
Foreword

For much of the last quarter century, educators, policymakers, and the general citizenry have been engaged in an unbroken quest to understand the school-improvement equation. That is, there have been ongoing efforts, sometimes systematic and often ad hoc, to identify the factors that explain school performance and student achievement and to deepen our understanding of how they work both as individual components and as parts of the system of schooling.

Research over these years has consistently underscored leadership as a critical theme in the school-improvement narrative. Indeed, evidence from nearly every realm of investigation—beginning with effective-school studies through the most recent work on comprehensive school reform—confirms leadership as an explanatory variable in schools where all students meet ambitious achievement targets.

Over that time, our understanding of leadership has deepened and become more complex. We have rediscovered a central truth of leadership: Although leadership is always important, during periods of fundamental transition (for example, to a new system of schooling in which all youngsters are to be well educated) and hardship (for example, nurturing troubled schools into healthy organizations), leadership is even more critical. We have learned about the centrality of instructionally focused leadership and the importance of transformationally anchored leadership work. We have also learned that leadership is as much a property of the school and its culture as it is a dimension of administrative roles. We have greatly expanded the information base on the knowledge and skills that define the various aspects of leadership, such as visionary and cultural leadership.

And it is here, in Smith and Piele's fourth edition of their hallmark volume on *School Leadership*, that these understandings are thoughtfully captured and carefully arrayed for maximum usefulness by school leaders at all levels of the educational system. Although it is impossible to enumerate all the strengths of this landmark analysis, several points merit special notice. The authors devour huge chunks of the knowledge landscape on leadership, in terms of both scientific and practice-based learning. But equally important, they are masters of integration and presentation.

The overall framework for the book works especially well on these issues. The six parts of the book provide excellent scaffolding and warehousing for what we know, and are continuing to learn, about school leadership. In addition, the individual chapters are finely crafted and beautifully written. Difficult concepts and complex ideas are made accessible without trivializing important content. School leaders of all stripes (principals, teacher-leaders, district office

staff, staff-development professionals) will resonate to the way this volume is constructed. All will find that it quite nicely accomplishes what handbooks are expected to do, that is, provide a tool that allows readers to regularly return to the knowledge base as information is needed.

Smith and Piele and their colleagues have taken on a massive assignment and pulled it off with considerable success. In so doing, they provide us with the most comprehensive and extensive treatment of the school leadership literature available to date. In the process, they help us tune in to and then stay focused on the most central leadership issues in education today. They provide a research-based platform for leadership for the 21st century. They help us understand that leadership is about both the person and the organization, that it is both an art and a science, that leadership practice is anchored in both knowledge and values, that leadership flows both from the organization and from the consent of others, and that our understanding of leadership is informed by both practice and scientific research.

The authors build our understanding of school leadership outward from student learning. They help us see that the ground or anchor for school leadership today must be the core business of schooling, not only the management, organization, and governance of that business. For all these reasons, and many more, Smith and Piele have provided a great service to the profession. Their *School Leadership* handbook is a gift to all of us in education.

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