

We must expand our vision of leadership if our schools are going to reach the heights our children, our communities, and our state require.

This “conversation piece” invites teachers, administrators, school board members, and parents not only to begin *thinking* about leadership differently but also to start *participating differently* as leaders in the important work of our schools.



*“Few leaders have the competence, time, and information needed at any given time to get the job done. Wise leaders rely on others and build upon their leadership capacity... That is why leadership and learning together are so important.”*

Tom Sergiovanni (*Rethinking Leadership*,  
Corwin; 2006, p. 164)

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# **Leaders For Learners and Teachers**

## **Expanding the Vision for Leadership in Maine’s Schools**

By

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University of Maine



*Intended for distribution and discussion throughout  
the Maine education community and beyond*

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7. Let administrators know what is interfering with your ability to “be at the top of your game” as a teacher. Assist them to rearrange tasks and priorities accordingly.
8. Listen to your communities, the school board, and administrators. Appreciate the real constraints that you all work under.

### *Parents and Community Members*

1. Look for ways to actively support teachers in their work with children. Lend a hand when teachers ask for help. Learn about the challenges they face. Celebrate their successes. Offer materials. Volunteer.
2. Tell them about your child’s learning as you see it: what’s going well *and* what you’re worried about. Be a partner with the teacher in your child’s learning activities.
3. Expect the school to inform you about your child’s learning progress and about what you can do to help.
4. Keep in mind that teachers teach many children with many different learning styles and needs.
5. Volunteer to provide other learning and recreational opportunities for children outside of school and school hours. It takes a whole village to raise a child well!

**Let us know what you think!** Contact Gordon Donaldson or Richard Ackerman at [gordon.donaldson@umit.maine.edu](mailto:gordon.donaldson@umit.maine.edu) and [richard.ackerman@umit.maine.edu](mailto:richard.ackerman@umit.maine.edu)

## Leaders for Learners and Teachers

### Expanding the Vision of Leadership in Maine’s Schools

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### **Why look at leadership “from the classroom out”?**

A group of Maine educators lit on a novel idea in November 2005 at a “rethinking leadership” symposium sponsored by the Maine Educational Leadership Consortium: Why not think about school leadership from the perspective of teachers and students? So often, we think about leadership “from the boardroom”, “from the office”, or “from the university”. But the logic of this simple suggestion seemed to many of us very powerful: *When people inside the classroom feel that leadership is present in the school around them, isn’t that one of the best tests for leadership? What does leadership look and feel like to them?*

This monograph shares a vision of school leadership that emerged from conversations prompted by this novel beginning – a vision of leadership “from the classroom out”. We invite readers to explore, as we did, the potential of this perspective-shift for helping schools, districts, and the public to move beyond current leadership practice to forms of leadership that put learning and teaching more squarely in the center.

Most of us still think of leadership in terms of existing administrative roles: principal, assistant principal, superintendent, curriculum director, special education director,

school board member, department chair. These roles, however, are limited by their history, springing up as they have from the need to *manage* bigger and bigger schools with more and more complex legislated responsibilities. As most administrators tell us, it can be difficult to inspire and to innovate when you're also expected to cut budgets, trim staff, and cobble together buildings and buses from one year to the next.

In recent decades, the profession and the public have sought to *move beyond management and administration, looking for the advantages that leadership can bring* to their schools. Our renewed concern for the quality and impacts of learning for every child has fueled this emphasis on leadership. Schools need to grow, to evolve, and to be capable of meeting changing child, family, and societal needs. While every school and school district need to be expertly managed, it is leadership that will ensure that they will grow and improve, each year "doing better by all children" than they did the previous year.

To the rich dialogue about how best to lead schools, we offer this view of "leadership from the classroom out". It caught the attention of many teachers, principals, and others at the November 2005 Symposium sponsored by the Maine Educational Leadership Consortium. We hope it will ignite more imaginations and help citizen and educator leaders understand how their practice can make a bigger difference "inside the classroom" in the future.

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4. Evaluate your own decisions, initiatives, and policies by asking: "Will this decision facilitate better teaching and learning for the children and teachers in our schools?"
5. Be clear with teachers, principals, and parents about how budget and personnel decisions "put learning and teaching first" even though they are constrained by fiscal and other realities.

#### *Teachers*

1. Speak up – about what works, but especially about what you are struggling with as you strive to reach all children every day.
2. Seek partnerships with other teachers and with parents in the journey to teach every child to a higher level of learning.
3. Devote time to examine evidence of student learning, regularly diagnosing "how well we're doing" and identifying what's working and what's not.
4. Regularly join colleagues in collaborative problem-solving and sharing "what works" with them.
5. Seek from colleagues and administrators feedback on your own practice. Set goals for your own improvement. Have a plan for your own learning and get support from leaders for it.
6. Recognize and appreciate the leaders within your midst, whether administrator or teacher, and provide them with feedback on how they are helping to shape the quality of your own work with students and parents.

from attending to students, student learning, and improved practice.

6. Don't lay all leadership responsibilities at the feet of the principal.
7. When faced with a major choice, ask, "Will this decision facilitate better teaching and learning for the children and teachers here?" If not, seek another way.
8. Remind yourself that your own success as a leader hinges on how teachers and parents understand that you are contributing positively to children's success in classrooms. Each action you take that *helps* children learn and teachers teach well is an action that builds your leadership *and* the leadership of teachers!

### *School Boards*

1. Devote time to learning about what is going on in the classrooms of your school. Use this knowledge in making decisions that support success in classrooms.
2. Listen to teachers', to students', and to parents' viewpoints and experiences in the teaching and learning process. Consider their advice.
3. Expect and support administrators in the regular assessment of teaching and learning. Call for well-informed recommendations on how best to structure hiring decisions, budgets, professional development, and calendars to support high quality teaching and learning in every classroom.

### **What IS school leadership to children and teachers?**

Our discussions about this question have followed two simple prompts:

1. What do teachers and students consider effective leadership – leadership that supports their success as learners and teachers?
2. How can leadership in and around a school “feed” learning and teaching?

The first prompt calls on us to define leadership as *something that nurtures the best learning and teaching we can imagine*. And takes us into the minds of learners and teachers to understand what the key ingredients are of that “something”. The second prompt then takes us to the minds of leaders and asks us to *learn from what children and teachers have said and to try to apply that to what we think and do as leaders*. The ideas and suggestions in this document are but an initial set of answers to these questions. We look forward to many others joining into the effort to flesh them out and put them into practice in our schools.

The Maine educators who have been engaging in our dialogue propose the following indicators of leadership as it is experienced by those inside the classrooms of our schools. If leadership is present in a school, it is evidenced by teachers and children in the following ways:

1. They feel supported and encouraged in their work as learners and teachers.

At this most basic level, teachers and learners sense that the institution and culture of the school want them to succeed and are willing to stand behind their efforts to teach and learn. They can point to individuals who influence decisions in the school and district who “put the classroom first” in their words and in their actions.

This feeling emerges from several things:

2. They trust that their *efforts to learn and to succeed* – efforts which involve identifying problems and challenges and engaging in difficult and time-consuming learning activities – *are understood and supported* by those who govern the “beyond the classroom” worlds of the school. People “out there” know that learning and teaching are difficult, time-consuming, and highly individualized activities.
3. They know that they are *expected to achieve great things* – to take every learner as far as he or she can go developmentally, but to ensure a common foundation of knowledge, skills, and personal habits for all. Leadership cultivates high aspirations and the confidence to keep striving to meet them.
4. They know that their leaders are *informed about what goes on in their classrooms and offer feedback* in the spirit of learning and growth that is accurate enough to help them improve their learning and their teaching. They value knowing what is working well and what

administrators, school board members, teachers and parents can do to help move from merely *thinking* about leadership differently to *acting* differently so that the leadership of our schools is improved.

These suggestions by no means cover everything we need to do to foster superb leadership. We suggest they be considered and discussed in whatever ways seem productive in your school, district, and community. We have found that it’s particularly fruitful when groups that include people from each of these roles join together to discuss how “leadership from the classroom out” might work in their schools.

#### *Administrators*

1. Listen --- to students’, to teachers’, and to parents’ views about what can make every classroom more productive for every child.
2. Create systems to provide feedback on student learning and teaching effectiveness that are continuous, trustworthy, and useful to teachers and principals.
3. Make questions and concerns about learning and teaching “discussable” by all: children, teachers, parents, and the public.
4. Ensure frequent and relevant opportunities for teacher and administrator learning that focus on improving classroom practices.
5. Clear from teachers’ and principals’ plates tasks and topics that siphon off energy, focus, and commitment

children and adults to use their own assessments to frame new learning activities and to celebrate success. They are adept at framing and facilitating “tough questions” about performance and modulating the difficult feelings and fears that sometimes accompany improvement.

6. *Help the school as a whole and individuals within it focus their energies and resources on “what matters”* for teaching and learning. Leaders manage the environment and institutional requirements so that “what doesn’t matter directly” will not siphon off vital energy and attention from learning and teaching. They can, as well, help others take deliberate actions in areas that are “levers” for improvement of their practice.
7. Function as *transparent and unabashed learners themselves*. Leaders unselfconsciously say, “I don’t know, but let’s see if we can find out”. They are, as one participant in the Maine discussions put it, “educable and proud of it!” They are expert at asking questions, fearless at acknowledging problems, and dauntless in their pursuit of information, ideas, and “a better way”.

### **What Can I Do to Expand the Leadership in Our School?**

This pamphlet is intended to help Maine citizens and educators consider what kind of leadership supports great learning and teaching. This final section suggests some things that

is not: how today’s lesson succeeded for some children, but not for others; how an individual plan to strengthen a skill set is slowly paying off. And they trust that they will be *helped and encouraged* by those beyond the classroom to evaluate and learn from continuous feedback.

5. They feel confident that they will obtain *assistance and resources in their efforts to succeed* at their work. They believe that they are in the presence of talented, caring, resourceful people who will help them to gain access to assistance and resources to build their own expertise. Feedback without pathways to improve is ultimately defeating.
6. They know that they are in the presence of *people who respect them and their talents*. Children and adults engaged in the rich and complex work of daily learning feel leadership when they sense that others beyond their classrooms have confidence in them and their abilities. Without the sense of being respected, leadership cannot exist.
7. They believe that administrators and boards are “*being straight*” with them about the constraints that make it difficult for the school to do its best. They trust that people in those leadership positions are ready and willing to collaborate with them on creative solutions to those real limitations.

Leadership of this sort seems to revolve around two central values: honoring and respecting the people who inhabit classrooms; and understanding and supporting the intricate world of learning and improving that these people undertake all day, everyday. Embedded in these indicators are a number of implications for leaders.

### **How is this leadership practiced?**

How leadership is experienced by children and teaching staff is one thing. How it is practiced is another. For centuries, we have tried to make the translation from “knowing leadership when I see it” to “what to do to provide effective leadership”. It’s a very tricky translation. Our discussions have pursued it nevertheless, yielding some initial implications for leaders based on the indicators listed above.

If learners and teachers experience the seven conditions of leadership listed above, adults are active in and around the school who:

1. Behave in ways that *create trust* in them among those in classrooms. They come to be seen as trustworthy by those inside classrooms; their capacity to trust creates “reciprocal trust” among many others in the school. It is this trust that allows people to be honest and authentic about the challenges and successes of their daily learning and teaching work.

This fundamental trust-generating quality emerges from leaders’ ability to:

2. Form *strong, respectful professional relationships* with others and cultivate those relationships among others. These are relationships that foster openness, honesty, and personal safety. Their presence “releases” the talents of students and teachers to focus on learning tasks and the school’s important work in supporting learning.
3. Operate on *beliefs about the school* and its mission that are clear and *that plainly “put children and learning first”*. Consistencies in the behaviors and words of leaders generate a sense of integrity, centered around the central importance of learning and teaching in all the school does.
4. Invest in improving their own skills and knowledge about learning and teaching. Leaders’ *expertise about educational activities and outcomes* is fundamental to the confidence and trust that those in classrooms feel toward them. They convey to others the essential qualities and indicators of high performing learners and teachers and clarify for all the learning goals and standards of performance vital to all educational work.
5. Serve as *ongoing resources to those in classrooms*: as skilled consultants and coaches and as conduits to other resources that help with learning and teaching. Leaders can provide accurate and useful feedback, can assist