SUSTAINING READING FIRST

Sustainability Series
Number 2
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Developing Effective Reading Leadership

Two Ways to Sustain Your Program: Distributed and Focused Leadership

The Qualities of Successful Leaders

Some of the Roles Good Leaders Play

Finding the Right People to Lead Your Program

Leadership for Sustainability

Welcome

Sustainability Series Number 2

Sustainability is the ability of a staff to maintain the core beliefs and values (culture) of a program and use them to guide program adaptations over time while maintaining improved or enhanced outcomes.

adapted from Century and Levy, 2002

This brief was designed to assist education leaders at all levels—school, district, and state—to sustain the success of the Reading First initiative in teaching students to read well. Strong leadership is an important aspect of the scientifically based school-wide reading models established with Reading First funds. Strong leadership—especially instructional leadership—is needed at all levels of an educational organization (district, school, grade level, and classroom) to assure and sustain strong implementation of the Reading First model. This brief looks at what it takes to create the conditions for widespread success, to provide strong leadership in a school and district, and thereby to bring more students to benchmark levels in reading.

This brief, second in a series addressing key aspects of sustainability, can be useful in workshops designed to help leaders in your school, district, or state sustain the success they have established through the Reading First initiative. Other aspects of sustaining school-wide reading models that are based on scientific research will be addressed in other briefs in this series. Please check the Reading First Sustainability website to see when new briefs will be available.

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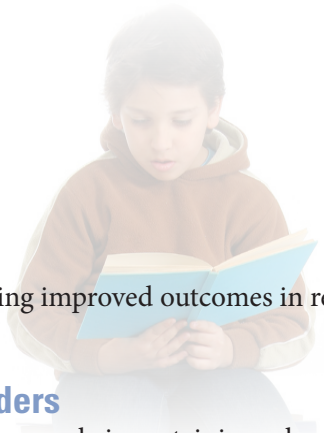

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The leader has to be practical and a realist, yet must talk the language of the visionary and the idealist.

Eric Hoffer

What is Reading Leadership?

Things do not necessarily improve with the passage of time. Skills do not improve without practice and change initiatives do not succeed without effort and attention. Many would argue what is needed to support and sustain positive change is strong leadership.

Leadership is the key to moving an organization forward. In an educational organization, what is needed most is for instructional leadership to (1) take the initiative to guide others towards a mission-oriented vision, and (2) work through others to positively affect student outcomes.

> The quality of a person's [work] life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor.
>
> Vincent T. Lombardi

Leaders are the people in an organization with the authority to make system-wide changes happen and persist when the results are favorable. Without leadership, organizations are more likely to stagnate or regress over time, rather than improve and sustain their change initiatives.

Strong leadership—especially instructional leadership—is needed at all levels of an educational organization to assure and sustain strong implementation of the Reading First model. This is true in districts, schools, grade levels, and classrooms. Thus, our view of leadership goes beyond the role of the principal to include superintendents, directors, supervisors, and coordinators at the district level; as well as coaches, teachers, and specialists at the building level. In this brief, we will examine the leadership considerations that contribute to initial success of the Reading First model in a school, as well as those which enable continued success over time, even in the face of changing priorities, loss of startup funds, and personnel changes.

The Qualities of Successful Leaders

What qualities does a school or district leader need to guide the staff to improve the reading outcomes of its students and to sustain these increases over time? How are those qualities manifested? Certainly the conferring of a title—principal, coach, director, supervisor—is insufficient to change outcomes. Those who fill these roles must possess certain qualities and must express these qualities in the daily fulfillment of their roles. A review of the leadership literature in the area of school improvement reveals several recurring themes related to leadership qualities:

SUCCESSFUL LEADERS...

Convey Expectations and Empower Success

- Leaders have high expectations of all staff. They communicate expectations clearly, provide support to empower staff to meet these expectations, and hold staff accountable for demonstrating improved student outcomes.
- Leaders are committed to distributing leadership and to empowering others as co-leaders of the Reading First initiative. They actively involve others, support their efforts, and empower their success.
- Leaders are committed to continuous improvement of the school's instructional program. They communicate this expectation to their staff, and they are actively engaged in making improvement a reality.
- Leaders possess understanding of the students' context. They assure that teachers know what it takes to teach their students and do not allow students' situations to be an excuse for failure.

Value Growth

Leaders guide staff in developing, revising, and revisiting their statement of purpose.

Leaders are committed to professional development activities and support of adult skill development. They demonstrate this commitment by providing the time and funding needed to carry them out, and assuring implementation support afterwards.

Take a Knowledge-based Approach To Participation and Management

Leaders have a working knowledge of effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices in teaching beginning reading.

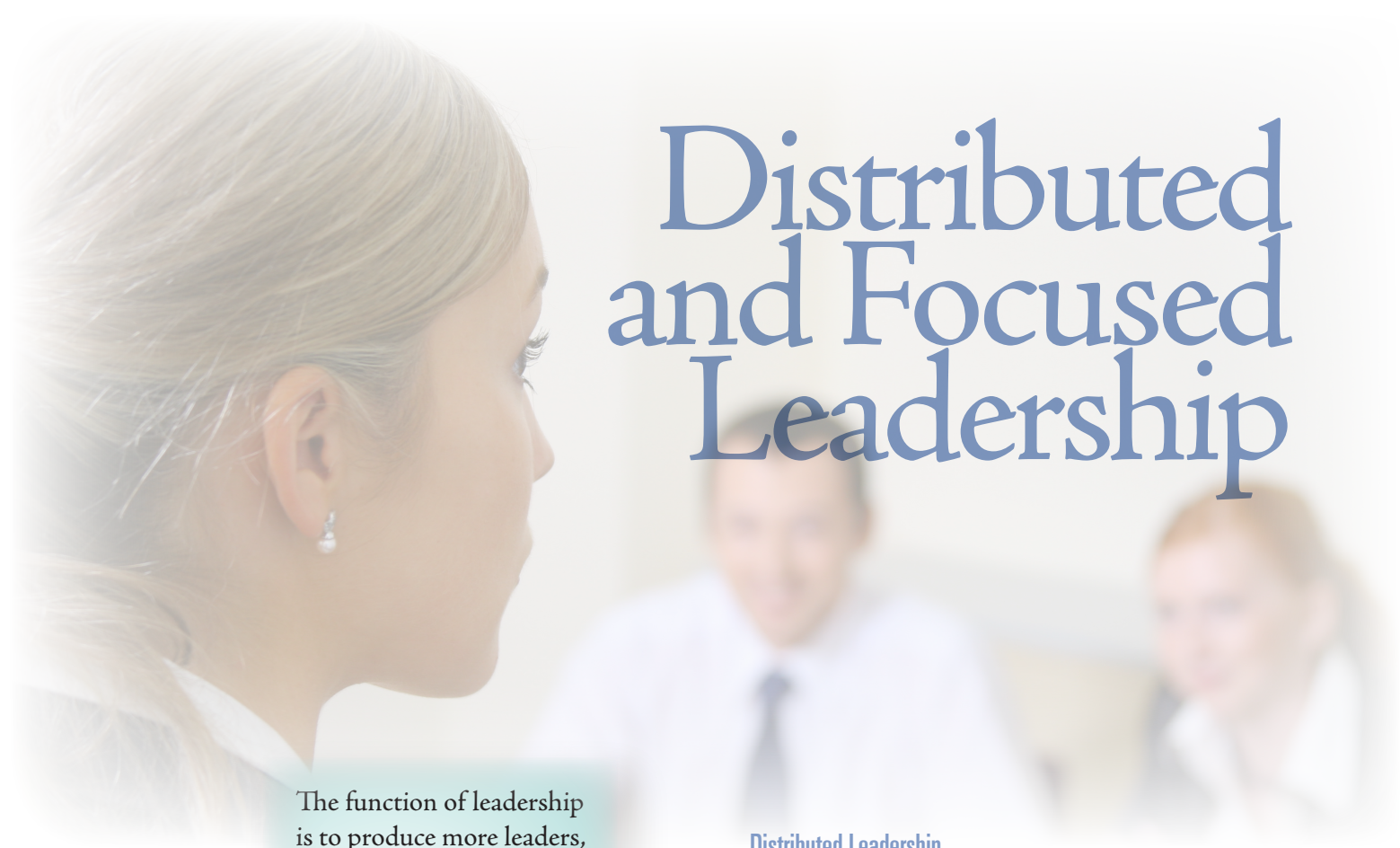
Leaders are committed to aligning resources with goals and priorities and to recruiting additional resources to address these priorities. They build budgets around goals and "find money" when needed.

Communicate and Motivate

Leaders have highly effective communication skills. They communicate in a clear, compelling, and convincing manner, frequently and with conviction.

Leaders can galvanize stakeholders around their vision for the school. They communicate convincingly with staff, parents, district, and community about the reading mission and vision.

Leaders have a clear vision. They frequently articulate an inspiring vision of student success and engage staff in developing practices to make this vision a reality.



Distributed and Focused Leadership

> The function of leadership is to produce more leaders, not more followers.
>
> *Ralph Nader*

Distributed Leadership

In Reading First, aspects of leadership can be effectively distributed to coaches, school reading teams, and grade-level reading teams. This is accomplished by giving individuals in these roles the authority to perform prescribed duties, providing them the support needed to succeed, and holding them accountable for outcomes. Sometimes this leadership emerges naturally. Often it can be actively developed in those who show promise and commitment to the goals of the initiative. Several examples of Reading First leadership tasks that can be distributed to players other than principals are summarized in Table 1.

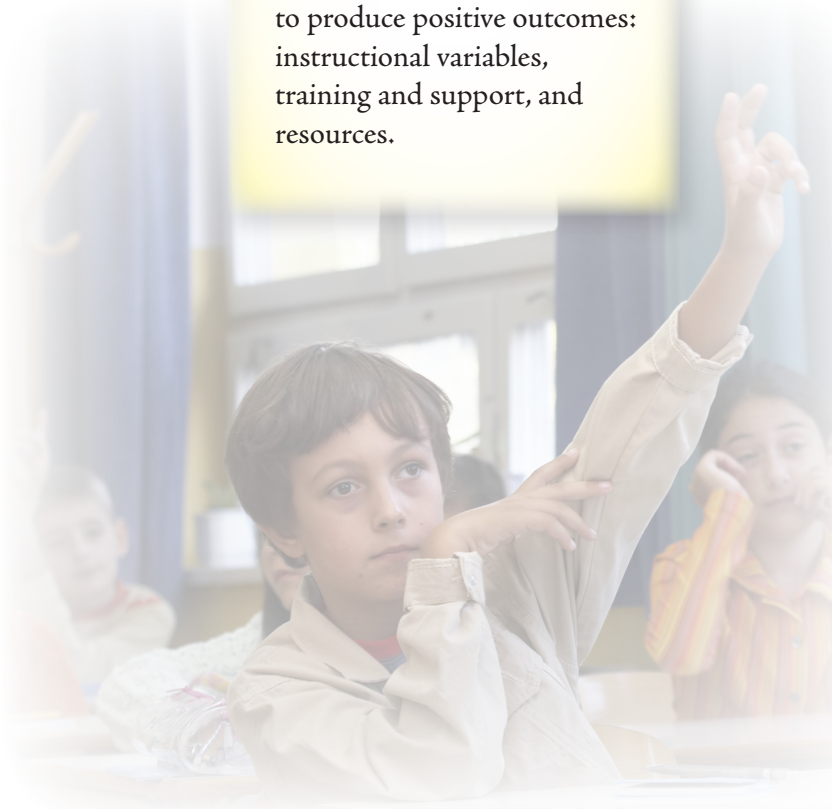
Table 1: Leadership Roles and Tasks in Reading First

Position or Role	Distributed Leadership Activity
Reading Coach	Facilitate data-based instructional planning Help plan and provide follow-up on instructional trainings
Principal Reading Coach Instructional Specialists Teachers	Contribute to school-wide reading team Contribute to grade-level reading team Present a training activity or best practice Serve a term as the building expert on a specific aspect of Reading First (e.g., curriculum program, interpreting data, or teaching strategies) Participate in special planning and training activities
Classroom Teachers	Mentor new teachers
All Stakeholders	Support and promote building reading culture: 1) discuss mission, vision, and expectations, 2) communicate common reading practices, and 3) take ownership of the things that can be controlled in the leader's role.

How can leadership be both focused and distributed?

…Leadership must be distributed among all those who have a stake in the success of an initiative.

…Leadership must be focused on those things that possess capacity and potential to produce positive outcomes: instructional variables, training and support, and resources.



Focused Leadership

To be effective, leadership must be focused on three broad areas. The most critical area encompasses instructional leadership—activities directly related to learning. The active involvement of leaders in matters related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and data utilization is essential to elevate these issues to the highest priorities of the school.

To support student learning, adequate attention must be focused on adult learning and performance in the areas related to student outcomes. Planning and delivering a well-aligned and thoughtfully sequenced program of staff development, supporting adult learning through a strong coaching function, and facilitating staff collaboration all contribute to student learning.

Finally, leaders must act to assure that all parts of the organization work well together and function in alignment with a school's mission and vision. This calls for cultivating the school's reading culture, aligning resources with goals, and engaging all stakeholders to support the effort to improve student outcomes. These leadership focal points and examples of each are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Leadership Focal Points and Examples in Reading First

Leadership Focus	Examples
Instructional Leadership	Leaders know the assessments used and their purposes and how to interpret the data and derive instructional implications. Leaders provide teachers regular opportunities to collaborate and use the data to improve instructional outcomes.
Adult Learning	Leaders plan and provide professional development and follow-up support (coaching) for adult learning; leaders provide time, structure, and facilitation for teacher collaboration; leaders make peer observation and feedback a positive, safe, and constructive norm within the school.
Organizational Effectiveness	Leaders actively develop and nurture a strong reading culture in the school; work to get all parts of the instructional system working together to serve student needs; identify and allocate resources to support student learning; engage all of the school's stakeholders in working toward its mission.

Some of the Roles Good Leaders Play

Successful and sustained school-wide initiatives require involvement of leaders at all levels. The more that leaders at each level become knowledgeable about a program's goals, become personally involved in the initiative, and align resources with the goals of the initiative, the more the program will affect student learning. Implementing a school-wide reading initiative, guiding it to success, then sustaining it over time requires staff at each level to fulfill certain functions to facilitate sustainability. Suggested leadership activities by role are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Leadership Functions for Sustainability

Level	Role	Leadership Functions Related to Sustainability
District	Superintendent School Board	Policy, culture, expectations, budget, personnel support, time/calendar/schedules, goals and priorities, community support
	Assistant Supt., Directors	Personnel elements—job description, supervision, evaluation, awareness, resource support, expectations, accountability
	Supervisors, Coordinators	Resource support
	Community Leaders and Stakeholders	Getting information out about successes and needs; engagement and awareness of constituents; resource support
School	Principal	Expectations, support, supervision, collaboration with coach, assure implementation of RF elements
	Coach	Collection, reporting, using data for instructional planning; grade level team meetings, professional development planning and follow-up; in-class technical support; orientation and mentoring of new staff
	Specialists	Expert knowledge supports the individual, grade level and program levels
	Leadership Team	Program audit, implementation fidelity, school data review, school-wide literacy, professional development planning, nurturing the reading culture, curriculum selection
Grade	Grade Level Team Leader/Facilitator	Convene and lead grade level team meetings (data review, instructional planning), assure follow-up
Classroom	Teachers	Implement elements, data review and planning with grade level team, help maintain reading culture, collaborative professional development with grade-level peers, parent engagement, student engagement, and motivation around reading

Finding the Right People to Lead Your Program

> The final test of a leader is that the leader leaves behind in other people the conviction and the will to carry on.
>
> *Walter Lippman*

A critical component of leadership is (1) getting the right people in the positions most likely to promote success of the initiative, and (2) structuring their jobs to make success possible. This is true whether superintendents or their assistants are hiring district directors, coordinators, or supervisors; whether school supervisors are hiring principals, or whether principals are hiring coaches, specialists, or teachers. There are several components to this hiring, assigning, supervising, and evaluating process.

Describe the job; state the expectations.

The job description for a district leader, principal, or coach can go a long way toward structuring his/her work and clarifying expectations for his/her accomplishments. Leaders who produce improved student outcomes within a conventionally defined role often must "break the mold" to do so. Those who succeed in a role defined by improved outcomes will have to fit the mold to be successful. In this age of accountability, we can no longer define the role of educational leaders solely in terms of administrative functions. To enable more schools and students to succeed, we must start by defining the roles and expectations for leaders in terms of improved student outcomes.

Hire leaders who are likely to succeed.

One of the most important tasks school leaders have is hiring the right people to lead their schools—leaders who can manage change and sustain improved results over time. One of the greatest threats to strong leadership in any program is the turnover that inevitably occurs over time. Effective principals, coaches and other leaders receive promotions, are transferred, move away, or retire. These losses can have significant detrimental effects upon the sustainability of any program.

One way to find effective leaders is by cultivating leaders from within the organization. Michael Fullan calls this "planned succession" (2005). Highly effective teachers can be assigned to the building reading team or trained to become coaches. Successful coaches can be given opportunities to learn the role of the principal. Strong principals can be groomed to become district leaders. Such preparation can take place through formal training (e.g., certification or licensure training), ongoing professional development in leadership knowledge and skills, or through on-the-job experiences such as shadowing, mentoring, or key roles on leadership teams or special projects.

Turnover and the need to hire leaders can also be addressed by using hiring criteria based on the qualities needed to sustain a school-wide reading initiative such as Reading First. Reading-related criteria and questions can be used to create job announcements, screen

applications, conduct interviews, and check references. Doing so will likely help locate the candidate who is most highly qualified and likely to succeed at leading a Reading First program. Examples of such criteria and questions can be found in the NCRFTA module on sustaining Reading First. (See References)

Assign wisely; transfer cautiously.

Too often, principals or district administrators are assigned to their roles based on criteria unrelated to the knowledge and skills needed to lead a successful school improvement process. When we do this, we diminish children's chances of learning to read and succeeding in school. Not only must we hire the most highly qualified leaders for all schools, we must also assign as leaders for Reading First schools professionals whose knowledge, skills, experience, vision, and commitment to student success match the mission and vision of Reading First and the needs of the students and staff. These same guidelines should apply when principals, teachers, or coaches are transferred into a school.

Train, orient, inspire & support leaders.

Leaders new to a Reading First school are likely to suffer training gaps that must be addressed. Assuming the school has a successful Reading First initiative, new leaders need to be oriented or acculturated to the reading culture of the school—to "how we do things here in reading." If there are other strong leaders already in the school, they can provide much of this orientation over the course of the first few months to a year. However, a safer pathway is for district or state leaders to take the lead with a vision for a successful Reading First school. Failure to provide this valuable training could result in failure of the program.

Supervise leaders for success.

New leaders in a Reading First school must be supported as they begin their role of leading a successful school-wide reading project. This support could come partly from an experienced and effective reading coach (if present), from a highly successful principal at another school, or from district or state reading leaders. Trainers with the knowledge of what it takes to lead such a program can provide planned professional development, "just-in-time" training or consultation, or individual mentoring on key knowledge and skills. Key areas of knowledge and skill include: understanding the curriculum, learning to collaborate with the reading coach, planning and providing professional development activities, coordinating schedules and assigning staff, instructional walk-through visits to classrooms, use of formative assessment data to guide instruction, and accessing and allocating resources.

Evaluate on results; expect accountability

No Child Left Behind has brought us fully into the age of accountability in education. This means that we monitor outcomes and adjust instruction and support as needed. If teachers are held accountable for student reading results, Reading First leaders must be held accountable for school outcomes. District leaders can do this by having principals report summary data to stakeholders (teachers, district officials, parents, and community) on a regular basis. Informally, those who supervise principals can visit the school and ask:

- What do the data look like?
- Tell me what's going well with student results.
- What challenges are you facing that may affect results?
- What are you doing about the challenges?
- How can we support your efforts?

Likewise, principals must also hold themselves accountable for teacher and student performance.

Leadership for Sustainability

If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.

John Quincy Adams

Some elements of leadership are essential for creating readiness for change or for implementing a new initiative in its early stages. Others are critical for refining or sustaining an initiative over time. Strategies that promote the sustainability of an initiative over time and examples of each are summarized below in Table 4.

Strong leadership at all levels of schooling is perhaps the single most determining factor in successfully implementing and sustaining educational change. When it is distributed across roles and focused on student learning, leadership can make the difference between success and failure in learning to read for many of the children we serve. When we lead with student success at the forefront of all we do, we empower all those with whom we collaborate to do their best work, and we make possible the realization of Reading First's noble mission and vision—enabling all students to become successful readers. Nothing we do in our roles as educators is more important.

Table 4: Leadership Activities Promoting Sustainability

Leadership Activities	Examples
Cultivate the prerequisites for sustainability	Strong implementation and culture; commitment to outcomes
Develop and nurture the driving elements of the implementation	Leadership, culture, use of data, time
Attend to the systems-level elements of the program	Instruction, personnel, budget
Prepare for staff turnover	Cultivate leaders; hiring criteria
Develop the capacity to sustain key elements	Curriculum expertise; instructional support; assessment expertise
Develop policies and procedures to guide continued implementation	Time use; materials adoption; assessment practices
Connect the program to other instructional anchors	AYP, RTI; school-wide Title 1
Engage key stakeholders in providing continued support	Teachers, district, parents, community
Provide, access, and allocate recurring resources to support program elements	Mission, vision, guiding principles, expectations, determination
Attend to the intangibles that depend on leader support	Materials budget; staffing allocation
Create, implement, and monitor a sustainability plan	Reading First sustainability plan or integrated school improvement plan

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