

Peter DeWitt's

## Finding Common Ground

A former K-5 public school principal turned author, presenter, and leadership coach, DeWitt provides insights and advice for education leaders. He can be found at [www.petermdewitt.com](http://www.petermdewitt.com). Read more from this blog.

SCHOOL & DISTRICT MANAGEMENT OPINION

## Transformational vs. Instructional Leadership. Which Is Better?

By Sean Slade & Alyssa Gallagher — October 28, 2021 ⌚ 3 min read



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## Sean Slade & Alyssa Gallagher

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We are in the midst of radical change. We are in the middle of a shift across the education sector in determining not just what we do but also how we do it. There are broad shifts in instruction, adjustments to delivery, alternations or even abolition of assessments. It is clear that a deep discussion around the best way, or rather ways, to teach is needed and in most places well underway.

For this discussion, organizations and schools need leaders who have expertise in pedagogy and in instruction. Leaders who are able to offer alternatives and lay out a pathway of teaching and learning that meets the needs of everyone in their community.

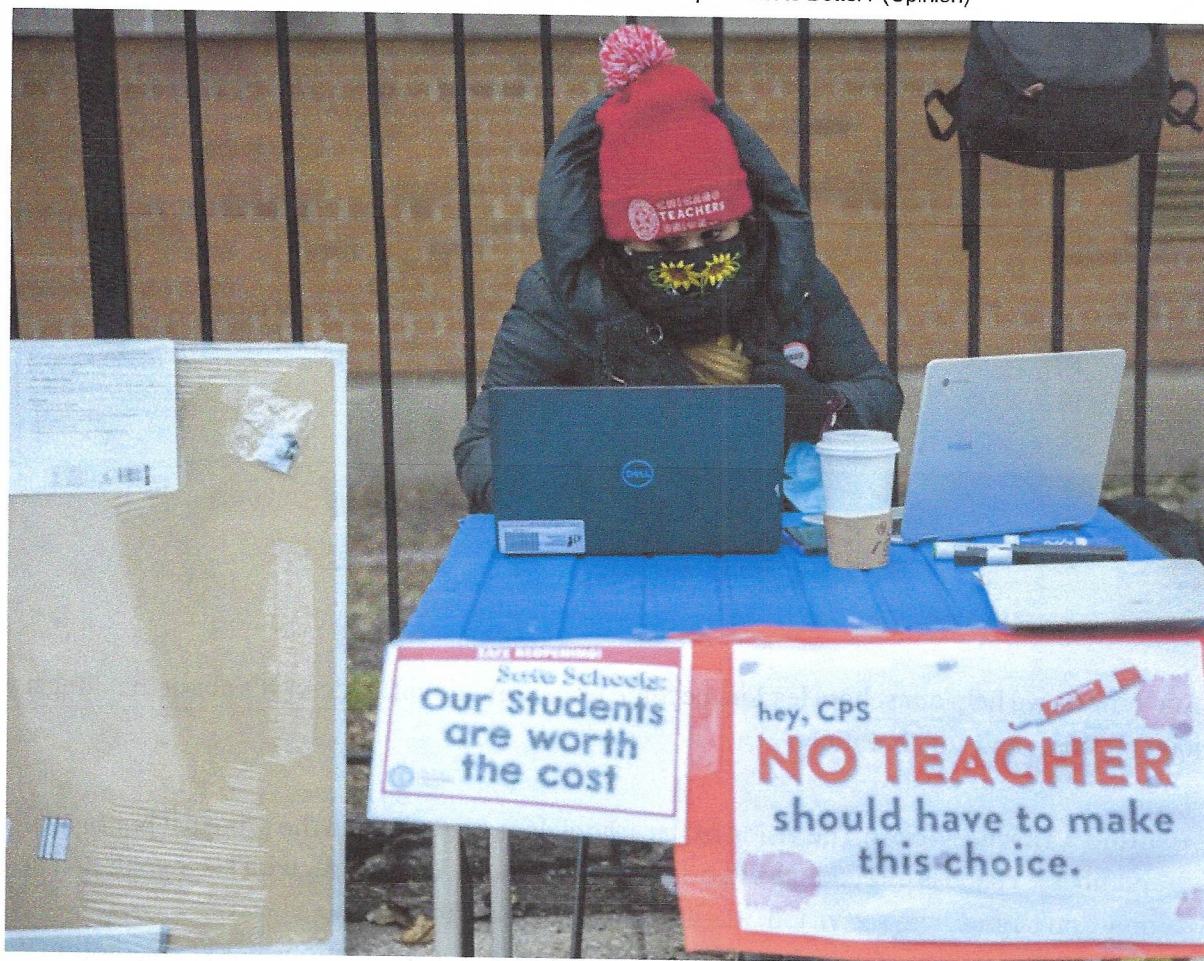
But instructional leadership is only half the story—or rather half the need. We also need transformational leaders who inspire followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes and develop their own leadership capacity. Leaders who are able and prepared to lead a team through uncertain change and engage all stakeholders in the process. These are leaders who are able to convey the values and vision of the school and, at the same time, create environments where other voices and suggestions are welcomed.

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It is no longer enough for school leaders to be experts in curriculum and instruction. They must also become experts in team leadership, inspiring others and developing agency across their communities. They must be willing to lead with empathy, vulnerability, and trust in collective efforts for change.

The schools that have buffered the effects of COVID-19 the best, and all the disruptions that have arisen, have been the ones that had access to resources and networks but also the ones that have developed a distributive-leadership model and are able to make decisions nimbly and quickly.

Our world for the foreseeable future is one where change is rapid and constant; leadership actions will need to be quick yet thoughtful and responsive to ever-changing needs. The only way to prepare our schools and their communities is to prepare the school leaders in developing nimble, agile, empowered teams. What is needed is a determined focus on transformational, as well as instructional, leadership. They are a different set of skills and attributes but, when developed constructively, help build teams that are prepared for learning, prepared to grow, and prepared for change.



— Sean Slade/Alyssa Gallagher

And how do we help our school leaders become transformational leaders? It's about instilling a mindset of trust, joint purpose, and collaboration.

- **Build a Shared Vision:** The vision of the school does not belong to the principal but to all the school members. Vision is directional and oriented to helping people strive, with clear goals and communication. If they don't agree with the vision, it is impossible to make it a reality.
- **Deepen Trust:** Transformational leaders build deeper, closer relationships at an emotional as well as an intellectual level. This is essential when leading school improvement efforts and in times of uncertainty.
- **Empower Others:** A key mindset shift here is from holding the reins tightly to personally ensure initiatives are a success, to inspiring others to embrace their leadership and letting go, trusting others to succeed.

We are past the days when the teacher with most seniority is elevated into the principalship automatically; and we are past the days when we assume that the best teacher will automatically become the best leader for the school and its community. And we are also past the days when we judge the individual as having a fixed mindset or set of skills. Each of us learns, grows, improves, and is able to shift our thinking and our leadership skills to suit. When we discuss leadership styles, we are referring to leadership *styles*, not *people*—and everyone can learn new styles. The most adept leaders are ones who can adjust their styles to suit the needs of the situation, and they are also the ones who are open and seek improvement.

*A new kind of leadership is necessary to break through the status quo ... these new theoreticians are leaders who work directly in their own schools ... and participate in the bigger picture. To change organizations and systems will require leaders to get experience in linking to other parts of the system. These leaders in turn must help other leaders with similar characteristics.* (Fullan, 2004, p 9)

Michael Fullan wrote that in 2004 and then recently repeated it in his latest publication, [The Right Drivers for Whole System Success](#) (2021). What Fullan proposed just after the turn of the century has now become a necessity into its third decade.

Instructional Leadership	Both	Transformational Leadership
Expectations		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulate &amp; communicate clear school goals</li> <li>• Principal seeks to limit uncertainty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a school culture focused on the improvement of teaching and learning</li> <li>• Goal-oriented</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear vision, create shared school goals</li> <li>• Seeks to envision &amp; create the future by synthesizing &amp; extending the aspirations of the members of the org.</li> <li>• Requires a higher tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty from the principal</li> </ul>
Focus		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate curriculum</li> <li>• Supervise &amp; evaluate instruction</li> <li>• Monitor student progress</li> <li>• Protect instructional time</li> <li>• Focused on curriculum &amp; instruction</li> <li>• </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organize &amp; provide a wide range of activities aimed at development of staff</li> <li>• High expectations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on developing the organization's capacity to innovate</li> <li>• Intellectual stimulation</li> <li>• Principal creates conditions conducive to everyone taking a leadership role</li> <li>• Influence people by building from the bottom up rather than the top down.</li> </ul>
Leadership style		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transactional</li> <li>• Strong, directive leadership</li> <li>• Focused on first-order change</li> <li>• Principal is the center of expertise &amp; authority</li> <li>• Focused on improvement of student academic outcomes</li> <li>• Hands-on principals, hip deep in curriculum &amp; instruction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skillful leadership</li> <li>• Being a visible presence in the school</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transformational</li> <li>• Distributed leadership</li> <li>• Generate second-order effects, Increase the capacity of others to produce first-order effects on learning</li> <li>• Produce changes in people, rather than in promoting specific instructional strategies</li> </ul>

