

A woman with long brown hair, wearing a white shirt, stands in front of a whiteboard, presenting to a group of people. The whiteboard features a mind map with 'IDEAS' at the center. Branches include 'Impact' (with 'SEO!' and 'be CREATIVE!'), 'Product' (with 'do research!' and a yellow sticky note with a question mark), 'Marketing' (with 'strong strategy!' and a pink sticky note with a question mark), 'Design' (with 'content not on site' and 'does it work?'), 'Brands' (with 'customers communication' and '2 ways go'), and 'Creative'. Other sticky notes include 'OK!' and 'Creative'. The group consists of several people, some standing and some seated at a table, listening attentively. The room has a brick wall and a large window.

# COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

How to inspire your leaders to become learners



School leaders today have one of the toughest jobs in education. On a daily basis, their work and worries encompass improving learning outcomes, keeping learners safe both emotionally and physically, bolstering teacher and staff motivation and doling out student discipline, among other tasks. Their job often begins before the first bus arrives and ends after everyone else has left the building.

**WE EXPECT OUR PRINCIPALS TO BE NIMBLE**, creative problem-solvers who can think on their feet and respond with humor, empathy, calm, concern and strength — whatever the situation calls for. But simply being in a leadership position doesn't guarantee those qualities. Frequently, these leaders feel inadequate in the job and unable to express these anxieties in fear of losing their credibility.

In fact, no one person could meet all of the demands of school leadership single-handedly. And, really, no one needs to be an expert at everything. What leaders need is an environment where school leaders — veterans and novices — feel safe being learners themselves.





## BRING IN A COACH

**P**ETER DEWITT HAS HIS OWN TAKE ON LEADERSHIP. DeWitt, a longtime teacher and principal, is now an author, leadership coach, education consultant, Education Week columnist and [Visible Learning](#) trainer working with John Hattie. His belief is that school leaders, like the best athletes, need coaches.

The best coach is the person who can help you get from where you are now to where you want to be, based on your own goals, insight and wisdom.



Instructional coaching for teachers, Dewitt wrote in a blog post for Education Week, is a “proven method of professional development that has an enormous impact on teaching and learning because coaches cater their approach to the needs of teachers that they are coaching.” Likewise, he says, leaders could learn from the same kind of experience. Leadership coaching offers principals the opportunity to learn with

someone from outside of their typical circle of influence on a weekly or monthly basis, he says. “In the best cases the relationship becomes a confidential partnership where they focus on a goal or a couple of goals together,” DeWitt says.

The coaching process, says DeWitt, can provide focus, offer outside perspective, raise self-efficacy and thereby help build collective efficacy. By going through the coaching process, school leaders are better equipped to coach others, such as assistant principals and teachers, and help them develop their own leadership skills.

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## PICK YOUR GOAL

**D**EWITT URGES LEADERS TO PICK A SINGLE GOAL to focus on in their leadership development practices with their coaches because more than that will just be overwhelming.. Wondering where to start? He suggests using one of the six influences that have the greatest effect on school leadership as defined by John Hattie's Visible Learning research:

### 1 **Becoming a better instructional leader.**

"High-quality instructional leaders co-construct goals with their staff to provide professional development that helps teachers understand what the best high-impact learning strategies are," writes DeWitt in his new book, *"Coach It Further"*. Goals aren't mandated; they're laid out through back-and-forth discussions. When the instructional leader goes into the classroom for observation, he or she keeps those "learning intentions" and "success criteria" in mind and focuses feedback on those goals.

### 2 **Building collective teacher efficacy.**

Teachers become more powerful when they work together on improving student learning, says DeWitt. That begins, he suggests, by helping individuals build their self-efficacy — the confidence they have in achieving their goals. DeWitt refers to education expert [Tom Guskey's](#) three elements required to raise self-efficacy:

a protocol (such as a teaching observation process); evidence (that the teacher trusts); and quick results (seen in weeks, not months).

Collective efficacy takes the power of self-efficacy among individuals and applies it to collaboration among different groups. For example, a big contributor to collective efficacy is "vicarious experiences" — allowing participants to learn from each other, as long as it's fueled by evidence of impact. Building collective efficacy can result in an "enormous amount of growth on the part of the staff," he notes, helping teachers feel like they can both trust and learn from and with each other, always with the caveat that evidence is expected to prove strategies are working.

**3 Deepening professional learning and development.** Teacher training takes multiple formats: faculty meetings, conferences, education camps, social network gatherings. But the one that's under control of the school itself is the faculty meeting, which DeWitt believes could be the most valuable form of professional learning. Here, he makes a plug for the "flipped" model.

As he explains in his book *School Climate*, flipping means sending a link to an article, blog post or video to teachers a few days ahead of the meeting so attendees come to the meeting with surface-level knowledge. In some cases, staff could be asked to bring evidence, such as feedback, teaching strategies





or observations about how they approached a given topic. Then, for a short period, the group has a discussion to make sure everybody has a common understanding. From there, people break into smaller groups to share examples and have deeper conversations. Then the groups come back together to share what they learned to allow for deep learning. This process, he adds, is a giant step forward on the route to building collective teacher efficacy, and will create the opportunity for transfer learning when teachers take what they learned in the meeting and use it in the classroom with their students.

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#### Handling feedback more effectively.

Collaborative leaders master giving feedback as well as receiving it. Positive feedback, when given correctly, “helps to increase a person’s level of self-efficacy,” DeWitt writes in *School Climate*. The simple act of opening up yourself to honest feedback can be powerful, but only if you take meaningful action, he says.

The same can be said for giving feedback. For example, school leaders who don’t visit classrooms face mistrust among teachers when they give feedback. After all, how relevant is the feedback if the teachers never see the administrator observing classes?

DeWitt encourages the leader and teacher to “co-construct” classroom goals and discuss what success looks like — before the walkthrough — to ensure the feedback is relevant and meaningful.

Additionally, part of this meaningful action is to understand how we receive feedback. Harvard professors Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen have researched feedback triggers. Those triggers include truth triggers, which means we find the feedback we are receiving is unhelpful or untrue; relationship triggers, which means we don’t believe in the credibility of the person giving us feedback; and identity triggers, which means the feedback we are receiving shatters the identity we created for ourselves.







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**Developing “assessment-capable” learners.**

Here, the focus turns to student learning. Self-directed students can tell you three things about themselves: Where they are, how they got there, and where they’re going next. These are concepts pulled from Hattie’s research, and it requires teachers to learn how to let students engage in their own learning. “When we easily give them the answer because they pause too long to think about it, or we don’t provide them with learning intentions and success criteria (how will they know they are successful when they complete the assignment?), we are taking away the opportunity for students to engage in their own learning,” DeWitt writes in *School Climate*.

Collaborative leadership calls for building dialogue with families, which requires participation from both sides.

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**Engaging families fully.**

Research has shown that students with involved families are more likely to succeed in school. However, says DeWitt, it’s common for schools to put out one-way communications such as “Come to open house” or “Schedule your parent-teacher conference.”

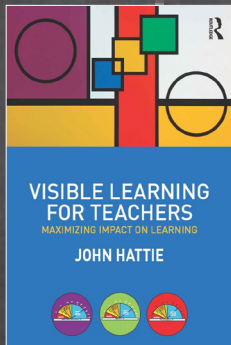
“[W]e often call for parent accountability, but that means we, as school officials, want parents to be accountable for the things we care about,” says DeWitt. “When parents become too accountable, meaning they want to advocate for their child a little too much, they are sometimes vilified and called helicopter parents.”

Collaborative leadership calls for “building dialogue with families,” which requires participation from both sides. Principals need to show families how to support the school and students as well as how the school can support them. This means requesting feedback on the best way to communicate with the family, seeking input on goals for their children, and helping families learn the “language” of learning. One suggestion DeWitt makes is to send surveys to parents to get feedback on how well the school is engaging with families and on what other modes and types of communication would be helpful. “The important thing to remember,” he says, “is that doing a survey is easy, but putting suggestions into action and then making those actions a habit is the hard part.”



# QUICK REVIEW OF VISIBLE LEARNING

Introduced by education researcher John Hattie in his book *Visible Learning*, Visible Learning has two arms:



**First**, it promotes the idea that teachers know what effect they have on student learning.

**Second**, it refers to making learning visible to students so they can become their own self-directing teachers.

By examining and synthesizing 1,500 meta-analyses covering 300 million students, Hattie has long researched the factors that affect student learning and achievement. In his book, Hattie ranked 138 effects that influence learning outcomes. (That list has since grown to more than 250.) While nearly any change in education will have a positive effect, Hattie notes, why not put energy and emphasis on those that have the greatest effect?

## BUILDING A NEW FOUNDATION

**B**ellingham Public Schools in Norfolk County, Mass., faced a turnaround situation. One of its elementary schools had earned a “level 3 rating”—not on the bottom rung but heading there. In response, the school developed an instructional leadership team that included the principal and grade level teacher-leaders. This team examined every piece of data available and asked hard questions about practices that had been in place for years. They identified areas where change was needed and developed a plan for implementing those changes.

Their efforts inspired a decision at the district level to train a leadership team whose members work with individual schools to identify and implement research-based best practices. The hope is to replicate the leadership model in use at the elementary school throughout the district. But Bellingham wanted help in articulating that aspiration in a way that would resonate for its educators and community.

DeWitt was brought in to teach his Collaborative Leadership practices. Over six months, administrators and teacher-leaders, now referred to as the District Instructional Leadership Team (DILT), participated in development sessions. Sessions focused on setting the foundation of what collaborative leadership looks like, asking the right questions, providing the right feedback, understanding the complexities of building a safe and supportive school climate for both teachers and students, understanding Hattie’s high-impact teaching strategies and developing a clearer picture of instructional leadership.



Then DILT held a district-wide session on collaborative leadership so participants would understand the new leadership models being proposed. Each school then recruited teacher and department leaders, and those teams were brought together for a final session with DeWitt that summer. Their goal: to map out a sustainable plan for continuing the work in the coming school year.

Now, each of the teams meets one day a month — half the day focuses on adult learning and examining student learning data, and the other half is spent planning the professional learning needs of the school. At least one staff meeting each month is led by members of the team to work on staff and student learning needs.

One outcome from this new model is the use of peer observation. Teachers turn to each other for professional learning opportunities. They sign up to visit each other's classrooms to observe and discuss teaching practices and the evidence found in student learning. Grade-level team meetings now happen weekly in every school, and principals meet with teachers more frequently for coaching, including discussions about shared professional practice and student learning goals.

As these educators have observed, "We are maximizing on each other's strengths and inspiring others to continue to grow." For the next step, the district will continue to collect evidence "to prove that what we are doing works, and when necessary, to identify what isn't working, and make the changes necessary to ensure that we maximize on learning for all."

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## WHY COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP WORKS

Collaborative leadership takes a structured approach that goes beyond the one-shot training that educators are usually forced to sit through. Here are five ways participants say that Peter DeWitt's training stands out:

- 1 He comes back multiple times to provide "close coaching" and to teach others how to do their own coaching so they develop a multi-layered approach to professional development.
- 2 He uses scenario-based exercises to let participants practice what they're learning. This type of active engagement helps learners connect to the new concepts.
- 3 The format is highly replicable by districts as they set up professional learning programs across schools, within schools and among teacher teams.
- 4 The advice and direction are practical, helping participants see the theory they're learning as highly doable.
- 5 As a coach himself, DeWitt is inspiring, which pushes people to want to grow in their roles.



### **PAY ATTENTION TO THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS.**

If your most experienced assistant principal is only allowed to handle school discipline, you're doing a disservice. That's all they'll learn going forward. As a principal, writes DeWitt, spend time focusing on instructional leadership strategies with them; teach them how to foster relationships with staff and coach them in having effective dialogue with stakeholders.

### **USE PRE-ENGAGEMENT SURVEYS.**

As you're leading coaching or training sessions yourself, borrow this technique from DeWitt: Use a pre-engagement survey to understand the experiences and needs of the people with whom you'll be working. Typically, he'll ask them just four questions: "What do you know about collaboration?"; "Can you describe some of the ways in which you collaborate?"; "What are you hoping to learn?"; and "What do you want me to know about you?".

**IMPROVE YOUR WALKTHROUGHS.** One way to do that is to ditch the checklist, advises DeWitt, because checklists set up a dynamic where leaders talk down to teachers. A better approach: align staff meeting discussions, individual goals co-constructed with teachers, the collecting of evidence and the formal teacher observation processes. No teacher should be surprised when the principal shows up in their classroom or when feedback is delivered.

### **RAMP UP EFFORTS TO INCREASE TRUST IN YOUR SCHOOL.**

That starts by treating teachers like the professionals they are, says DeWitt. Greet them in the main office, find something good to say about their teaching practices, point out areas where they have a positive impact on the kids or the school community, build their self-esteem by getting to know them through one-on-one conversations, and hold off on blanket emails when face-to-face time would be the kinder response.

## **ADVICE FROM THE FIELD**

### **COACHES DON'T HAVE TO BE CONTRACTORS.**

In *Coach It Further*, DeWitt says coaching can happen when two principals work together as peer coaches, when an experienced school leader is paired with a new one, or when a superintendent or assistant superintendent works directly with a principal. And, yes, when district capacity is lacking for building coaching relationships, coaches can be brought in from an outside agency.

# THE COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP LEARNING SERIES

Collaborative Leadership is a professional learning program delivered in a series of one to five workshops focusing on research-based influences that will foster a supportive and inclusive school climate, increase academic and social-emotional learning, and maximize the efficacy of every school stakeholder. Each day of the workshop focuses on developing the research-based high-effect influences that result in high-impact leadership. Participants gain exposure, practice and coaching explored in three of Peter DeWitt's books: Collaborative Leadership, School Climate, and Coach It Further.



## BREAKING GROUND

THE STATE OF IOWA requires school administrators to take an “evaluator approval” course every five years. Heartland Area Education Agency, which serves some 10,043 teachers, superintendents and principals in 11 counties in central Iowa, had experience in working with Corwin and DeWitt on training connected to Visible Learning. But this time, Jim Verlengia, director of Leadership Supports for the agency, proposed that he and DeWitt develop a four-day workshop focused on collaborative leadership for those administrators. This was new ground for the Iowa Department of Education, which had previously been solely responsible for its training offerings.

It worked. The department has made the session one of its standing options for administrators, who have requested DeWitt return for additional versions of the training. “This is the most practical evaluator approval I’ve had in all the years we’ve been required to have this additional class for licensure,” said one attendee. “Assignments have been relevant,” said another.

“The amount of research can be overwhelming, and it is nice to have some clarity around the Hattie research,” reported a third administrator, adding that DeWitt’s training “has helped me get a better idea of which leader behaviors can help move our school forward.”

Verlengia has become a big fan of DeWitt’s work. “It isn’t often that one’s vision becomes reality,” he says. “However, in this case, the thought of providing administrators with meaningful and applicable growth opportunities that could positively impact the work they do and the schools they lead exceeds the vision we had.”





## SUPPORTING EMERGING LEADERS

**T**O HELP ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS and new head principals build leadership skills, [Oklahoma's State Department of Education](#) and University of Oklahoma's [South Central Comprehensive Center](#) and [EDUTAS](#), jointly developed a professional learning program intended to fill school leaders' toolboxes with "practical, job-embedded strategies."

This program, called Moving UP: Transitioning into Principalship, included five sessions with DeWitt, in which the principals spent time learning and practicing the six components that make up his collaborative leadership model. For each session, DeWitt would listen carefully and adjust his content, conversations and strategies to fit learners' local contexts. After each session, the principals, along with the coaches they were each matched with, debriefed with DeWitt and reviewed participant feedback to personalize follow-up coaching and differentiate content for the next session.

Especially valued were scenarios in which DeWitt demonstrated coaching techniques through "vicarious experiences," as described in his book *Coach It Further*. Those methods allowed the participants to learn from him and from each other as part of building their self-efficacy and confidence so that they could later coach others at their schools.

Having a coach "during this stressful year of transitioning into a new position was an absolute blessing," said one participant. "I'm confident my learning here is affecting my staff — specifically, the formal and informal feedback I [can now] provide to my staff."



## MEET, MOTIVATE, MODEL

**T**HE IDEA OF COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP, as championed by DeWitt, is to meet stakeholders where they are, motivate them to strive for improvement, and model how to do it. The use of this “meet, motivate, model blueprint,” as he calls it, can inspire school leaders to transform leadership practices, identify where immediate changes can happen, build and empower the leadership team, and bring all stakeholders into the conversation. The result is a school staff that works effectively as a team in improving student learning, which is the ultimate evidence of success.

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