

An ASCD Study Guide for

The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results

This ASCD Study Guide is designed to enhance your understanding of *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results*, an ASCD book by Douglas B. Reeves published in April 2006. This study guide is designed to support individual and group study. Ideally, groups of readers will address each chapter and focus on the discussion questions that follow. Guidelines for effective book studies include:

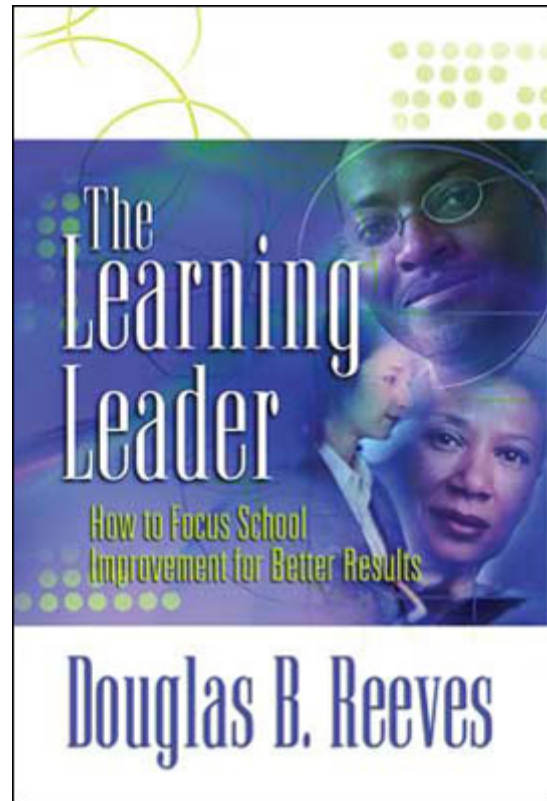
Meetings that start and end on time.

Participants who read the chapter before the meeting.

Divergent views which are welcomed and encouraged. When divergent views are not presented, the group may wish to appoint a “devil's advocate” to provide constructive contention and alternative points of view.

Application that is practical. Participants should conclude each meeting with the goal of saying, “I can apply what I learned to my personal and professional responsibilities” and offer specific examples for application.

The author welcomes comments from readers and study guide groups. He can be reached by email at DReeves@MakingStandardsWork.com. You can also visit the author's website at www.MakingStandardsWork.com or call the center at 800-844-6599.



Preface

1. Think of examples of contrived complexity in your experience. How can you move from unhelpful complexity to simpler and more meaningful analysis?
2. Think of an example of unwarranted simplicity. What are the nuances and challenges that are missed by an inappropriately simple analysis?
3. How do you define intelligence in your professional responsibilities? How does your definition compare to those provided in the text?
4. What claims have you heard about the Theory of Multiple Intelligence in your college classes, professional development courses, and personal conversations? How do those claims compare with Gardner's analysis?

Introduction

1. Examine the Leadership for Learning Framework. Think of decisions (not people or schools, but specific decisions by educators or school leaders) that fit into each quadrant of the framework. For example, “Although our math scores were low, we moved into the

Learning quadrant when we made decisive changes in our schedule and in our assessment.”

2. What are your hypotheses about student achievement? Fill in the blank: “If _____, then student achievement will improve.” Brainstorm as many items in the blank as you can, and then see what those items have in common. Some hypotheses focus on actions by students and families (“If they would just speak English at home, then student achievement would improve.”) Other hypotheses focus on adults in the school (“If we provide a clear and rigorous curriculum, supported with assessments that are fair, frequent, and meaningful, then student achievement will improve.”) What do your hypotheses have in common?
3. Think about a new initiative or program in your school or school system. How is the implementation of that initiative monitored? How frequently is it monitored? If monitoring is binary in nature (“We did it” or “We didn’t do it”), how could you create more thoughtful monitoring that measures how the program is implemented and how effective it is?

Chapter 1

1. What does the word “results” mean for your professional responsibilities? What other factors should be considered to evaluate your effectiveness aside from the data associated with results?
2. When you think of the “Educational Enron” in the text, what images come to mind? In your experience, what programs or initiatives have been recognized as leading innovations in one year and then crashed to the ground in later years? What lessons can you draw from those observations?
3. Which innovations have you observed that avoided the “Educational Enron” syndrome? Which innovations have you observed that have long-lasting sustained results with deep acceptance from a wide variety of stakeholders?

Chapter 2

1. In your experience, think of a quantitative measurement that did not fully describe the performance of a student, teacher, or school. What additional information did you need to provide a complete description?
2. Think of an example in which correlations were misleading—i.e. two factors were associated, but they were not cause and effect. Now think of a contrary example in which correlations were also indicative of causality—i.e. the two factors were related and discovered to be cause and effect. What conclusions did you draw from these experiences?
3. Consider the impact of demographic characteristics on the students you serve. How are these demographic characteristics related or unrelated to student achievement? What inferences can you draw?

Chapter 3

1. Consider an example of “the wisdom of crowds” in your own experience. When was the collective wisdom of your colleagues more accurate than the individual conclusions from members of the group? When was the opposite true?
2. Review the metaphor of “architectural leadership” and consider whether it applies to your professional environment. If the leader is the architect of individual and organizational improvement, what does that imply for leadership responsibilities in your organization?

Chapter 4

1. What is the vision statement for your school or district? Write it out and ask several colleagues to explain what it means for them. How similar or different are these explanations? How would you improve the vision statement to make it more meaningful?
2. Describe the qualities of “relational leaders” in your own words. You might want to create a rubric using words such as “inspirational, competent, developing, and jerk.” Be specific. What are the key differences between the inspirational leader and the jerk? Why are these differences so important?
3. Consider the networks in your own system. Can you think of the hubs and super hubs? Who are the people who are exceptionally well connected throughout the organization? Why are they so important to your next change initiative?
4. Many people experience the Six Degrees of Separation in their personal and professional lives. Think of personal examples where you have encountered strangers that were linked to you by only a few steps. What implications do those experiences have for your organization?
5. Consider the decision making structure in your organization. Which decisions are individual (Level I)? Which decisions are collaborative (Level II)? Which decisions are top-down decisions from administrators (Level III)? What do you observe about the relative quantity of each level of decisions?

Chapter 5

1. Have you seen an “ugly plan” that was modified to reflect the messy realities of your organization? How would you evaluate the effectiveness of that plan compared to the “pretty plan” that was perfect in format but that failed to change with organizational needs?
2. The research suggests that demographic characteristics are influential in initial student achievement. But the evidence also suggests that demographic characteristics have little impact on gains in student achievement. What conclusions can you draw about this difference in impact?
3. How does the inquiry variable affect student achievement? How could you apply the findings of this study to your organization? What questions might you ask of your colleagues that would evaluate their position on the inquiry variable?

4. Implementation and monitoring are significantly related to student achievement. Think of a leadership or teaching variable that is important to you. How frequently is that variable monitored?

Chapter 6

1. Consider the characteristics of successful schools identified in this chapter. How are these characteristics tied to demographics? For example, is consistent use of nonfiction writing assessments a hallmark of successful high-poverty schools or is it successful for all schools regardless of demographics?
2. When you reflect on the needs of the students in your school or district, which characteristics of successful schools listed in this chapter are most needed for your students?
3. Conduct a quick content analysis of 10 randomly selected writing portfolios in your school. Count the number of fiction and nonfiction pieces. What do you notice?
4. Arguments against frequent common assessment include the arguments that we are “overtested” and that teachers should be free to assess students in any way that seems appropriate to them.
Try an experiment: Gather three pieces of student work from three different classrooms from the same grade, same subject, and preferably on the same or similar assignment. Find student work that has been evaluated as “B” or “proficient.” You should now have nine pieces of student work from three different classrooms, all of which, in theory, are equal in quality. Cut off anything identifying the student, teacher, or grade, and then score each of these nine pieces of work as a group. How similar or different are your scores to the original score of “B” and what do those differences suggest about the need for common assessment?
5. Review major projects and assessments in three different classes on the same subject in the same grade. How are the projects and assessments similar or different? Are expectations higher in some classrooms?
6. Reflect on students that you know are presently in need of intensive intervention. What are the structural impediments (scheduling, staffing, financial constraints) that prevent the school from giving those students necessary intervention immediately? If the same students needed a vaccination or medical care, how would the system overcome structural impediments to get them the vaccination or medical care they needed?
7. Find people in your building who are the first generation of their family to go to college. Interview those persons about what made them successful. Ask about their experiences with teachers, particularly teachers who demanded more. How did those experiences contribute to their success?
8. What are the myths that prevail in your school or district? How can those myths be challenged with evidence?

Chapter 7

1. Randomly select five boys and five girls who failed the previous year's literacy and math tests in your school. Examine the grades that those students received paying particular

attention to grades of A, B, and C. List the grades for each sex separately. With their teachers, discuss the results of those students who earned passing grades but failed an external test. Do you notice any trends in the students who received high grades for poor work? What is the gender and ethnic composition of your sample?

2. What are the consequences in your school or district when a student fails to submit work? Is it a zero? If so, brainstorm alternatives to the zero that are more effective in providing incentives for the students and accurately evaluate their work.
3. Is the use of the average a matter of policy or practice in your school? Is the average automatically used by computerized grading programs? What are effective alternatives to the average that can be used within the constraints of your system?
4. What student behaviors are most important for success in your school or district? How can you communicate student performance along with behavior without distorting letter grades? Look at a kindergarten report card in your district. What does that report suggest about how you can more effectively communicate about behavior and academic performance to parents and students in all grade levels?

Chapter 8

1. Construct your ideal leadership map. Without using real data, simply plot points on the map based on your goals for effective practice and the percentage of students who score proficient or higher on standardized tests.
2. Construct your actual leadership map for your school or district. In the left column list the leadership practices and their effectiveness coefficient, and in right column list the percentage of students who are proficient or higher on those assessments as they relate to the leadership strategies in the left column. This will give you several sets of ordered pairs, with the left column representing the X (horizontal) axis and the right column representing the Y (vertical) axis. Plot the points on the ordered pairs on a blank Leadership Map. What pattern do you notice? If you need help with this task, go to www.LeadAndLearn.com and a Leadership Map can be automatically constructed for you once you input the data.
3. Compare your ideal map and your real map. What specific strategies must you undertake to move from your present leadership map to the ideal map?

Chapter 9

1. Where are the islands of excellence in your school or district? What is necessary to move from these isolated islands to systemic impact?
2. Ask 10 colleagues, "If you needed help with a challenge in improving student achievement, who would you ask for help?" Note any similarities among the responses to see if you can find a hub or super hub in your school or district. If you identify a hub or super hub, is that person part of the leadership team? Is that person part of a systemwide official body designated to improve student achievement? If not, how can you maximize the impact that this person has in improving the effectiveness of your entire school and district?

3. Review your current school improvement plan or your school, department, or district planning document. How many priorities do you have? If this number is greater than six, what are the most important priorities?
4. Are there subtle and perhaps unintended incentives to create a bell curve in your school? What messages do teachers receive about the distribution of grades or the average grade that their students receive?
5. Find a teacher or school that has already moved “from the bell curve to the mountain” and inquire about the specific professional and leadership practices in that school. How do those practices differ from a classroom or school that remains firmly rooted in the bell curve?

Final Reflections

1. What are three key ideas that you can immediately use based on what you have learned in this book?
2. If a busy colleague only had time to read one chapter of this book, which chapter would you recommend? Why?

The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better Results was written by Douglas B. Reeves. This 220-page, 6" x 9" book (Stock # 105151; ISBN-13: 978-1-4166-0332-0; ISBN-10: 1-4166-0332-8) is available from ASCD for \$20.95 (ASCD member) or \$26.95 (nonmember). Copyright © 2006 by ASCD. To order a copy, call ASCD at 1-800-933-2723 (in Virginia 1-703-578-9600) and press 2 for the Service Center. Or buy the book from ASCD's Online Store.