEARNING



and business groups—also influence school leadership practices. And of course leaders are influenced by their own professional learning experiences and by student and family backgrounds.

School leadership, from formal and informal sources, helps to shape school conditions (including, for example, goals, culture, and structures) and classroom conditions (including the content of instruction, the size of classrooms, and the pedagogy used by teachers). Many factors within and outside schools and classrooms help to shape teachers' sense of professional community. School and classroom conditions, teachers' professional communities, and student/family background conditions are directly responsible for the learning of students.

Three Important Features of the Book

How, you might well ask, is this book any different from the final reports and journal articles already published from the study? First, we have "stripped away" much of the technical information demanded of a research study while

preserving our basic results. Second, the book includes only results from our study that have significant implications for policy and practice, leaving most of the implications for future theory and research to our other publications. Finally, we have written the book in a form that we think would make it appropriate not only for individual readers but also for use in continuing education and graduate course contexts.

We hope you will find the fruits of our considerable labor helpful.