

Why This Book?

When I was hired to be a school principal, it was one of the greatest times in my life. I had no leadership experience, had been teaching at a high-poverty city school, and was hired to be the principal of a small rural-suburban school district. We were considered rural because of where we were located in New York State, and we were considered suburban based on the size of our student population.

For the first five years it was the best job of my life, but after 2010–2011 I realized things were changing rapidly. New York State, like many other states and many countries around the world, experienced increased mandates and accountability. Not only were we required to tie a point scale to each of our teacher observations, but high-stakes tests were tied to teacher evaluation as well. Managing these new levels of accountability was a learning experience. I learned about pressure, political agendas, and what happens when the philosophy of the school leader doesn't always mesh with the philosophy of the district, the state, or the nation. It was in this season that I found my true leadership voice.

I was one of eight principals to write a letter to the state education department to argue that high-stakes testing should never be tied to teacher evaluations. I also published many respectful, yet poignant, articles on my *Finding Common Ground* blog for Education Week focusing on why most of the accountability measures were hurting our schools. I also wrote about my understanding that the accountability measures were a consequence of having school leaders who were not necessarily doing what was best for students. However, I found that we leaders simply did not have the time to focus on instruction and meet the demands of this increased accountability. Add on budget cuts and absorbing the whole population of a one-classroom-per-grade-level school that was closed, and we were met with a perfect storm.

Unfortunately, that is when our administrative team began to fracture. Many of us, and many other leaders around the area, talked about how terrible the changes were behind closed doors, but when I went upstate to speak

out about them, I felt as though I was standing alone. Fortunately, I had strong support from administrators in western New York and Long Island.

Leadership isn't about standing behind closed doors complaining about accountability and then going to school and making teachers do it. Leadership is about going against the grain and using your voice to speak up about the things that you believe are harmful to learning. If you are against high-stakes testing, say so. If you think high-stakes testing is necessary, then say that. Leadership is about using your voice, even if it means going up against others. It is hard, but it is very, very worth it.

This book is about striking a balance between doing the things you have to do and finding a way to do the things you want to do. Instructional leadership is about focusing a little bit of your time as many days as possible on student learning. Not only is it vitally important for students, but teachers deserve a leader who respects them and wants to stand side-by-side with them. We live in complicated times, and leadership is a challenging but worthwhile calling. I was a better leader because of my teachers and students, even when the going got tough with other leaders around me. As Warren Bennis said many years ago, "Stand up and be a leader." This book will help you do just that.

We often talk about instructional leadership in our educational circles. At universities, in workshops, inspiring keynotes, and through blogs and articles, leaders are told that instructional leadership has an enormous impact on students. In John Hattie's synthesis of meta-analyses, which included more than 400 studies on the topic of leadership, instructional leadership had an effect size of .42. That is higher than the hinge point of .40, which represents a year's worth of growth for a year's input. The problem is that leaders cannot always find the time to focus on instruction and student learning and in some cases were never given practical leadership training. Instructional leadership is one of the most researched forms of leadership in the past 50 years, but it is still as clear as mud because it is difficult to pin down specific, consistent ways of putting it into practice. We are going to work all of that out and clear all of that mud as we make our way through this book together.

In a 10-year study by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), Fuller, Young, Richardson, Pendola, and Winn (2018, p. 1) found that the demands of instructional leadership are increasing:

Over the past few years, the extent to which [the typical principal] uses assessment data for instructional planning has increased, along with her involvement in helping teachers use effective instructional practice and her efforts to develop the school as a professional learning community. She spends much of her time in contact with staff, especially in her supervisory role.

The researchers (2018, p. 2) also cite areas in which leadership is getting more complicated these days when they add that principals' "awareness and involvement have increased dramatically regarding student mental health and student socioemotional awareness."

Instructional leadership is not often broken down into its finest parts, so many leaders may use the term "instructional leadership" but not really know what it is or how to do it. In education, we have a common language and use terms like "growth mindset," "differentiated instruction," and "multiple intelligences," but we often lack a common understanding of those same terms. This book is about defining a common language and a common understanding of instructional leadership.

Instructional leadership is not merely getting out of your office more often and doing walkthroughs or learning walks that provide one-sided feedback. Instructional leadership is when those in a leadership position focus on implementing practices that will increase student learning.

Instructional leadership is when those in a leadership position focus their efforts on the implementation of practices that will positively impact student learning.

Instructional leadership is about understanding how to implement improvements effectively, build collective efficacy during that implementation process, and work together with teachers and staff to build a focus on learning, so that we can improve our teaching strategies and increase student engagement. Instructional leadership is also about collecting evidence to understand our impact as leaders and practitioners.

This collective work has an enormous impact on student learning. Due to all of these moving parts that include students and teachers working together, we know that instructional leadership is a complicated leadership experience because it is merely one part of what leaders do every day. Yet, many leaders still are eager to learn how to improve their practice.

In that same NAESP study, Fuller et al. (2018, p. 2) found that although the typical principal has increased her capacity and responsibilities significantly, she

still feels she has much to learn, [and] the areas in which she would most like to receive assistance in improving her abilities are [1] improving student performance, [2] improving staff performance, and [3] school improvement planning. . . . She is most likely to participate in school- and district-provided professional development as opposed to other professional development opportunities.

Here is the issue, though: Many times, that professional development is about mandates and accountability, or it is very teacher-centered.

Unfortunately, a great deal of professional development is not about how to improve as instructional leaders. So, our average school leader expresses a need for support in improving student and staff performance, but she does not engage in professional development opportunities that will give her the tools she needs.

Since the publication of research around instructional leadership, many challenges have surfaced for building- and district-level leaders, as well as for teachers and staff members. Education departments around the world have focused on test scores due to pressure around PISA (Program for International Student Assessment), and schools have had to deal with budget cuts, increased accountability measures, board members who have a singular focus, and a higher number of students who experience trauma and mental health issues. What this means is that the focus of instructional leadership has been blurred by so many pressing issues within the school community, issues trickling down from the district office, and pressures from the state and federal government. Leaders find themselves boxed into a corner of compliance around those accountability measures and mandates and the social-emotional needs of staff members and students. Is there any wonder why instructional leadership is so difficult?

Leaders don't always know how to sort all of these issues out and put their instructional leadership skills into practice. Many leaders feel as though they simply don't have the time, because they are tasked with so many other responsibilities.

Leaders are stressed out, and they are leaving the profession at a break-neck pace. I'd like to try to change that, and I believe that the conversations around instructional leadership need a reboot. That reboot starts with six areas that I have found to be central to instructional leadership: (1) implementation, (2) a focus on learning, (3) student engagement, (4) instructional strategies, (5) collective efficacy and (6) evaluating our impact. Yet, it is rare for any of these six areas to be addressed in publications focusing on instructional leadership.

Six Areas Instructional Leaders Focus On

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| 1. Implementation | 4. Instructional strategies |
| 2. Learning | 5. Collective efficacy |
| 3. Student engagement | 6. Evaluating our impact |

As you make your way through the book, you will notice “Mindful Moment” headings throughout each chapter. I am an avid practitioner of meditation and believe we all need to learn to take moments out of our busy days just to breathe and reflect. The book will provide those moments for you.

Instructional Leadership: Creating Practice Out of Theory offers readers the research behind instructional leadership, balanced by practical steps toward becoming instructional leaders. Instructional leadership is one of more than 251 influences John Hattie has researched, and one of the most important, because it provides us with the opportunity to find our voices as leaders and have an impact on student learning.

As a former school principal who now conducts workshops and coaches leaders, I have come to learn that what the research implies that leaders should do and what leaders are *able* to do are sometimes two different things. Let’s take the time to change that.

THIS BOOK’S FEATURES

- **Author Videos**—I have provided an introductory video for each chapter, providing context and highlighting main themes.
- **Program Logic Models**—This feature will help readers define their outcome and the necessary steps to achieve that outcome.
- **Implementation Cycle**—Throughout the book there will be examples of implementation cycles that can be used for instructional leadership practices.
- **Mindful Moments**—School leadership is stressful. Throughout the book, these sections help leaders step back, take a breath, and reflect on their practices.
- **Student Voice Questions**—In each chapter, these questions will help readers reflect on interactions and engagement with students.
- **Study Guide Questions**—At the end of each chapter are questions readers can use as a study guide. I often find that groups read the book together for book clubs, leadership PLCs, and university courses. I will offer questions to help guide those discussions.
- **Instructional Leadership Reflection Framework**—At the end of this book is a reflection framework, which will help guide readers’ level of involvement in each of the instructional leadership components.