Resource C: Distributed Leadership
Research and Policy Considerations
We have learned a great deal about distributed leadership that policymakers can use to support their goals for school and student success. Nevertheless, the research base on distributed leadership approaches continues to be limited in several ways. In particular, future research could explore other shared elements of distributed models based on:

- **School level or size.** For example, it may be that distributed approaches in elementary schools look very different from those enacted in high schools. School size generally may be more important than the grade levels of the students served.

- **School location.** For example, distributed approaches in rural areas may share unique characteristics when compared with schools in more densely populated urban areas.

- **History of school performance.** For example, a distributed model designed to transform a low-performing school may look very different from a model designed to move a school from good to great.

- **Staff experience or tenure.** For example, distributed approaches in schools led by novice principals or those with a large percentage of new staff (such as a start-up) may differ in important ways from schools led by a veteran principal or those whose staffs have been relatively stable for a long period of time.

- **Student or community characteristics.** For example, it may be that successful distributed leadership approaches for schools serving large populations of Latinx students share similar characteristics, whereas those serving students who come from lower- or higher-income households may differ. Or they may not—the empirical research does not shed light on these and similar questions.

There is also a **lack of attention to the larger context in which schools operate**—the extent to which policies and conditions work together to support or inhibit school-level approaches to distributed leadership. For example, it may be that certain types of governance structures (e.g., local school councils) tend to foster or inhibit distributed leadership models. We do not know whether traditional public schools, public charter schools, private or independent schools, innovation schools, or schools run by other entities (e.g., the Bureau of Indian Education) can offer additional lessons on how context affects the effectiveness of distributed approaches. The research has not sufficiently explored these and related questions.

In addition, **gaps in a number of other areas are of strategic importance.** For example, is there a difference in the magnitude of impact when leaders in emerging roles (e.g., teacher leaders, parent-teacher advisory council leaders, etc.) are compensated for their leadership responsibilities? What compensation structures or priorities (e.g., ensuring funding is available for substitute teachers, childcare during parent and community engagement sessions, etc.) lead to stronger school and student outcomes? Many school systems are also grappling with significant gaps in the diversity of their education workforce, which, if addressed, could promote stronger academic outcomes for students of color. Given that the principal ranks remain overwhelmingly white and male, yet research has found benefits for both students and teachers when principals share their racial/ethnic identity, how can distributed leadership support efforts to increase the diversity and effectiveness of the educator workforce as a whole?

Finally, **constraints inherent to the distributed leadership framework** make designing high-quality research challenging. Because of its flexible nature—and the fact that variation is not only expected, but actually part of its value—distributed leadership is, and will continue to be, a difficult concept to study and from which to draw universal conclusions.

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