BALANCED LEADERSHIP:
What 30 years of research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement.
Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel), 2003

Overview
Principal leadership is significantly correlated with student achievement. One standard
deviation improvement in principal leadership is associated with a 10% percentile gain in
student achievement. This study found that twenty one specific leadership responsibilities, and
66 associated practices, have statistically significant relationships with student achievement.
The study also found that leaders can also a marginal or, worse, a negative impact on
achievement, if they focus on the wrong responsibilities or practices.

Balanced Leadership Framework
Researchers at McRel developed a Balanced Leadership Framework to integrate theory and
research into a practical format for education leaders. The framework is conceptualized
according to first order and second order change, though findings clearly demonstrate that
school improvement often resides in the domain of second order change. Seven leadership
responsibilities & practices (change agent, flexibility, ideals/beliefs, intellectual stimulation,
knowledge of curriculum/ instruction/ assessment, monitors/evaluated, & optimizer) were
identified by how they are positively impacted by second order change. Four leadership
responsibilities and practices (communication, culture, input, & order) were identified by how
they were negatively impacted by second order change.

Recommendations for policy makers
Based on the results of the study, researchers at McRel make the following recommendations
to policymakers:
1. Review and approve principal licensure programs to verify they adequately address
   knowledge and skills needed by principals to engage in research based practices.
2. Insure faculty has knowledge and skills needed to teach research based leadership
   practices.
3. Commit resources for high-quality, rigorous, and research-based professional
development for principals.
4. Support use of tools that allow practitioners to assess their use of research-based
   leadership practices
5. Be aware of changes initiated through policies and the implication of those changes
   for different stakeholders.
6. Collaborate with chief state school officers and other senior leadership to influence
   the conditions necessary to support change with second-order implications.

Waters, T., Marzano, R. J., & McNulty, B. (2003). Balanced leadership: What 30 years of
research tells us about the effect of leadership on student achievement. Aurora, CO: Mid-
continent Research for Education and Learning (McRel).