

**The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results** by Douglas B. Reeves. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006. 221 pp. ISBN 1-4166-0332-8.

American schools face the challenge of educating the world's most diverse students and encompassing significant variations in achievement, socioeconomic status, culture, linguistic background, and disability (Saenz, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2005). Educators are entrusted with the daunting task of addressing students' academic and individual needs and empowering them with the skills and knowledge needed to meet standards. When standards are not met, schools often apply the myth that adoption of the right program will improve student achievement. Districts spend millions of dollars acting upon this myth and investing in new programs and professional development. Despite these efforts, however, leading educational publications proclaim that "even the best schools cannot close the equity gap" (Rothstein, 2004). The alarming statistics concerning student achievement call for a different approach to empowering students and educators.

In *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results*, Douglas Reeves shows that, despite the lack of achievement in many schools, many districts dramatically improve achievement each year. Reeves writes, "Now we are seeing '100 100 100' schools in which 100 percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches, 100 percent are members of ethnic minorities, and 100 percent score proficient or higher not only in state reading tests but also in assessment of math, science, and social studies" (p. 80). He highlights leadership as a critical factor in achievement, examines current leadership practices, and concludes that these practices can blatantly perpetuate the inequalities of schools. Reeves proposes a comprehensive framework for aligning leadership practices and student achievement. He successfully reveals the myths that have historically stifled change, shares instructional and leadership practices that narrow the achievement gap, and presents the framework that successful schools employ.

The introduction and first chapter reveal that assessment of achievement is diminished when educators focus only on the fraction of success that deals with results. As Reeves writes, "When you truly want better results for students, you don't just stare at the data and display some colorful charts. You don't just talk about what the kids are doing. You display courage.... As things are now, we don't even pretend to improve most of our schools; we only talk about it" (p. 3). He argues that when focus is placed on test scores without analyzing the factors that influence results (e.g., instruction, curriculum, parental involvement, and assessment), achievement is less likely. Leaders who are successful in narrowing

the achievement gap typically analyze data, locate and identify pockets of excellence, and replicate them for further excellence.

Chapters 2 and 3 review various leadership models, clearly describing the strengths and challenges of each. Reeves includes the value of reflection, human relationships, and admirable character traits and emphasizes the importance of capitalizing on the strengths, talents, and knowledge of all members of the organization. These dimensions are necessary components of leadership, but are rarely all present in a single leader. Great leaders magnify their own strength by creating teams that complement them. Reeves articulates the need for leaders to create a collaborative environment with distributed leadership where goals are transparent and each team member supports improving teaching and learning.

Chapter 4 discusses essential leadership skills, preferences, and practices that help school leaders face the challenges of student achievement. Reeves' focus here is "to explain the dimension of leadership in a way that allows leaders to capitalize on their strengths and take a complementary approach to their weaknesses" (p. 33). In other words, strong leadership includes vision, human relationships, systematic interactions, reflection, collaboration, and analytic and communication skills. An effective leader enlists individuals who complement each other, forming a strong team.

Chapter 5 provides readers with evidence that when it comes to achievement and educational equity, planning processes are less important than implementation, execution, and monitoring. This chapter is especially interesting because Reeves gives insight into ineffective current school practices: "If our goal is student achievement, why do we invest so much effort in compliance requirements that are not only unhelpful to this objective, but counterproductive?" (p. 65). Reeves reviews research that connects leadership, student achievement, and educational equity, contending that when external variables such as budget, policies, and planning are held constant, the factors most related to improving achievement and educational equity are the ideals and beliefs, evaluation of data, and application of research-based strategies of leaders and faculty members.

Chapter 6 cites evidence that illustrates how leadership affects student achievement and educational equity. In the studies described, demographic characteristics remained constant while student achievement rose dramatically; the factors that changed were instruction and leadership. Reeves' strength lies in demonstrating that ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse students are successful when educational leaders are committed to making a difference. The author effectively describes characteristics that successful schools possess, including holistic accountability; non-fiction writing assessments throughout the disciplines; and effective formative assessments that provide immediate feedback, decisive intervention, and constructive use of data. These specific strategies

“traverse the chasm from knowing to doing, from research to action” and empower all students (p. 91).

Effective assessment and feedback are briefly elaborated upon in Chapter 7. Many school districts use letter grades on report cards as the only source of information about the needs of students. Grades provide very little information and are often not directly correlated to student ability; Reeves states that there is “an astonishing number of students earning grades of *A*, *B*, and *C* who are failing the state graduation exam” (p. 116) and cannot read, communicate effectively in writing, or perform basic problem-solving tasks. Grades often reward compliance and conformity rather than critical thinking and proficiency. The author discusses theories about aligning grading policies with proficiency, emphasizing the importance of consistency and consensus among all stakeholders regarding what constitutes proficiency. Chapter 7 points out that students learn to evade proficiency and learning when poor grades are awarded for incomplete assignments and shows the hidden ideals such as persistence, confidence, and hard work that are taught when adults encourage and challenge students to work harder and resubmit work.

Chapters 8 and 9 delve into leadership tools used to monitor and reflect on instructional practice. These tools include leadership mapping, in which schools outline student accountability data, create strategies that address challenges, and implement effective change. The book explicitly models their development and provides Internet resources for further assistance in developing and interpreting these maps.

Reeves’ book is a must-read for educational leaders at all levels, including principals, district superintendents, teacher leaders, and university administrative leadership and training programs. It provides a comprehensive look at variables associated with student achievement and educational equity, as well as practical and constructive strategies. As a teacher leader in an elementary school, I found that it provides a great deal of insight into the reflection, collaboration, and action needed in shared leadership within successful schools. Like many educators facing the realities of standards, assessment, and accountability, I often seek books that propose solutions to the problem of the disconnect between leadership and student achievement. Many books disappointingly propose cookie-cutter models or programs to be purchased and emulated. Reeves’ book does quite the opposite, delving into the outlooks that effective leaders must hold if they are actually going to be catalysts for change. He does not provide a step-by-step outline or curriculum guide describing how to curtail inequity and the lack of achievement in schools. Nonetheless he does argue persuasively that leadership, instruction, and responsible actions toward students are imperative, that leadership is collaborative and deliberate, and that all leaders and practitioners

must be focused on students and their needs, as well as be committed and reflective in their practices.

### **References**

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- Saenz, L. M., Fuchs, L. S., & Fuchs, D. (2005). Peer-assisted learning strategies for English language learners with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 71(3), 231-246.

### **Reviewer**

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