



education review // reseñas educativas

editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

January 6, 2011

ISSN 1094-5296

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>

Follow Education Review on Facebook



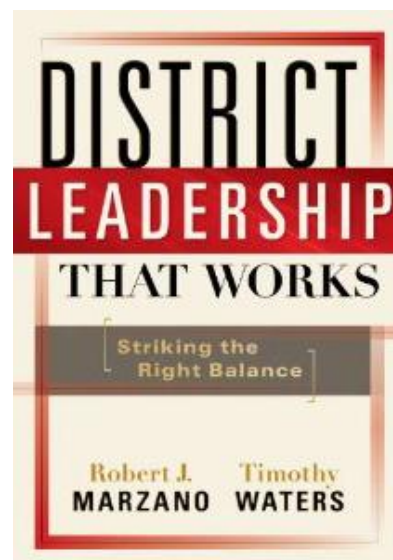
Marzano, Robert J., & Waters, Timothy. (2009) *District Leadership That Works: Striking the Right Balance*.
Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press.

Pp. 168

ISBN 9781935249191

Reviewed by David W. Hickey
Northern Kentucky University

In 1987, Secretary of Education William Bennett criticized public educators who work outside the classroom such as superintendents, local school boards, and district office staff as a “bloated educational bureaucracy.” Or, more crassly stated, “the blob.” Bennett said, “Spending more on education won’t improve results if all we’re doing is feeding educational bureaucracies” (Walker, 1987). These remarks raised the question, “Is district administration, in fact, unrelated to student learning (at best) or detrimental to student learning (at worst)?” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 2). The answer is not a simple “yes” or “no.” Marzano and Waters in *District Leadership That Works: Striking the Right Balance* believe there is a positive



Citation: Hickey, David W. (2011 January 6) Review of *District Leadership That Works* by Robert J. Marzano & Timothy Waters. *Education Review*, 13. Retrieved [Date] from <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1018.pdf>

correlation between district leadership abilities and student achievement and that there are specific district leadership behaviors associated with student achievement.

District Leadership That Works is a meta-analysis based on research of all available studies correlating district leadership and student achievement over a 35-year period. The authors identified 27 studies comprising 2,714 school districts, an estimated 4,500 superintendent leadership ratings, and an estimated 3.4 million student achievement scores. **Marzano and Waters** found a correlation between district leadership and student achievement of $r = +.24$ and predicted that an improvement of one standard deviation in district leadership would produce a 9.5 percentile gain in student achievement. Although some may disagree with the underlying assumptions of the findings, it is difficult to doubt the validity of the numbers.



The text focuses on the five district-level leadership responsibilities or initiatives correlated to academic achievement revealed by the study. According to Marzano and Waters, district leadership should engage in specific actions that include:

- ensuring collaborative goal setting;
- establishing non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction;
- creating board alignment with and support of district goals;
- monitoring achievement and instruction goals; and
- allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction (p. 6).

Five out of the seven chapters are dedicated to an in-depth analysis of each of these findings. Two other unexpected findings the researchers discovered involved positive correlations between student achievement: (a) building-level autonomy within a district (site-based management was negatively correlated), and (b) superintendent longevity that may manifest itself as early as two years into the superintendent's stay.

Chapter one provides the fodder for the argument that district leadership is a critical ingredient for effective schooling and members should demand cookie-cutter behaviors from school principals and classroom teachers. Yet, schools have historically been viewed as loosely

coupled organizations and operate best when left alone by central administration.

Chapter two reconciles these two perspectives by focusing on Weick's (1982) research that schools, by nature, are loosely coupled organizations in reference to student achievement and classroom instruction. Loosely coupled organizations, such as schools, naturally embrace site-based management. Yet many school districts have lost their ability to improve student achievement system wide by relinquishing district authority of performance goals to local school leaders. Malen, Ogawa and Kranz (1990) examined two hundred documents on site-based management that revealed, "little evidence that site-based management improves student achievement" (p 56). Marzano and Waters discovered through research and study of (a) highly reliable organizations and (b) the highest performing school districts that it is possible to accept that schools can and should be tightly coupled regarding student achievement. This apparent dichotomy can be resolved by central office administration providing school principals with "defined autonomy." If this view is accepted, then it can be accepted that student achievement can be improved by district leadership. One way is for superintendents and others to set and monitor nonnegotiable goals for achievement.

Chapter three focuses on superintendents establishing district goals to improve student achievement with input from stakeholders, such as principals, who ultimately will communicate and put into practice the goals at their respective schools. Through collaborative goal-setting processes it is the responsibility of district leadership for the staff to focus on nonnegotiable goals for achievement and nonnegotiable goals for instruction. Everything else should be in the service of these two overriding ideas to be effective at school reform. The researchers' focus on student achievement through the use of formative assessments is based primarily on Black and Wiliam's (1998) research, which reported conclusively, "Formative assessment does improve learning. The gains in achievement appear to be quite considerable... amongst the largest ever reported for educational interventions" (p. 61). Marzano and Waters believe that the "Most effective system would employ a value-added, formative based approach to assessment as opposed to a status-oriented,

summatively based approach” (p. 52). In other words, the researchers maintain that tracking and measurement of these goals should focus on teacher and district designed value added formative assessments and standards-based student report cards. These steps would allow struggling students to be identified and provided extra support. However, focusing on nonnegotiable goals for achievement is only part of the story. Districts must also set and monitor nonnegotiable goals for instruction.

The topic of Chapter four is recruiting, retaining, and continuously improving the instructional skills of teachers. Marzano and Waters argue that systems need to be designed to improve the pedagogical skills based on five phases:

During Phase 1, teachers systematically explore and examine instructional strategies using action research. During Phase 2, the district designs a model of language of instruction that allows for individual schools to make their own adaptations. During Phase 3, teachers systematically interact with the model and are given time for those interactions to occur.

During Phase 4, teachers observe master teachers using the model of instruction. Master teachers ...are defined as teachers who consistently produce student achievement gains. During Phase 5, the district monitors the effectiveness of individual teaching styles by correlating teachers' skills at using the strategies in the instructional model with student engagement and learning. (p.70)

Tucker and Stronge (2005) explain that most individuals would prefer to have a highly effective teacher vs. a highly qualified teacher as defined by NCLB legislation. To determine if a teacher is highly effective, Marzano and Waters believe that phase five of a system to set and monitor nonnegotiable goals for instruction should allow for a reliable method for the collection of data on teachers and students relative to student achievement. To support non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, the centerpiece of the study, the researchers identified three related findings that are the foundation.

Chapter five defined three factors to support non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction: collaborative goal setting, Board alignment, and allocation of resources. Marzano and Waters elaborate:

Collaborative goal setting is the vehicle used to establish non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction; *board alignment* is necessary to sustain long-term attention to these goals; and *resources* must be *allocated* to fund activities such as professional development, scheduling changes, and the like. (p. 71)

Ward (2007) states collaborative goal setting should include “board members, superintendents, and principals to engage other leaders at all levels of the organization” (p.20). Yet, Sell (2006) notes that goals may be difficult to agree on if the School Board, superintendent, and teacher union relationships are strained or at odds. To be successful, Marzano and Waters found that board alignment and support for the goals is essential.

Historically, school boards have not focused on student achievement, but with the NCLB legislation, “Districts were expected to implement reforms immediately or suffer the consequences of a loss of federal money or school restructuring (Sell, 2006, pp. 76-78). School Boards and superintendents also need to allocate resources to reform efforts and decide how money is to be spent. Greenwald, Hedges, and Laine (1996) concluded that by increasing per pupil expenditures, districts could reasonably expect an increase in student achievement. Marzano and Waters believe that most Americans agree, “that the United States does not fare well in comparison with other countries in regard to student achievement” (p. 80). They go on to state, “It is not how *much* money is spent, but *how* the money is spent” (p.80). Baker and LeTendre (2005) found that nations, with the exception of the U.S., tend to have less inequality in resources among schools. Some wealthier nations also believe that more resources should be provided at home for poorer students. In summary, superintendents and school boards need to allocate the necessary time, money, personnel, and materials to further student achievement to achieve the status of being a high-reliability district.

Chapter six focuses on defined autonomy in a high-reliability school district in which building leaders do the “right” work. Marzano and Waters found little relationship between school autonomy encouraged by site-based management and student achievement. “Given that nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction are the right work for every school in a high-reliability district, each principal must operate in the context of these goals” (p. 90). In a previous study, *School Leadership That Works* (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), the researchers identified twenty-one leadership behaviors for school-level administrators that, when followed, build an environment of “defined autonomy” needed for high-reliability, high achieving districts. Defined autonomy is a “critical operating principal for a district seeking high-reliability status” (p. 103). The previous chapters suggested strategies to follow to move districts in the direction of improved student achievement and effective classroom instruction. The journey is difficult and requires a commitment by most school districts to second-order changes.

Chapter seven, the final chapter, addresses these changes and provides advice for district leaders. Chapter seven reminds us that nonnegotiable district goals for achievement and instruction will require not only external change, but internal transition by district leaders, school leaders, and teachers. These strategies require a break from the past for most districts which in the short term appear to be making the situation worse, not better. Marzano and Waters ask readers to have faith and that over time “They will produce a sense of unity and a pride in accomplishment that high achievement and high-quality instruction are the centerpiece of the district” (p. 109). They ask that district leaders be proactive regarding the change and transition and offer six recommendations based on their years of experience. These suggestions include: (a) know the implications of your initiatives, (b) maintain a unified front, (c) keep the big ideas in the forefront, (d) use what is known about the acceptance of new ideas, (e) communicate with “sticky messages” (Gladwell, 2002), and (f) manage personal transitions.

In the two-page epilogue, the researchers hope their recommendations will, “Help school-and district-level

leaders reduce variability in the quality of instruction offered within schools and between schools” (p. 116).

This book is designed for educational leaders at all levels, including those in graduate educational leadership programs. It outlines the importance of district leadership with high-reliability student achievement and effective classroom instruction. The research analysis identifies five basic strategies to employ for new ways of leading districts marked by

- ensuring collaborative goals setting;
- establishing non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction;
- creating board alignment with and support of district goals;
- monitoring achievement and instructional goals; and
- allocating resources to support the goals for achievement and instruction (p. 22).

The researchers take complex concepts and distill the information into easy to understand strategies that support the ongoing efforts in school districts. Relying on informed opinions of their work and the work of others, Marzano and Waters lead the reader through the What, Why and How by providing insight into how to balance district goals with building-level autonomy to ensure every student’s success. It is a “must read” for educational leaders who aspire to make second-order changes for those school districts struggling with improving student achievement and reframing environments to move classroom instruction forward.

References

- Baker, D. P., & LeTendre, G. K. (2005). *National differences, global similarities: World culture and the future of schooling*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7-75.
- Gladwell, M. (2002). *The tipping point: How little things can make a big difference*. Boston: Little, Brown.

- Greenwald, R., Hedges, L. V., & Laine, R. D. (1996). The effect of school resources on student achievement. *Review of Educational research*, 66(3), 361-396.
- Malen, B., Ogawa, R. T., & Kranz, J. (1990). Site-based management: Unfilled promises. *School Administrator*, 42(2). 3-56.
- Marzano, R. j., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Sell, S. (2006). Running an effective school district: Schoolboards in the 21st century. *Journal of Education*, 186(3), 71-97.
- Tucker, P.D., & Stronge, J. H. (2005). *Linking teacher evaluation and student learning*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Walker, R. (1987, March 2). Bennett:Test gains as a “dead stall.” *Education Week*, 7(23), 5.
- Ward, M. 2007, March). For schools to be successful, boards and administrators must engage leaders at all levels. *American School Board Journal*, 26-29.

About the Reviewer

David Hickey is pursuing his doctoral degree in Educational Leadership at Northern Kentucky University in Highland Heights, Kentucky. His research focus and area of interest is K-12 formative and summative assessments, and teacher dependencies. He is the Chief Information Officer for Mason City Schools, one of Ohio’s highest-performing 613 public school districts.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.

Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center <http://nepc.colorado.edu>



Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
