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Weaving Webs

By Jeff Archer
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James P. Spillane gets a little nervous sometimes when he talks to groups of educators about "distributed leadership," a notion about how schools operate that he's spent the past several years trying to understand. Often, people come up after hearing him and say something like, "That's great, we need to do distributed leadership in our school," or "Yeah, we're planning on doing that next year."

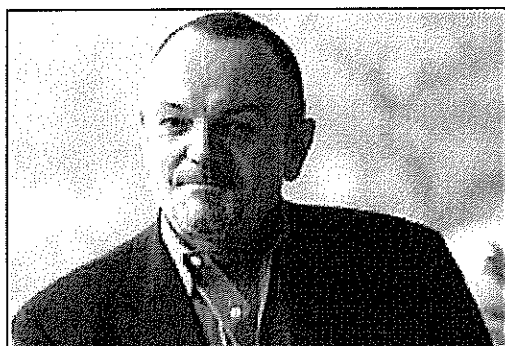
School leadership isn't hierarchical, researchers are discovering.

His retort comes in his lyrical Irish accent.

"I say, 'Hang on a second,'" says Spillane, a professor at the school of education and social policy at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. "Leadership is more than likely already distributed in your school. Maybe you've got to intervene to think about *how* it's distributed, or the extent to which it's distributed. But that's a different question."

How leadership is distributed in schools is precisely the question that most interests Spillane. When he looks at a school, he doesn't see a place in which one, or two, or even a handful of people call the shots. He sees an evolving web of influence stretched over the entire building, with some people leading from formal positions of authority and others by virtue of how they're seen by their peers.

It's a well-honed view. Spillane is the principal investigator for one of the largest studies ever conducted on distributed leadership in education. With \$1 million from the National Science Foundation, he has for the past five years led a team of other researchers at Northwestern in studying 13 schools in Chicago to see what they look like when observed through the distributed-leadership lens.



His timing couldn't be better. In a quick survey last year, the Denver-based Education Commission of the States found 10 states with laws or regulations, or at least proposals, aimed at distributing leadership. Most sought to elevate the roles of teachers, such as by creating career ladders. Katy Anthes, a policy analyst at the ECS, says that since then, she's learned of even more states with similar plans.

James P. Spillane, a professor in the school of education and social policy at Northwestern University, heads a team of researchers studying "distributed leadership."
—Allison Shelley/Education Week

"It sounds like such a good idea, to distribute leadership," says Anthes, whose group tracks state education policy. "There's pretty wide anecdotal agreement, and agreement in surveys, that the principal's job as it stands is too big. They are working 70 hours a week and can't get to the instructional piece."

All this interest both excites and worries Spillane. He likes that people are thinking more broadly about leadership in schools. His concern is that policymakers may become too prescriptive in their application of the idea. If anything, his research suggests that distributed leadership looks different in different schools, depending on their situations. It even varies within schools, over time, and across subject areas.

There are, of course, lessons to be learned. Spillane is highly critical of the way most leadership- preparation programs focus on individuals. (In fact, he's helping to hatch a plan for a leadership-training regimen for teams of educators.) He also says school accountability structures often work against distributed leadership by putting so much of the onus on principals.

But it's too early, he argues, to make any claims about distributed leadership and its connection to student outcomes. Instead, he sees it as an important "diagnostic frame." More than just a way to delegate responsibilities, it's a tool to help leaders think strategically about exploiting the expertise in their buildings.

Richard F. Elmore, a Harvard University education professor who also writes on the topic, goes even further, calling it a potent "design principle"—and one that other knowledge-based organizations, such as medical practices and consulting firms, have used well.

"Powerful, high-performing knowledge organizations are ones that operate through the construction of social networks around the work," says Elmore, who taught Spillane when both were at Michigan State University in the 1980s. "Everybody who works in schools should be interested in distributed leadership."

A Holistic View

Attempts to describe alternatives to the traditional hierarchies of school management are nothing new. Robust bodies of literature exist on teacher leadership, shared decisionmaking, and site-based management. But by largely focusing on people and their roles, Spillane argues, such work often misses key dimensions about how schools operate. What concerns him is what people do, how they do it, and why.

That focus on what actually happens in practice is a major theme for Spillane, 41, who began his career as a 5th grade teacher in the government housing projects of Ireland's second-largest city, Cork. (He came to the United States in 1984 on scholarship to earn a master's in education at California State University, Chico.) An upcoming book of his, *Standards Deviations*, shows the gap in understanding that often exists between those who write academic standards

Research and Resources

"Building a New Structure for School Leadership," a paper drafted by Richard Elmore for the [Albert Shanker Institute](#) in 2000 that outlines the need for "dramatic changes in the way public schools define and practice leadership." (Requires [Adobe's Acrobat Reader](#).)

Leadership Capacity for Lasting School Improvement, by Linda Lambert, published in 2003 by the [Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development](#), talks about the importance of nurturing leadership within schools. The ASCD has made a few [chapters](#) available online. The book can be ordered [here](#).

"Distributed Properties: A New Architecture for Leadership," by Peter Gronn, an education professor at Monash University in Australia, is an academic treatment of the concept of

and those whose job it is to teach to them.

Another tenet of his is that leadership in a school cannot be understood separate from the tools and structures that leaders use. By way of explanation, he often cites a study by Edwin Hutchins, a prominent cognitive scientist, that detailed the landing of an airplane. The process, Hutchins noted, required not just the pilot and the co-pilot, but also a wide array of instrumentation.

"The notion was that leadership practice is not simply a function of what the individual knows," says Spillane, also a faculty fellow at Northwestern's Institute for Policy Research.

With that in mind, he set out in the late 1990s to design a study to capture a holistic view of school leadership. The resulting project, the Distributed Leadership Study, has involved experts in sociology, learning science, and human development at Northwestern. Along with the NSF money, the study received about \$340,000 from the Chicago-based Spencer Foundation, which also underwrites the coverage of research in *Education Week*.

Calling the project a "theory building" exercise, Spillane says it wasn't meant as a way to link specific forms of distributed leadership to student results. Before any such connections can be made, he says, a clear picture of what distributed leadership looks like is needed. The study team intentionally chose the 13 schools—all of them K-8—because they reflected a range of success in raising student achievement.

The research involved extensive interviews, observations, and surveys of school staff members. Some of the schools had investigators on site two to three days a week for more than a year. The researchers also tapped the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago, which has amassed troves of information on that city's schools from test scores and the consortium's own surveys. ("Windy City's Schools Look to Consortium for Practical Research," April 9, 2003.)

The strategy was to map backward from the classroom, explains John B. Diamond, who helped coordinate the research project as a postdoctoral fellow at Northwestern. "We asked: 'When you make decisions about math instruction in the classroom, what influences you, and if there are people who influence you, who are they?'" says Diamond, who is now an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

All About Instruction

What the researchers didn't find was anything nearing a single model. Instead, the schools they studied used a range of methods that allowed distributed leadership to occur. It wasn't just formal roles that mattered. And in some cases, leadership was distributed as much by default as by design.

'There's pretty wide Take the Kelly School, a nearly all-black, high-poverty school

distributed leadership in the July 2000 issue of *Educational Management and Administration*. To order a back issue, contact SAGE Customer Care by e-mailing journals@sagepub.com, or calling 1-800-818-7243.

"Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective," a brief overview of the Distributed Leadership Study in the April 2001 issue of *Educational Researcher* by James P. Spillane, Richard Halverson, and John B. Diamond. (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

"Systems of Practice: How Leaders Use Artifacts to Create Professional Community in Schools," a journal article, based on the Distributed Leadership Study, by Richard R. Halverson in the Oct. 10, 2003, issue of the online journal *Education Policy Analysis Archives*. The article examines the use of policies, programs, and procedures at the school level to influence instructional practices.

Other papers and presentations related to the Distributed Leadership Study at Northwestern University may be found on the Web at: <http://dls.sesp.northwestern.edu>.

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Katy Anthes,
Policy Analyst,
Education Commission of the
States

on Chicago's West Side that Diamond studied. (The name is a pseudonym for research purposes.) The school, whose percentile scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills jumped from the 20s to the 70s over the past decade, has an official "leadership team" of four teachers. But another important way in which staff members there influence one another is through regular meetings focused on instruction.

By arranging its schedule so that students are dismissed at 12:30 p.m. on Fridays, Kelly is able to hold schoolwide gatherings each week to let teachers share ideas about improving their work. Recently, staff members there also took it upon themselves to launch what they're calling a "focus group,"

a series of smaller, regular meetings of teachers who voluntarily come together to study and discuss specific instructional issues.

As a result, teachers at Kelly aren't left to sink or swim, remarks one staff member there. "When you're a teacher, you learn all this theory, and then you go in to teach and the theory goes out the door," she said recently. "So you're either a natural-born teacher, or you quit at the end of the day, if you don't have anyone to help you."

Barbara Eason-Watkins, the chief education officer for the Chicago public schools, who is familiar with Spillane's work, agrees that good principals foster an atmosphere in which such exchanges can happen. "It's not just about governance," she says of distributed leadership. "It's truly about making the appropriate instructional decisions about teaching and learning within that school."

It's also not necessarily democratic, as the researchers saw. Even where teachers were encouraged to offer ideas, school administrators played a central role. As the principal at Kelly said recently: "I see my job as setting the tone." She tells teachers how she wants their classrooms to look—bright, clean, and colorful—and she makes clear that student discipline is a collective responsibility of the whole staff.

Administrators also established consistency with certain tools. Amy F. Coldren, a doctoral candidate at Northwestern who also worked on the study, notes how one principal used "writing folders" to keep tabs on students' literacy skills. On a monthly basis, the principal collected writing samples from every student in the building. She read each one, and jotted down feedback for both students and teachers.

"What was interesting to me was how the principal, in such a large school, with 1,300 kids, was able to keep her hand on the pulse of instruction with so many classrooms and so many teachers," says Coldren.

One of the most striking findings in the study was how much distributed leadership varies across content areas, even among the same teachers. Researchers asked groups of teachers whom they went to for advice on language arts instruction, and whom they sought out for help on teaching math. Then they plotted out the links between the teachers, producing constellation-like images called "social network analyses."

The results showed two very different structures. The teachers' advice networks in language

arts looked almost spherical, with many individual teachers seeking advice from three or more other staff members. In math, it looked more linear, with many teachers going to just a couple others for help. Those patterns occurred even where a principal had consciously created structures for teachers to share ideas on both subjects.

Spillane suspects that one reason is that many elementary teachers are more confident in their expertise in literacy instruction than in math. Savvy principals quickly pick up on such differences in their schools, he says. He points to one principal in the study, who, recognizing a weakness in his school's science instruction, set out to hire a strong science teacher who also had strong leadership qualities.

"School leaders don't just lead instruction," Spillane says. "They lead instruction for particular subjects, and that makes a hell of a lot of difference in how the work of leadership plays out in schools."

No Five-Step Program

Some policymakers are picking up on the idea that distributed leadership isn't a one-size-fits-all concept.

State education officials in Connecticut hope to find multiple models of shared leadership through a survey they've designed largely to gauge the extent to which teachers in a school are able to weigh in on instructional matters. Based on the responses, each school surveyed will get a score on what designers of the instrument call a "distributed-leadership readiness scale."

Larry Jacobson, the state official directing the study, says a pilot of the questionnaire at six schools hints at a link between higher scores on the scale and better performance. The survey will be administered at 22 schools across the state this year. "We are going to identify those successful districts that have made efforts to share leadership, and celebrate and explicate what they do," Jacobson says.

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Richard F. Elmore,
Education Professor
Harvard University

Another pilot experiment on distributed leadership is under way in Delaware. State education officials there have plans to invite districts to submit proposals for crafting arrangements that spread leadership responsibilities differently within their schools. By next fall, the agency intends to pick four, which will receive financial and technical support to help put their proposals in place.

Both the Connecticut and Delaware efforts are financed by the New York City-based Wallace Foundation, which also supports coverage of leadership issues in *Education Week*.

Despite his reluctance to be prescriptive, Spillane himself is helping to put some of what he's learned into practice. He's working with others at Northwestern's education school to design new leadership-training modules based on the idea of distributed leadership. In a major departure from more traditional programs, the training will be for teams of educators, not just principal candidates.

The Carnegie Corporation of New York has given the effort about \$273,000 in seed money.

Meanwhile, Spillane says there's still plenty more to come from the Distributed Leadership Study. The information-gathering phase has only recently been completed, and he guesses that he and other researchers who worked on the project will be spinning off writings for another four to five years. Drafts of case studies, and two books, are in the works.

"I suspect as more stuff comes out, we'll have more to say," Spillane says. "I don't think it will be a script—you know: 'Here are the five steps of distributed leadership.'"

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