Resource A: Distributed Leadership
A Definition for Policymakers
The term “distributed leadership” is used throughout the education sector, yet it is rarely defined. Further, many similar terms, such as shared leadership and collective leadership, are often used interchangeably with distributed leadership, potentially contributing to confusion among education researchers, policymakers, advocates, and other stakeholders. On the basis of our literature review, as well as our decades of experience training school and system-level leaders, we have developed the following research- and practice-based definition of distributed leadership:

**DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP | A DEFINITION FOR POLICYMAKERS**

Distributed leadership refers to a range of flexible approaches to school organization, management, and operations that expand traditional conceptions of leadership to include a wide range of both formal and informal leadership roles and activities.

While the specifics may vary by context, all models include an effective principal who fosters a trusting culture, promotes collaboration, and organizes, taps, andmarshals school resources (including through staffing, scheduling, and other structures and strategies) to help build the leadership and overall capacity of teachers, students, parents, and the school community as a whole.

When these elements are in place, distributed leadership approaches can yield important improvements to school and student outcomes that may exceed the sum of individual contributions.

Distributed leadership is an approach to improving school and student outcomes that extends traditional conceptions of leadership in several crucial ways:

**Distributed approaches expand our conception of who leads** beyond formal leaders (e.g., the principal, assistant principals, and deans) to more members of the school community. It shifts the focus of school leadership from the principal as a lone, heroic leader to the broader school organization and its constituents, including teachers, other educators and support staff, students, parents, and even local community members. The distributed perspective also expands the focus from people in formal leadership roles (i.e., those who have positional leadership or authority) to a recognition of informal leadership that is executed by many individuals within the school community. In other words, some individuals may serve in formal leadership roles while many—or even most—do not. The principal role in distributed approaches is crucial, as we’ll explore further in the sections that follow. At the same time, while the positional authority of the principal and other formal leaders represents an important place to start understanding leadership within a school building, a deeper and more accurate conception of leadership will look at the many people within a school community who exercise leadership, in big ways and small.

**Distributed approaches broaden our understanding of how various members of the school community might exercise leadership.** The distributed perspective encompasses both the formal, more structured “principal plus defined-role leaders” approach to school organization and the reality that leadership is a living practice that is highly influenced by the local context and emerging, even daily developments within school communities. In other words, distributed approaches look beyond leadership via authority—an individual is “in charge” and, therefore, others must comply—to an expanded understanding of who leads and of the practices, functions, and activities that constitute leadership. In particular, distributed approaches acknowledge that leadership occurs when individuals work together to make decisions, identify and solve problems, build and share expertise, and otherwise influence the way the school operates to meet shared goals. Through these processes, individuals can transfer, exchange, or create shared knowledge and strategies related to instructional practices, classroom management, and other crucial aspects of their work. For some, especially those accustomed to and perhaps more comfortable with traditional, hierarchical notions of authoritative leadership, this shift may feel like a radical re-envisioning of leadership.

4 Gronn, 2002.
Distributed approaches showcase greater variety regarding when and where leadership is exercised. Often, we think of leadership taking place via formal processes (e.g., team meetings, parent-teacher associations, etc.)—and, indeed, such structured opportunities can support the aligned, sustained execution of leadership by more individuals who have a stake in the success of students and the school as a whole. At the same time, distributed approaches recognize the important ways individuals lead through influence. Social interactions within schools create “influence relationships” by which individuals, even those who do not hold formal leadership titles but often have important experience or expertise to share, can serve as important leaders within the building. Hence, the distributed approach acknowledges that leadership also occurs in the daily interactions among members of the school community (e.g., hallway conversations between teachers, interactions among parents outside of school, etc.) and that these interactions can substantially influence school culture, operations, and outcomes. In this way, the distributed perspective highlights the situational nature of leadership: how individuals respond to challenges that arise in their work and take initiative to proactively advance ideas, practices, and solutions that improve the teaching and learning environment in their schools. In other words, leadership can occur whenever and wherever issues that need to be addressed arise.

Distributed approaches shift our perspective on why we should aim to expand leadership. It is not simply about restructuring the organization to share the workload of leadership, which has become unmanageable for a single principal to handle—though that is certainly part of it. In the distributed perspective, we are equally concerned with how individuals work as a collective to achieve more than the sum of their individual contributions and thereby strengthen a school’s overall capacity for improvement. Distributed leadership highlights how expanded leadership takes advantage of and multiplies previously untapped expertise—and how it promotes the effectiveness and sustainability of school improvement efforts that lead to measurable improvements in student achievement and other important outcomes. By recognizing leadership as both “designed” and “lived,” the distributed perspective can help principals identify all sources of leadership in the building and take advantage of untapped leadership potential. In some cases, it can also help formal leaders address practices that may undermine shared school improvement efforts. Underlying the distributed perspective are notions of collective, collaborative, shared, and conjoined processes that allow all members of a school community to work together in pursuing common goals, organizational learning, and individual growth. In this respect, distributed leadership is an approach for achieving better-informed decision-making, greater instructional effectiveness, and general school improvement—not merely lightening a principal’s workload by asking other individuals to take on specific leadership duties.

Taken together, distributed approaches are inherently flexible. With an expanded understanding of who leads, how they exercise leadership, when and where leadership occurs, what leadership looks like in practice, and why distributed approaches to leadership are valuable, it becomes clear that many aspects of distributed models will look different from one school to the next. Given how much of the decisions related to distributed leadership are influenced by the school context—including its assets, needs, priorities, and preferences—variation is to be expected. Distributed approaches also are affected by local conditions, the resources and constraints within the system that ultimately shape what happens in classrooms and schools. For distributed leadership to address the unique needs of schools, it must look different from one school to the next and from one local context to another. The flexible nature of distributed leadership is, thus, by design. It is, in fact, an aspect of the distributed approach that makes it so valuable: it can be applied to any school, urban or rural, high-achieving or in-need-of-improvement, anywhere.

---

9. Spillane et al., 2009.
10. Spillane et al., 2009.