

## General Interest

# Leaders Building Effective Teams: Three Corners of Engagement

By Judith Stegmaier Nappi

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*This article examines the relationship between and among leadership practices, administrator and teacher competencies, teaming, and student success through a structure referred to as the three corners of engagement. Studies have found that teacher quality has the most impact on student incentive and success; however, a domino effect occurs as a leader's attributes influence the teacher motivation and teaching quality related to student performance (Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 2006; Marzano et al., 2005). Employing a team approach is a way to guarantee that the various leadership responsibilities required for school success are performed in a competent manner. Examining teaming in an educational setting, the author considers three corners, or central points: resources, both human capital and physical; the focus of education for students; and the structures through which required tasks are completed. Each corner is dependent on the others and is driven by the vision, beliefs, and goals established by stakeholders.*

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Studies have found that teacher quality has the most impact on student incentive and success; however, a domino effect occurs as a leader's attributes influence teacher motivation and teaching quality, which ultimately have an impact on student performance (Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 2006; Marzano et al., 2005). Skilled leadership is thus a critical component of school and student success, but, in today's educational and financial climate, even the most skilled administrator cannot go solo. Educational success is more likely to occur when distributed or shared leadership is practiced (Nappi, 2014). Employing a team approach is a way to guarantee that the various leadership responsibilities required for school success are fulfilled in a competent manner. Examining teaming in an educational setting involves consideration of three corners, or central points: resources, both human capital and physical; the focus of education for students; and the structures through which required tasks are completed. Each corner is dependent on the others and driven by the vision, beliefs, and goals established by stakeholders

### School Leadership

Public schooling in the United States is complicated and has undergone sizeable modifications in the past few decades related to changes in legislation that regulate schooling, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965; No Child Left Behind Act, 2001; and Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015. Raising student achievement and closing achievement gaps have become the foci in education. Although the legislation that led the educational challenges designed to raise student achievement did not specifically target leadership as a key factor in achieving these goals, leadership has been identified as

a variable. With the nation's pledge to have every student meet success, the need for high quality administrators is greater than ever. The obligation to expand student achievement while attending to a more diverse student population is compelling school administrators to implement practices that are grounded in research.

**Wallace Foundation Report: Four core practices.** The Wallace Foundation Report (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010) collected 6 years of quantitative data and concluded that student achievement can be linked to effective leadership skills. The report examined prior research to identify four categories of core leadership practices: (a) setting directions, (b) developing people, (c) redesigning the organization, and (d) managing the instructional program (p. 67). Within the categories of core leadership skills are specific practices (Table 1).

Table 1

*Core Leadership Practices and Related Practices*

<b>Core Leadership Practices</b>	<b>Subcategories (Specific Practices)</b>
Setting Direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Building a shared vision</li> <li>✦ Fostering the acceptance of group goals</li> <li>✦ Creating high performance expectations</li> <li>✦ Communicating the direction</li> </ul>
Developing People	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Providing individualized support and consideration</li> <li>✦ Offering intellectual stimulation</li> <li>✦ Modeling appropriate values and practices</li> </ul>
Redesigning the Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Building collaborative cultures</li> <li>✦ Restructuring the organization to support collaboration</li> <li>✦ Building productive relationships with families and communities</li> <li>✦ Connecting the school to the wider community</li> </ul>
Managing the Instructional Program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✦ Staffing the program</li> <li>✦ Providing instructional support</li> <li>✦ Monitoring school activity</li> <li>✦ Buffering staff from distractions to their work</li> <li>✦ Aligning resources</li> </ul>

*Note.* Content from Louis et al., 2010, pp. 68-69.

**2015 Professional Standards.** Efficacious school leadership is crucial to the improvement of educational productivity and cultural awareness. As a response to the shift in educational issues—poverty, family situations, technology, student attitudes and behaviors (including bullying), accountability, student health, reduced funding, and community involvement—the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015) drafted

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and adopted the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders. Ten evidence-based standards focus school leaders on effective practices related to communication, teacher and staff competencies, the school community at large, school climate, and the day-to-day operations of the school.

The framework of the Professional Standards thus provides educational leaders with the direction required for the key areas of accountability. Designed after a comprehensive examination of the research on the relationship between educational leadership and student learning and seeking the input of researchers and of school and district leaders through

surveys and focus groups to identify gaps between the 2008 Standards and the needs of leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015), the 2015 Standards are reliant upon one another and focused on student success. They are as follows:

1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values
2. Ethics and Professional Norms
3. Equity and Cultural Responsiveness
4. Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment
5. Community of Care and Support for Students
6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel
7. Professional Community for Teachers and Staff
8. Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community
9. Operations and Management
10. School Improvement (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015 p. 3)

The 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders can be connected to the Core Leadership Practices as noted in the crosswalk (Table 2).

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Table 2

*Crosswalk of Core Leadership Practices and Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*

<b>Core Leadership Practices</b>	<b>Subcategories (Specific Practices)</b>	<b>Professional Standard for Educational Leaders 2015</b>
Setting Direction	Building a shared vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, creating high performance expectations, communicating the direction	<i>Standard 1</i> Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.
Developing People	Providing individualized support and consideration, offering intellectual stimulation, modeling appropriate values and practices	<i>Standard 2</i> Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Redesigning the Organization	Building collaborative cultures, restructuring the organization to support collaboration, building productive relationships with families and communities, connecting the school to the wider community	<i>Standard 3</i> Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being. <i>Standard 5</i> Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student. <i>Standard 6</i> Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being. <i>Standard 7</i> Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being. <i>Standard 8</i> Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
Managing the Instructional Program	Staffing the program, providing instructional support, monitoring school activity, buffering staff from distractions to their work, aligning resources	<i>Standard 4</i> Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being. <i>Standard 9</i> Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being. <i>Standard 10</i> Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

*Note.* Content from Louis et al., 2010, pp. 68-69; and National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015, pp. 9-18.

**Leaders and student learning.** At the core of educational leadership is improved student learning. A mounting body of knowledge based on research and practice indicates that educational leaders have an impact on student achievement (Danielson, 2006; Lambert, 2006; Levine, 2005). A study conducted by Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin (2013) found that successful principals increase the achievement of an average pupil in their schools by between 2 and 7 months of learning in an academic year while unproductive principals lower achievement by the same amount. Specifically, successful leaders create challenging but caring and supportive settings conducive to student learning and support teachers by creating a positive work environment through the practices and procedures they put into effect. Thus, the Core Leadership Practices (Louis et al., 2010) and Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) set the guidelines for practices that will be the most productive and beneficial to students and teachers.

**Leadership competencies.** Competencies are patterns of thinking or acting that result in an individual's becoming successful in a particular occupation or position. Frey and Ruppert (2013) classified competencies as being either personal or organizational. According to Frey and Ruppert (2013), personal competencies include the knowledge, skills, abilities, experience, and personality that an individual acquires; organizational competencies, on the other hand, are the processes and structures that are entrenched in an organization.

“ School leaders who promote a positive school culture where collaboration is valued and teachers are given a voice are more likely to have greater teacher retention. ”

In most cases, the identification of competencies has primarily been based on in-depth studies of highly successful individuals in leadership roles outside of education (e.g., business managers). Sanghi (2016) grouped

leadership competencies into four clusters: thinking capabilities, people effectiveness, self-management, and social awareness (p. 253). Within each cluster are a number of different behaviors that are job specific. Due to changing global conditions, Torrington and Taylor (2002) proposed that organizations must define competencies by anticipating what will be needed in the future to achieve goals rather than looking at what competencies were successful in the past. In line with this thinking, Vakola, Socerquist, and Prastacos (2007) conducted a longitudinal study on developing competencies to meet strategic planning goals based on the needs of stakeholders. According to Bryson, Ackermann, and Eden (2007), the essential piece of an organization's success is the talent to recognize and develop skills in order to generate the greatest benefit for key stakeholders at a moderate cost.

In education, cost is not only measured in monetary amounts but also in student achievement, creating unique competencies for educational leaders. An early study conducted by Green (1997) identified 13 core competencies observed in successful schools. Later studies conducted by Green (2010, 2012) condensed the 13 identified characteristics into four themes:

1. Understanding Self and Others
2. Understanding the Complexity of Organizational Life,
3. Building Bridges through Relationships, and
4. Engaging in Leadership Best Practices. (p. 60-61)

Principals who promoted research-based best practices in instruction (Fullan, 2006; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005) and demonstrated the competencies defined by Green (2010) were able to demonstrate a positive correlation to school culture and student achievement. Walstrom and Louis (2008) found the competencies identified by Green (1997) to be the foundation of positive changes in leadership.

**Leadership and teacher retention.** “People don’t quit companies. They quit managers” (National Education Policy Brief, 2008, p. 2). Principals and other school leaders create the environment in which teachers spend a large portion of their day. School leaders who promote a positive school culture where collaboration is valued and teachers are given a voice are more likely to have greater teacher retention. Reflecting on the competencies identified for successful school leaders will assist school leaders as they work toward developing a constructive school culture in which teachers are respected and supported.

### Leadership and Student Success through Building Effective Teams.

*“Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision, the ability to direct individual accomplishments toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.” —Andrew Carnegie*

The expanded charges and responsibilities of school leaders have increased the need for distributed leadership. Middle management in the form of assistant principals, supervisors, coaches, and so forth is recognized by many practitioners as being vital to the effectiveness of the organization. However, these positions are not always evident, and oftentimes the responsibilities placed on individuals in these roles are not made clear. Accordingly, one approach to improving practices is to fashion a team that will organize and guide initiatives that are intended to improve the educational process. Friend and Cook (2007) found that “teaming is the most frequently advocated structure for implementing school reform initiatives” (p. 58). Employing a team approach is a way to guarantee that the various leadership responsibilities required for school success are performed in a competent manner.

School administrators can create the type of environment in which teachers work collaboratively to perfect their craft and impact student achievement. In this type of supportive environment, teachers learn from one another to build upon their core skills. It is the role of school administrators to provide the means, supports, and educational climate that will allow teachers to further their skills. According to Sparks (2013), schools will progress only when all administrators and teachers belong to one or more effective teams where distributed leadership is practiced.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) identified more than 20 responsibilities effective school leaders master. The identified responsibilities include keeping updated on the research in curriculum, instruction, and assessment and using data to evaluate and implement changes to improve school practices. “It would be rare, indeed, to find a single individual who has the capacity or



Figure 1. Lencioni's Model of Team Dysfunction. Retrieved from <https://www.tablegroup.com/>

will to master such a complex array of skills” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 99); therefore, a school team that is designed to share leadership tasks and responsibilities can assist in improvement efforts. Leadership teams can provide coaching (both formal and informal), determine professional development needs, design professional development, problem solve, assist with communication, and be a resource to both teachers and administrators.

By counterpoint, Lencioni’s model of team dysfunction (2005; Figure 1) helps define the key characteristics of effective teams. Successful teams trust one another, have a purpose based on the school’s mission and vision, hold one another accountable, and operate within a structure based on procedures and responsibilities for each member. Sparks (2013) similarly identified four phases of effective teaming:

1. Starting out: Members collect information and begin to implement ideas from the information acquired.
2. Developing: Members test various approaches and strengthen belief in the process.
3. Deepening: Members have met with some success and recognize achievements.
4. Sustaining: Implementing current research-based strategies and revisiting value of initiatives have become second nature.

*“When solutions are designed collaboratively, a greater chance exists of reform being sustained, as once goals and strategies become part of the fabric of the school, even if there is a change in leadership, teacher-designed initiatives are more likely to remain.”*

Of course, effective teaming does not occur automatically. Creating an effective team initially takes time and effort but can assist with the many leadership responsibilities essential for a school’s success. Administrators must understand that they are dealing with professionals who bring different background experiences, needs, and ideas to the table. The perceptions that group members exhibit when working as a team impact other team members and the team as a whole (Lewin, 1952). Therefore, it is important for leaders to develop group norms that will allow for productive team meetings. This might require professional

development prior to the team’s working on school-related issues. Professional development may focus on communication skills, setting priorities, working with adult learners, using data, and problem solving.

Once a team is established, it is vital that the school leaders give it the authority to make decisions within the scope of its work (Cotton, 2003). Tracey (2001) argued that when leaders enable those they supervise to make decisions, they increase the likelihood for success. Establishing productive teams also generally leads to the staff’s implementation of initiatives with fidelity because teachers have been given a voice in the process. When solutions are designed collaboratively, a greater chance exists of reform being sustained, as once goals and strategies become part of the fabric of the school, even if there is a change in leadership, teacher-designed initiatives are more likely to remain.

### **Leadership Competencies and Teaming: Three Corners of Engagement**

When examining engagement in an educational setting, three corners, or central points, should be considered: resources, the focus, and the structure. In an educational setting, the resources are human capital as well as physical resources, with human capital

being the greatest expenditure that K-12 districts make (Myung, Martinez, & Nordstrum, 2013). The focus is education of students, and the structure involves how required tasks are completed. Each corner is dependent on the others and is driven by the vision, beliefs, and goals established by stakeholders (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Three corners of engagement (Nappi, 2017).

**Resources.** Resources in education are vital to realizing educational goals and objectives because they are an important factor in offering students equal opportunities by reducing the impact of socioeconomic influences on student achievement. Adeogun and Osifila (2008) observed a positive correlation between the academic success of students and physical, economic, and material resources. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2012) identified the resources invested in education as

1. spending—the salaries of teachers, administrators, and support staff; upkeep or production costs of buildings, utilities, transportation, meals
2. human resources—teacher training, student teacher ratio, teacher availability
3. material resources—physical space, school grounds, heating, cooling, ventilation, lighting, and educational resources such as computers, texts, and Internet access
4. time resources—student’s time in school, class size, and co-curricular activities.

Many variables must be considered regarding educational resources, such as student characteristics, family backgrounds, school location (rural vs. suburban or urban), type of institution (public or private), and expenditure per student. A review of economic research across the United States regarding school resources and student achievement conducted by Hanushek and Woessmann (2017) found that expenditures and class size played a small role when looking at differences in student achievement. However, differences in teacher quality and instructional time did have an impact on student achievement (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2017). The conclusion was that the amount of resources to which a school has access was not as important as how the resources were utilized.

In an earlier analysis of the literature, Hedges, Laine, and Greenwald (1994) found that most studies indicated a positive relationship between amount of resources and student achievement. Demir (2009) studied the influence of class size on student achievement and suggested student-teacher ratio as the most important predictor of academic achievement. Although debate exists as to whether resources, on their own, have a positive impact on student achievement, a connection clearly exists, as funding is needed to provide programs that have been identified as effective.

Developing a leadership team by linking individual competencies within an organization (Huxham & Vangen, 2005), school administrators can make the most of resources available. Growing evidence exists that administrators who foster a community of learners among teachers can achieve improved teaching and learning (Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011). Social capital, or the manner in which teachers interact to share and access the knowledge of one another, has been recognized as an important characteristic of school reform (Carmichael, Fox, McCormick, Procter, & Honour, 2006) and has been linked to student achievement (Pil & Leana, 2009). The key point is that teachers' and administrators' competencies are themselves a resource for best decisions about use of all resources to meet established goals.

**Focus.** The quality of a student's learning experiences is ascertained through the development of curricular objectives. Therefore, teachers must have a solid understanding of the standards, develop student learning goals that are measurable and directly related to the standards, and communicate expectations to students. Beyond the development of objectives, teachers need to implement ongoing assessments to monitor progress and make instructional changes as required to meet the needs of all learners. These measures require teachers to be actively engaged in the curriculum-writing process in order to foster a community of learning and improvement.

Leaders who communicate a clear vision and consistently convey high expectations for all students will have the greatest impact. Research indicates that school leaders identified as successful articulate a vision for a collective institutional purpose and shared responsibility and that principals who can find new and innovative means to convey this message are key (Cotton, 2003; Portin et al., 2009). Developing a shared interpretation of the school's goals will help teachers to identify the significance of the work in which they engage with colleagues and with students. Coburn (2003) conducted an analysis on school reform and found that perspicacity, sustainability, and faculty collaboration are necessary to improve practice. Teachers who are asked to participate in open communication with school

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leaders and with one another are more likely to “buy into” school reform efforts or new initiatives.

**Structure.** The structure of an educational institution is the framework within which all parts work together to promote the success of all students. The school's structure or processes need to be aligned with goals, objectives, and established initiatives rather than being “another thing” that has to be addressed. Some of the structures important in school success are a safe environment, classroom setups, a coherent schedule with few

interruptions, analysis of data to reveal instructional needs, provision of professional development based on teacher and student needs, peer coaching, a collegial environment, and clear communication.

Of course, one of the most important charges of an educational leader is to deliver a safe and well-organized educational environment that allows for effective instruction and learning to take place. Certain paramount factors for a safe and well-organized educational environment have been identified, including setting and communicating standards of behavior as well as establishing procedures that allow for consistent application of behavior policies (Cotton, 2003). When institutional procedures are in place, teachers can then set up classrooms in which students feel safe asking questions and contributing to discussions. No single correct way to set up a classroom exists, but all classrooms should foster an atmosphere of security and respect. The classroom design should be planned in a manner that will allow for the best possible way for students to learn the subject under study and for all students to be active participants in the learning process.

The master schedule of a school is the framework for everything that will take place within the school year, including cocurricular activities. Developing a coherent schedule has been identified as one of the most important exercises in which administrators engage. The school schedule “gives practical expression to the curricular philosophy of the school; it sets, maintains and regulates the teaching and learning pulse of the school and ensures the delivery of quality education for all students” (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2006). The schedule establishes the assignment of subjects or classes, teachers, and students to the time periods allotted within a week, considering all state, district, and union rules imposed upon the school system. Research has found that extending time in school can be a helpful means for supporting student learning, particularly when taking into consideration how time is utilized (Patall, Cooper, & Allen, 2010).

School administrators can revise organizational structures to allow for collaborative practices to take place. Cotton (2003) found that the most effective school leaders planned schedules around fundamental instructional needs with minimal interferences of instructional time. For example, schedules can be designed to secure common planning time for teachers. When common planning time is arranged, the time must be utilized for analyzing student work to drive instruction. Camburn (2010) found that collaborative planning time resulted in a greater frequency of reflective practice among teachers. Given adequate time, the proper professional development, and constant communication regarding the significance of collaboration, teachers will begin to have faith in the process of sharing best practices and challenges. Throughout this process, school leaders need to recognize and capitalize on individual competencies that teachers bring to the table and both model and encourage collaboration.

Monitoring of school and student progress by both school leaders and teachers is an important factor when examining student success. Participating in collaborative meetings and paying close attention to student performance has been linked to improved

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student performance (Elmore, 2000; Fink & Resnick, 2001). Deno (2003) found that when teachers monitor student progress, students learn at a higher rate, teachers make quality instructional decisions, and students become more reflective. Gathering and using data to make decisions is essential when focusing on student improvement. Data can be measured and used on many levels, such as state, district, school, classroom, and individual student levels. Collecting and analyzing data sets allow school leaders and teachers to make decisions based on goals and objectives with greater clarity. Educational leaders need to assist teachers in learning what types of data to collect and how to analyze the data to improve student learning and meet achievement targets. Creating a culture in which data are viewed as helpful to the teaching and learning process is critical to continuous school improvement.

### Conclusion

Leadership has a strong albeit indirect influence on student achievement. By focusing on the three corners of engagement—resources, focus, and structure—school leaders and the teams they create can impact student achievement by developing the three key areas designed to support vision, goals, and objectives.

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