Resource B: Distributed Leadership
Literature Review Findings
Many studies have been conducted on distributed leadership or similar approaches to school leadership, including shared leadership, collaborative leadership, collective leadership, and teacher leadership. For this literature review, we initially examined more than 70 studies and articles on distributed leadership and related topics. Of those, 32 seminal works met our criteria for inclusion in the in-depth literature review and are listed at the end of this resource.

The research we reviewed suggests that distributed leadership offers a powerful way of perceiving and understanding leadership as it exists in schools. It has the potential to help schools achieve what they cannot under the leadership of a single principal or even a small group of administrators. Further, distributed leadership models may enhance schools' capacity for organizational learning and for collective improvement by tapping un- or under-utilized leadership potential in a school. As a result, distributed approaches may support more-sustainable school improvement.

Below we highlight key outcomes of effective distributed leadership approaches and other takeaways from our literature review. We explain how those outcomes meet evidence requirements under federal law, and we describe six key elements common across distributed leadership models. Finally, we include research citations for the 32 seminal reports from which we have drawn our findings.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP | SCHOOL AND STUDENT OUTCOMES
1) Promotes Collaboration—Strong Evidence
2) Fosters Teacher Leadership—Strong Evidence
3) Supports Instructional Improvement—Moderate Evidence
4) May Increase Teacher Job Satisfaction and Foster Stronger Organizational Commitment—Promising Evidence
5) May Contribute to Increased Student Achievement—Promising Evidence

1) Distributed Leadership Promotes Collaboration
In schools where leadership is distributed effectively, there is greater collaboration among school staff members and more-collaborative team problem-solving and decision-making. These findings come from a report by Jonathan Supovitz and Namrata Tognatta, based on data gathered via an experimental study of the Philadelphia Distributed Leadership Initiative. The results were positive and statistically significant.

TAKEAWAY: Distributed leadership approaches can be an effective strategy for building trusting, collaborative school cultures in which school leaders, teachers, and other community members work together toward a shared vision for student success.

2) Distributed Leadership Fosters Teacher Leadership
Distributed leadership models promote and strengthen teacher leadership, increasing educator voice in shaping school practices and providing exceptional teachers with more and better opportunities to expand their reach, positively influence instruction, and advance in their careers. These findings come from a report by Jonathan Supovitz and Matthew Riggan, based on data gathered via an experimental study of the Philadelphia Distributed Leadership Initiative. Once again, the results were positive and statistically significant.

TAKEAWAY: Distributed leadership approaches can be an effective strategy for creating career ladders for teachers and supporting teachers to expand their reach to benefit more students.

3) Distributed Leadership Supports Instructional Improvement

In schools where leadership is distributed more widely, teachers engage in a number of important practices that support instructional improvement. Teachers are more likely to access teacher leaders and other formal instructional leaders as resources for their development, rather than solely relying on advice from nearby colleagues who may or may not have the necessary expertise to support their instructional needs. In addition, in schools where teacher leaders are regularly tapped to lead team meetings—as opposed to schools in which administrators lead most meetings—more discussions about instructional change occur. Notably, it is not just the existence of these opportunities that matters, but also how the meetings are run: when individuals who are already seen as informal leaders within the building are tapped for formal leadership positions, teams have more-candid conversations about how to improve instruction in the context of their schools and classrooms. These findings come from a report by Eric Camburn and S.W. Han assessing data from a quasi-experimental study of the America’s Choice Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Program, which relies heavily on a distributed leadership approach to reorganizing schools. This study included many features of high-quality research, but it is missing the key ingredient of random assignment. The results were positive and statistically significant.

**TAKEAWAY:** Distributed leadership approaches can be an effective strategy for improving instructional practices across a school, especially when school leaders tap the right expertise within the building for leadership opportunities.

4) Distributed Leadership May Increase Teacher Job Satisfaction and Foster Stronger Organizational Commitment

Teachers express greater job satisfaction when they work in schools where leadership is distributed. This outcome appears to be strongly related to the quality and quantity of peer collaboration teachers engage in during their daily work. In addition, teachers in distributed leadership settings have greater academic optimism, efficacy, and trust, and they are more willing to work with their colleagues outside of their own classrooms and to make altruistic contributions as members of the organization. This is particularly so when leadership roles and functions are distributed across an organization through careful and collective planning, with buy-in from the members of the organization, and where there is alignment among school departments. Further, in schools where leadership is highly distributed and teams are more cohesive, teachers demonstrate stronger organizational commitment. Organizational commitment refers to teachers’ belief in shared goals and values and their willingness to take action to make a positive impact on the school community.

Of note, the research shows that the distribution of supportive leadership functions (e.g., setting and promoting a collective school vision and motivating staff and community members), rather than distribution of supervisory leadership functions (e.g., managing and holding staff accountable), predicts stronger organizational commitment of teachers. Thus, school leaders should be supported in efforts to distribute specific leadership responsibilities, including those that enable teachers to work together to create shared values, establish a common sense of purpose, and develop shared goals.

These positive, statistically significant findings come from three correlational studies, which look at the relationship between variables but cannot point to cause-and-effect, authored by Darlene García Torres; by Blair Mascall, Kenneth Leithwood, Tiiu Straus, and Robin Sacks; and by Hester Hulpia, Geert Devos, and Yves Rosseel.

**TAKEAWAY:** Distributed leadership approaches may be an effective strategy for addressing teacher retention issues.

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8 Supovitz and Riggan, 2012.
9 Supovitz and Riggan, 2012.
10 Camburn and Han, 2009.
5) Distributed Leadership May Contribute to Increased Student Achievement

Studies connecting distributed leadership to student outcomes are limited. Identifying the unique effect of distributed leadership on student outcomes, like all leadership interventions, is inherently challenging, as leaders’ influence on students is often indirect, multifaceted, and difficult to disentangle from the other school factors. That said, two studies have begun to show how distributing leadership across multiple stakeholders could shape student outcomes.

In one study, teachers’ perceptions of how well their principals promoted and enhanced leadership by other staff was positively related to school improvement capacity, and the level of school improvement capacity was then positively related to student growth in reading and math. In another study, the strength of leadership across multiple school stakeholders was found to have an indirect, positive effect on student achievement; distributed leadership was found to improve teachers’ motivation, performance, and work environments, which in turn correlated with stronger student achievement outcomes. Of note, this study found especially strong correlations between greater student achievement and higher levels of influence by staff teams (though not individual teacher leaders), individual parents, parent advisory councils, and students.

These findings come from two correlational studies of collaborative and collective leadership approaches conducted by Phillip Hallinger and Ronald Heck, and by Kenneth Leithwood and Blair Mascall. The results in both reports were positive and statistically significant; however, due to the studies’ designs, they suggest a relationship but cannot point to cause-and-effect.

**TAKEAWAY:** Distributed leadership approaches are likely a strategy to improve student achievement, especially if they include a focus on instructional leadership teams and on strategically engaging and empowering parents and students.

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19 Leithwood and Mascall, 2008.
20 Leithwood and Mascall, 2008.
While the research has not prescribed a pre-packaged distributed leadership program, through our literature review we identified a set of six common characteristics of effective distributed leadership models. In this section, we describe these key elements and, in doing so, offer a framework for conceptualizing the flexible notion of distributed leadership.

**DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP | 6 KEY ELEMENTS**

- Key Element 1: An Effective Principal
- Key Element 2: Collaborative Learning, Problem-Solving, and Decision-Making
- Key Element 3: Strategic Opportunities for Engagement
- Key Element 4: Empowered Staff and Community Members, Especially Teacher Leaders
- Key Element 5: A Culture of Trust
- Key Element 6: A Focus on Capacity-Building

**Key Element 1: An Effective Principal.** In successful, high-performing schools, formal leaders exercise leadership that empowers, encourages, and supports others to develop their own capacity to lead.\(^{21,22}\) In distributed approaches, a skilled principal is key—not a lone, heroic leader, but rather an individual with both positional and relational authority who is committed to fostering leadership across the school and who has the mindset, knowledge, skills, and supports necessary to bring a distributed leadership approach to life. As a practical matter, keeping the role of the principal at the forefront acknowledges the structure and organization of authority established by the district, which presumes the existence of a formal leader at the top of the school hierarchy. In addition to reflecting the reality of how most schools are structured today, distributed leadership models also acknowledge the reality that democratic or participatory decision-making processes can get stuck; a formal leader can exercise leadership differently depending on context,\(^{23}\) sometimes engaging in truly collective, consensus-driven decision-making and, at other times, gathering input before making the ultimate call, thereby ensuring smooth, efficient operations.

Below we elaborate on the importance of the principal’s role by highlighting the ways in which research has found principals to be especially crucial for bringing each of these key elements of distributed leadership approaches to life.

**Key Element 2: Collaborative Learning, Problem-Solving, and Decision-Making.** In schools where leadership is effectively distributed, all school actors, including those who do not hold formal leadership positions, help to establish a shared understanding of their school’s particular needs, deliberating on solutions and establishing shared goals.\(^{24}\) A single authority figure does not dictate individual practices or plans for action. Rather, individual practices are planned, executed, and improved based on collaborative processes and the collective learning that occurs through those processes.\(^{25}\) Mutual influence is the norm: teachers’ practice is affected by school leaders, for example, but teachers also engage with and actively influence the problem-solving and decision-making that leads to instructional changes or other shifts in classroom practice.

To Foster Collaborative Learning and Decision-Making, Principals Must Lead Differently. For principals, distributing leadership requires that they figure out alternative expressions of their leadership.\(^{26}\) They may have to adjust how they exercise their authority, and the extent to which they exert it; in the process, they take on new acts of leadership as someone who fosters and develops leadership in others.\(^{27}\) Rather than by serving as the sole decision-makers, they must exert influence by nurturing effective, skillful, and well-informed problem-solving and decision-making on the part of their staff and other members of their school communities. Further, they must understand that empowered staff will necessarily sometimes disagree with their decisions and that these divergences must be handled respectfully and in a way that optimizes team culture and decision-making.\(^{28}\)

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\(^{26}\) Supovitz and Riggan, 2012.

\(^{27}\) New Leaders, 2012.

Key Element 3: Strategic Opportunities for Engagement. Creating and supporting leadership teams, professional learning communities (PLCs), councils, and other structured opportunities for teachers, students, parents, and other school community members is a key strategy for promoting the collaborative learning, problem-solving, decision-making, and capacity-building that are central to distributed leadership approaches. For example, by having regular, predictable opportunities to work together during the school day, teachers can exercise leadership by leading a grade-level or department meeting, observing a colleague’s lesson, or facilitating a data-driven inquiry cycle. During these sessions, other teachers learn valuable information to help improve their practice, and they have opportunities to participate in problem-solving and decision-making, giving them a voice in the school’s improvement strategies. Parent and student councils and community meetings provide similar opportunities for other school stakeholders to engage in leadership and shared decision-making. In this way, distributed leadership teams promote collaboration among teachers and staff, and support individual and collective efforts to improve instructional practice.29

With the Right Local Conditions, Principals Can Create Structured Opportunities for Engagement. Principals create school schedules and can provide regular time for teachers and community members to get together to share ideas, collaborate, problem-solve, improve their practice, and engage in conversations about how to best advance school goals. These opportunities could be formal (e.g., professional development sessions, department meetings, PTA meetings, etc.) or informal (e.g., scheduling common prep periods for all grade levels so teachers can informally connect to discuss problems of practice). Principals can also ensure staff are tapped for formal leadership roles have time built into their days to learn, plan, and execute leadership responsibilities. All of these choices require principals to be thoughtful about how and when teachers and other community members are able to engage with one another, paying special attention to the expectations teachers have regarding their planning periods, practical concerns with parent schedules, and other considerations. Provided they have appropriate flexibility and are not limited by local constraints on the school schedule, principals can play a powerful role in creating structures to support distributed leadership.

Key Element 4: Empowered Staff and Community Members, Especially Teacher Leaders. An important element of a distributed approach is when staff and community members feel empowered to exercise leadership. Their empowerment comes from being aware that their knowledge and experiences are assets to the organization, being appreciated for what they have to offer, and having opportunities to make a real impact.30 It can also be helpful for individuals to have opportunities to explore their own needs and interests, so that they may feel they are growing personally and professionally while advancing the goals of the broader organization.31 The literature also emphasizes the importance of improving teachers’ self-confidence to act as leaders in order to build their capacity to lead.32

Principals Grow Leaders to Meet Their Unique Needs. Principals have an important role to play in encouraging and supporting individuals, especially teachers, to take on new responsibilities and roles.33 In terms of managing leadership structures, principals ensure formal leaders understand the expectations for their work as leaders, and they set the tone for a school climate that encourages everyone to take initiative and engage in acts of leadership, both large and small. Understanding the experience and expertise of teachers and other community members, including acknowledging informal leadership taking place in their schools, principals can strategically tap individuals for leadership positions—especially teacher leader roles—and prioritize specific skills or backgrounds during hiring. While policymakers can support schools to implement and sustain new leadership roles—e.g., through investments in teacher leadership—it is crucial that principals and schools retain sufficient autonomy to use new positions, dollars, and other resources to meet their needs.35 Optimally, principals, in collaboration with their school communities, will design a model of distributed leadership that works best for their context, and the specific roles and opportunities will vary from school to school.

31 Harris, 2003.
32 Harris, 2003.
33 Supovitz and Riggin, 2012.
Key Element 5: A Culture of Trust. In the distributed approach, people who are not in traditional leadership roles have opportunities to provide feedback, engage in shared decision-making, and contribute to collective improvement efforts in an environment in which they can trust that their input and contributions will be respected and valued. \(^{26}\) Trust among staff and teachers plays a crucial role in determining the effectiveness of a distributed approach to leadership. \(^{27}\) High-functioning leadership teams tend to be preceded by strong trust between the team and the school principal. \(^{28}\) While trust is essential in creating a culture of shared decision-making, fostering it can be one of the most challenging tasks, depending on the history of administrator-teacher, teacher-teacher, or other relationships within the school. \(^{29}\) Given that a distributed approach expects teachers to exercise duties above and beyond their traditional roles and responsibilities, whether formally or informally, it is perhaps unsurprising that trust is so important. Engaging in collective learning, problem-solving, and shared decision-making, all geared toward achieving a common goal for the school organization, are aspects of the distributed approach that could be viewed as exciting or anxiety-producing for staff members, depending on the level of trust they have in school leaders as well as the level buy-in they feel for the vision.

Principals Play a Key Role in Building a Culture of Trust. It is crucial for the principal to ensure that this trust exists in a school, and research has found this is especially true in the context of distributed leadership models. \(^{30}\) For distributed leadership models to be effective, it is particularly important that trusting relationships exist between administrators and teachers, \(^{31}\) as well as between teachers and other members of the school community.

Key Element 6: A Focus on Capacity-Building and Sustainability

Distributing leadership helps members of the school community grow and improve in their individual practice and strengthens a school’s overall capacity for improvement. In particular, effective teachers who take on instructional leadership responsibilities deepen their expertise by teaching and coaching their peers, going back into their own classrooms with stronger practice; in addition, they maximize instructional improvement schoolwide by affecting the practice of their colleagues in other classrooms. \(^{32}\) By recognizing teachers’ instructional expertise as a valued asset for the school and tapping teachers to lead instructional programming—from selecting or recommending curricula, to leading student data analyses, and observing and providing feedback to colleagues on their practice—schools can achieve immediate improvements. \(^{33}\) They are also better positioned to sustain those improvements over time. \(^{34}\)

Principals Are Uniquely Positioned to Distribute Leadership to Build Capacity. As the leaders of the school’s vision of excellence, equity, and improvement—and often the individuals responsible for implementing or, at minimum, overseeing staff evaluations and related professional development—principals are uniquely positioned to connect both individual and collective strengths to school priorities.

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\(^{26}\) Dinham, 2005.
\(^{28}\) Supovitz and Riggin, 2012.
\(^{29}\) Supovitz and Riggin, 2012.
\(^{31}\) Supovitz and Riggan, 2012.
\(^{34}\) Hallinger and Heck, 2009.
DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP | LITERATURE REVIEW BACKGROUND
We focused our research on 32 seminal reports of distributed leadership, all of which were published post-2000. These works represent almost exclusively empirical studies of distributed leadership rather than other related or similar concepts. In addition, we home in on those works that base their conceptualization and operationalization of distributed leadership in the theories and literature that have defined it as a distinctive concept. We have included findings from select works that offer definitions of other similar concepts that resemble our definition of distributed leadership. With a few notable exceptions, the works featured in this review are studies of the United States school context.


