

Distributed Leadership – Research Review

Research findings on distributed leadership

Despite the well-established impact of school leaders on student achievement, there is limited research on how specific policies impact principal quality and availability. Much of the available research mirrors general findings on improving overall educator quality and/or is limited to survey and descriptive research from a handful of reputable organizations.

Distributed leadership presents itself as a solution to the twin challenges of too much responsibility for principals and teacher frustration about not being able to take on leadership roles without leaving the classroom

- 70 percent of principals indicate their responsibilities have changed dramatically over the past five years; 75 percent of principals now report the job is too complex ([MetLife, 2013](#)).
- 97 percent of teachers surveyed list school leadership as essential or very important for their retention—the highest of among all factors ([Scholastic, 2012](#)).
- The Wallace Foundation cites the cultivation of leadership in others as one of five key practices of an effective school principal ([Wallace Foundation, January 2013](#)).
- Lack of advancement opportunities significantly impacts teacher retention ([New Leaders, 2015](#)).

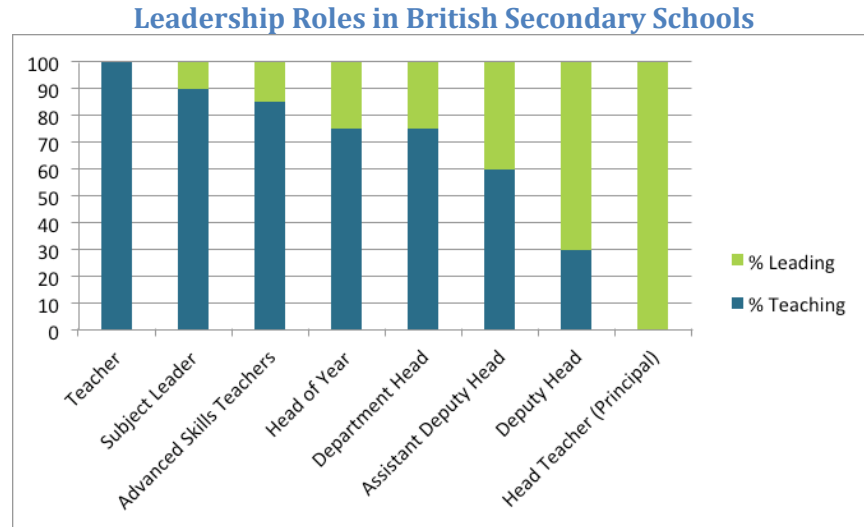
Distributed leadership has a positive impact on teacher relationships and student achievement

Effective distributed leadership targeted at improving instruction strengthens the professional community among teachers and is a strong predictor of instructional practices that are associated with student achievement ([Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Walhstrom, and Anderson, 2010](#)).

Specific roles and responsibilities will vary by level

Analysis of the United Kingdom's school leadership roles reveals that ([Petrilli and Northern, 2014](#)):

- Each level (and some differing roles within the level) comes with its own mix of time devoted to teaching and time spent leading (see figure below).
- Each role and its requisite skills require sequenced training and reflect progression on the career ladder.
- Such role changes for teachers in the United States would likely have substantial implications for contracts, compensation schemes, and certification rules.



Implementation matters

- Distributed leadership is distinct from shared leadership, in that the emphasis is not on whether designated roles exist, but how leadership is distributed and whether designated teachers are responsible for carrying out certain leadership *practices* ([Harris and Spillane, 2008](#)).
- Successful teacher leadership programs depend on: 1) whether roles and responsibilities are officially recognized and thoughtfully developed; and 2) whether teachers have time for planning in order to teach and lead effectively ([Riordan, 2003](#)).
- For distributed leadership to be effective, states and districts should consider a whole-scale *redesign* of the principal’s role. Though some responsibilities may be delegated, principals will assume new oversight responsibilities. ([Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Walhstrom, and Anderson, 2010](#)).