

New Leadership for New Standards

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In January, President Bush signed the “No Child Left Behind Act.” This law, backed by conservatives, moderates and liberals in Congress, requires states and school districts to test students annually in grades three through eight, increase teacher qualifications, close the achievement gap between majority and minority students within 12 years, and take forceful actions when schools fail to raise test scores for all groups of students.

These federal policies will have a great impact on the meaning of leadership in public education. If standards-based reform is to succeed, a different kind of leadership will be needed.

Currently, many leaders focus much of their time on the logistics of running a school system, such as worrying about the bus schedule and the maintenance of the buildings. This is understandable, since that is what has been asked of leaders in the past. In this new climate, improving teaching and learning must become the main concern of superintendents, principals and other education leaders. If raising academic achievement is the overriding goal, then leaders must place that above all else. Of course, schools must still be managed. One idea gaining support is to designate building managers for each school, who would oversee logistical matters and report to the principal, while the principal concentrates on improving teaching and learning.

School leaders also must be adept at using data to improve teaching and learning. Too

often, test data is used only for accountability, rather than to diagnose the needs of individual students and improve their education. Both principals and teachers must be trained to use test data to modify daily lesson plans and to tailor assistance for individual children. Much more test data will soon be available, because the new federal requirements require states to produce descriptive and diagnostic information, as well as individual test results.

New school leaders must also show a strong commitment to closing the achievement gap between Caucasian and Asian students on the one hand and African-American and Hispanic students on the other. This commitment must extend to closing achievement gaps for disabled, migrant and low-income children, groups also covered by the new federal law.

Most importantly, we need leaders who truly value learning. Just as children watch closely what parents *do* as well as what they say, students observe whether teachers, principals and others are personally interested in learning more. Leaders who read books, newspapers and journals, and take courses to improve the understanding of art, computers or history, send a signal to students that the people in charge of their schools value learning.

This list of characteristics for new educational leaders may sound ideal - and in a way, it is. We need to work on developing leaders who believe that improving teaching and learning for all students is the core of a good school.