CHAPTER 4

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a hot-button issue these days. Reformers depend on it. The public believes that it is what schools need more of. And private sector CEOs think they know exactly what it is and are anxious to share that knowledge with the “poor unwashed masses” of educational leaders. It is not surprising, then, that so many people are trying to make a living peddling their latest insights about effective educational leadership.

Indeed leadership by adjective is a growth industry. We have instructional leadership, transformational leadership, moral leadership, constructivist leadership, servant leadership, cultural leadership—we even have primal leadership (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee, 2002). A few of these qualify as leadership theories and several are actually tested leadership theories. But most are actually just slogans. Consider, for example, the term “instructional leadership”: it typically serves as a synonym for whatever the speaker means by “good” leadership—with almost no reference to models of instructional leadership that have some conceptual coherence and a body of evidence testing their effects on organizations and students.

With all this confusion about the concept of leadership in our environment, we might be persuaded to think that hard evidence about what is good or successful or effective leadership in education organizations is lacking—or at least contradictory—but we would be wrong. We actually know a great deal about the leadership behaviors, practices, or actions that are helpful in improving the impact of districts and schools on the student outcomes that we value. As one example,

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the review of educational leadership effects on student learning reported almost 10 years ago by Phil Hallinger and Ron Heck (1996) included about 40 studies. And many more have been reported since then.

One source of confusion in sorting out what we know about successful leadership is that much of the educational leadership literature is not about actual leadership practices at all. It is about leaders’ values, beliefs, skills or knowledge that someone thinks leaders need in order to act in an effective manner. For example, much of the popular leadership literature has been influenced by Daniel Goleman’s (1994) idea of “emotional intelligence.” But this is an internal state, rather than an overt behavior, not to mention that it is one we have known to be important for leaders for over a half century under the label of good communication skills. While leaders’ internal states are interesting and obviously important—what leaders do depends on what they think and feel—no one experiences or knows the internal states of others except as they manifest themselves in some kind of external act. Furthermore, there is a dearth of empirical evidence linking any leader’s internal state to their use of effective leadership practice.

The most visible examples of making unwarranted assumptions or links between internal states and overt leadership practices are leadership standards: the ISSLC standards in the United States (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996); the standards driving leadership development in England (Teacher Training Agency, 1998) and others developed in Queensland, Australia, and New Zealand, for example. Almost all of these standards, in addition to identifying leadership practices, spell out long lists of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that leaders should have or acquire on the assumption that they are needed for effective leadership practice. But the accumulated body of research on successful educational leadership has very little to say about the matter.

In contrast, the accumulated empirical evidence has a great deal to say about effective leadership practice. By far the largest amount of this evidence is about the leadership of school principals. A much smaller but still significant proportion is about the leadership of senior district administrators. In addition, there is a rapidly growing body of evidence about teacher leadership (e.g., Murphy, 2005) and distributed leadership (e.g., Spillane, Sherer & Coldren, 2005), sometimes considered closely related. But so far this evidence is mostly descriptive, primarily generated through small qualitative studies. And the results of these studies are actually quite disappointing. The most recent and comprehensive review of the teacher leadership literature (York-Barr & Duke, 2004) was able to locate only five empirical studies of teacher leadership effects on students (two of these studies were mine) and none reported significant effects.

This illustrates another key point about how leadership is conceived these days. Both teacher leadership and distributed leadership qualify as movements driven much more by philosophy and democratic values than by evidence that kids actually learn more if a larger proportion of district and school leadership comes from non-traditional sources. Some advocates claim that the more leadership the better—that the capacities of the organization are realized more fully as the sources of leadership