

Introduction

If you walk into Savanna Oaks Elementary School and ask the question, “Who here is responsible for student learning?” you will get one reply, in myriad voices.

“I am,” the teachers will state.

“I am,” the secretary will respond.

“I am,” the students will tell you.

“I am,” the parents will say.

“I am,” the principal will affirm.

Who is responsible for student learning at Savanna Oaks?

Answer: Everyone.



You can sense and see shared responsibility in everything that happens at Savanna Oaks. Teachers work collaboratively to evaluate and improve their instructional strategies. Some teachers manage their own programs, handling everything from staffing to budgets to assessing their own effectiveness; from time to time, the principal checks in to make sure these teachers have what they need to be successful. With the help of teachers and parents, Savanna Oaks students are setting individual learning goals and monitoring their own progress toward these goals. Parents from all parts of the school community are active in the school’s governance and partner with the administration and teachers to set school policy.

Shared responsibility at Savanna Oaks is a feeling that “what I do makes a difference in how well students learn.” That feeling exists because everyone has both the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about how best to promote learning and the skills and opportunity to translate their ideas into effective action. It is *shared* responsibility because these individuals see themselves as part of a larger system, where all the pieces work together toward a common goal.

Located in Verona, Wisconsin, within a district serving a community with some of the wealthiest and some of the poorest children in the county, Savanna Oaks has more children receiving free and reduced lunch than any other school in the district. It also has the highest mobility rate and the widest discrepancy between high and low socioeconomic status (SES). Its test scores, however, are consistently at—and in some cases, even above—district and state averages.

The Challenge of Emulating Success

What can educators learn from the example of successful schools like Savanna Oaks? Recently, a group of administrators contacted our organization, Quality Leadership by Design (QLD), seeking the answer to a very similar question. They wanted to visit some of the successful schools we work with to learn which programs or organizational designs these schools had implemented.

Although we encouraged the administrators to visit several schools (Savanna Oaks included), we also cautioned them that what they would see would not be “programs” or specific school designs per se, but rather best organizational and instructional practices in action. Despite our words of warning, the administrators returned from their site visits frustrated. “These schools aren’t using anything in particular!” they reported. “They’ve incorporated lots of bits and pieces and have come up with their own approaches.”

And therein lies the biggest challenge facing schools and school districts interested in developing shared responsibility for student learning: It’s not a program. It’s not a curriculum. Shared responsibility incorporates a set of principles and techniques that

gives members of the school community the authority and responsibility to create what is needed, based on the data and culture of their particular school and school district. We believe it is this ability to *learn, adopt, modify, and innovate* that makes schools like Savanna Oaks successful.

The quest to find instant answers and capture “the secrets of school success” via programs and designs lies at the root of the problem with “benchmarking” as it is implemented by many educators. We’re all familiar with the drill: Get the most recent “best” program, arrange for a few sessions of staff inservice training . . . and then wonder why your results fall short of the benchmarked school’s. In looking at individual trees, many well-intentioned educators continue to miss the forest—the underlying and universal principles, processes, and practices that drive sustained, continuous improvement of student results.

Savanna Oaks didn’t adopt a program, a model, or a specific school design. The staff didn’t go looking for a quick fix or a “package” that would answer the challenges they faced in helping students learn. But they did develop their capacity for leading, learning, and change. How they—and many other school staffs like them—did so is the subject of this book.

The Achievement–Learning Connection

Sharing responsibility for student learning may sound like a cliché, but it’s very difficult and very rare. In fact, we believe if more schools were actually *doing it*, “forced improvement” through legislated accountability policies would not be necessary. Politicians are responding to the public outcry against poor schooling. This outcry, and

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the accompanying demand for more accountability, indicates that many U.S. schools are providing students with a subpar educational experience—not all schools, of course, but certainly enough to provoke *national* concern.

Although the standards movement has been instrumental in pushing schools and districts to examine and align what is taught, when it's taught, and why, educators know that standards alone do not improve student learning. And we know that standardized tests are not the sole or even the most meaningful measure of learning. Educators are particularly sensitive to the dangers of extrapolating the meaning of test scores beyond the intended purpose of such measures. Many of us would say that standardized test scores represent a simplistic view of the educational enterprise, and that a too-exclusive focus on test scores threatens to drive all the creativity, passion, and innovation out of our profession.

But consider how educators' arguments against standardized testing must sound to African American, Hispanic, and low-income families: The "achievement gap" for their children has endured for many decades. For these families, it is frustrating at best to hear educators say that standardized tests aren't meaningful, true measures of student learning. Whether or not one "believes in" standardized test scores as a reflection of school quality, in a very real and practical sense, many children—both minority and nonminority—are graduating ill-prepared for a world that values mathematical, technological, and literacy skills.

For better or worse, the public is measuring the "quality" of U.S. schools by standardized test scores—and many schools are not measuring up. If you are a parent facing the decision about where to send your

child to school, it's likely you are considering test scores. As Colleen, a parent of pre-kindergarten twins, recently told us, "Our neighborhood school has some of the lowest test scores in the city, and even though it has smaller class sizes now, I'm not sure I want to take a chance."

On the other hand, families also worry that the current emphasis on testing will drive the love of learning right out of their children. Recently, our friend Alan, the father of a kindergartner, bemoaned test-focused instruction, saying, "What if my daughter wants to pursue an interest that doesn't appear on the test? Where is there room for her to enjoy the arts, physical movement, engagement in democratic processes—not just as add-ons, but as part of educating her as a whole child? Is the purpose of schooling just to turn out good test-takers?"

We would suggest that it's not a matter of "either/or" but "both/and." Schools need to focus on helping all students achieve high standards and providing all students well-rounded educational experiences.

Research shows that where there is shared responsibility for student learning, student achievement—for every subgroup—improves (see Barth, Haycock, & Jackson, 1999; Cawelti, 1999; Newmann & Associates, 1996). In schools with cultures of shared responsibility, many of which we highlight in this book, the *purpose* of what they do is not to improve test scores. If that were the case, the staffs would simply align all curricular and instructional practices to "teach to the tests" . . . and eventually discover their test scores hit a plateau and then decrease (Hoff, 2000). Rather, these schools' objective is *to continuously improve student learning*; rising standardized test scores is just one of many important measures of success.

In addition to improved test scores, how else would we measure success in schools where everyone shares responsibility for student learning? We'd look for

- Classroom, school, and district-developed assessments that show steady improvement for every individual and every group of students.
- Increasing rates of student, parent, teacher, and community satisfaction on a variety of indicators important to these constituents.
- Improved efficiencies in the use of resources such as staff development dollars, curriculum choices, staff deployment decisions, and—perhaps most critically—time.
- Evidence of renewed energy for teaching, learning, and leading.
- Students actively engaged and taking responsibility for their learning.
- Deeper, more enduring connections between students, teachers, parents, administrators, and the community.

The list above provides the global indicators of success we believe all schools should strive for. However, each school and district needs to define what it means by “success.” Taking the time to do so is integral to the process of building shared responsibility for student learning.

Why Aren't We There Now?

If shared responsibility for student learning is key to student achievement, why aren't there more schools like Savanna Oaks? For all the attention aimed at educational reform over the past decade, you'd think nearly every school would have made progress. But even the most optimistic person would have to admit that there has been little overall improvement in the quality of U.S. public education.

Why is this? It's not for lack of money or desire. State legislatures, the federal government, business and industry, and special interest and community groups have pumped billions of dollars into educational reform. They have spent countless hours in debate and strategy sessions and have added their voices to the groundswell of calls demanding “better education.” Neither can we attribute the lack of progress to school systems' inability to change. Recent history has shown schools capable of integrating other massive reforms, such as Title I, special education, and Perkins III, all of which arose from state and federal mandates and are financed by public funds. Thanks to several major federal initiatives, schools have significantly changed the kind of education provided to a number of student populations and the kind of material presented within several content areas.

So why haven't we seen more systemic improvement in education? Because public demands and federal mandates can't fundamentally improve the system of teaching and learning that occurs every day, in every classroom, and in every school (O'Neil, 2000). This kind of fundamental reform—*the transformation of the teaching and learning system*—can only come from the inside-out. It must start at the classroom level and move out into the system at large.

Building Capacity for Leadership, Learning, and Change

Think for a moment about what it would take to create shared responsibility for improved student learning at your school.

Teachers and principals would need to know best instructional practices. They would have to understand the purpose, role, and value of assessments and data-

gathering techniques; use wisdom, commitment, and professional expertise to set results-based goals; and use the data to inform continuous practice improvement.

Classified staff would need to know how to continuously refine and improve noninstructional processes to ensure programs and systems could run efficiently and effectively. They would have to understand their day-to-day influence on the school's children and families. They would need to know how to work collaboratively with teachers and principals to solve problems and get things done.

Students would need to know their individual learning styles, how they learn best, and how to self-assess their skills and capabilities. They would need to understand how to set personal goals that are meaningful and challenging and how to work with others to achieve those goals.

Parents would need to know how to support their children's learning. They would need to understand how to partner effectively with school personnel; how to work with school and community resources to achieve their goals for their children; how to become clear voices in the school's overall vision; and how to help the school accomplish this vision.

As you see, there are many variables involved. And this is the reason why shared responsibility for student learning cannot be accomplished by a piece of legislation, a grant program, a single leader, or a few interested teachers or parents. Rather, shared responsibility must be the work of *leadership* as Linda Lambert defines the term in her book *Building Leadership Capacity in Schools* (1998). Leadership, Lambert tells us, is a concept that is not tied to individuals, official positions, or sets of behavior. Leadership is the school's overall capacity for

broad-based, skillful participation in the creation and fulfillment of a vision focused on student learning.

Data coming out of the University of Wisconsin's Center for Education Research support Lambert's views. In research into the potential of professional development activities to improve student achievement in high-poverty, high-achieving schools, Fred Newmann, Bruce King, and Peter Youngs (1999) found that "professional development is more likely to advance achievement of all students in a school if [professional development] addresses not only the learning of individual teachers, but also other dimensions of the organizational capacity of the school" (p. 1). The "organizational capacity" Newmann, King, and Youngs refer to is synonymous with a shared mission, congruent programs, and skillful and broad-based collaboration; all of these are components of what Lambert calls "leadership capacity."

One of the key characteristics of personnel within "high-capacity" schools is that they continuously contribute to each other's learning for the purpose of improving student learning. Consequently, these schools are characterized by an emphasis on building and nurturing relationships within a context of community; creating shared vision and goals; and building educators' skills in the areas of collaboration, inquiry, dialogue, and the application of data to inform decisions and practice.

High-capacity schools also exhibit a strong focus on developing teachers' competence in instruction and assessment within their curricular areas; maintaining program coherence and continuity (avoiding "the fad of the day"); and developing high-quality technical resources, such as curriculum, books, assessment instruments, computers, and workspaces.

Finally, high-capacity schools always have an effective principal—one who positively influences the life of the school and fills what Lambert calls the role of the “formal leader.” This is the individual who initiates the dialogue about school vision, maintains the dialogue’s focus on teaching and learning, and then creates the time and expectation that staff will collaboratively learn and develop toward that vision (Lambert & Conzemius, 2000).

In this book, we lay the groundwork for building shared responsibility for student learning through a process of continuous personal and organizational learning. Sharing responsibility for student success can and should be applied at every level of the educational organization, whether it’s between a classroom teacher and an individual student or between the board and the central office administration. But perhaps the most important place for these conversations to occur is at the school site, where teachers can learn together in community.

A Word About Words

Words are particularly important to educators, and throughout this book we have been very intentional about our word choices. In recent times, the terms “high standard” and “results” have come under heavy fire. We would like to make our position clear at the outset.

- *We strongly support the development and communication of clear, challenging, and consistent standards and expectations by the people who are working most closely with students.* From our perspective, the most important point in the whole standards debate is that educators are using input from parents, community members, and outside research to improve the consistency of the K–12 educational system in their district. Having rational standards that are based on a deep

understanding of child development, important content, and best pedagogical practices is critical to providing high-quality education for all students.

- *Both “processes” and “results” are important.* We believe good processes lead to good results. For far too long, educators have focused solely on processes—activities, innovations, programs, strategies, and so forth—without a concomitant focus on end results. The net effect is that we have left ourselves vulnerable to outsiders telling us which results matter, and now we are stuck with far too many standards and far too much standardized testing. As educators, we need to begin taking responsibility for measuring the effects of the activities and strategies we undertake to improve student learning and achievement so that we know and can communicate what works and what doesn’t. This self-reflective ability lies at the heart of “professionalizing” our profession.

- *There is a distinction to be made between student achievement and student learning.* When we refer to “improving student achievement,” the assumption we’re making is that commercially developed standardized tests are the most frequent measure of achievement (although district-developed assessment tools are becoming more and more popular). When we refer to “improving student learning,” we are assuming that “learning” is being measured by a variety of tools, including performance assessments, projects and models, portfolios, and other “authentic” assessments. We also use the term “improving results,” by which we mean improving both student learning and achievement.

Making a Difference

How do you know that what you do makes a difference? We took this question to heart as we prepared this book and made

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a commitment to include only those processes that we know *really work*, either because we've seen their effective application first-hand in schools or because they are supported by academic research and the literature.

In Chapter 1, we present a conceptual framework for building shared responsibility for student learning. Subsequent chapters explore various aspects of that framework in depth and describe how it works in practice. Chapter 2 describes how to achieve shared focus at the school site. Chapter 3 provides an in-depth look at the power of reflection; and Chapter 4 adds the "why and how" of collaboration. Chapter 5 introduces "SMART goals"—the means for powering shared responsibility's continuous personal and organizational learning. Finally, Chapter 6 pulls all the elements together to describe what the leadership capacity created through shared responsibility looks like and feels like in practice.

The true test of whether what we've written will make a difference depends on

your ability to create unique meaning from this book in your classroom, school, or district. We encourage you to think of building shared responsibility for student learning as an ongoing activity, and not an end product. It is a journey, not a destination.

Savanna Oaks did not get to where it is overnight. In fact, it has been nearly a decade since that school's principal first asked the teachers to envision the school of their dreams. Those early discussions kicked off an extraordinary amount of critical thinking, strategic planning, and skill building, all of which coalesced to support a school that shows constantly improving levels of student learning.

If the work of building shared responsibility for student learning is a journey, it is not an easy one. There are no quick shortcuts and no simple solutions. Throughout this book, we share stories and insights collected from our interviews with teachers and principals who have embarked on this challenging and rewarding journey. All of them would tell you it is well worth the effort.