



Principal Perspectives on Whole-School Improvement Programs and *The Leader in Me*

Introduction

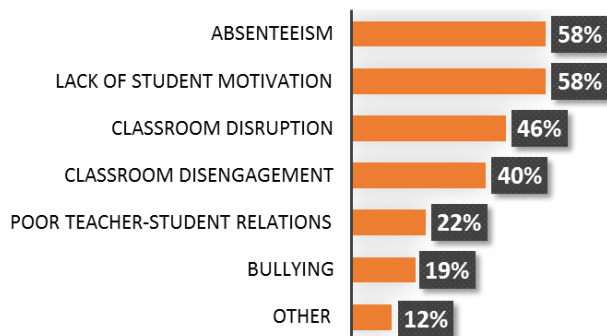
Beginning with the release of the Nation at Risk report in 1983, and continuing throughout the past 30 years, elected officials, business leaders, parents, and education policymakers have called for a dramatic improvement in the performance of America's public schools. Much of the school reform agenda to date has been connected to accountability, with initiatives focusing on school

curricula, instructional strategies, and assessments in an effort to increase student academic achievement. However, in recent years researchers and practitioners alike have discovered that an exclusive emphasis on academics is not enough to produce sustainable school improvement; the most effective strategies are whole-school models that address not only academic achievement, but also student and teacher behaviors, school culture, and the school environment.

For example, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) have been implemented in many schools as a way to build a school culture based on collaboration and distributed leadership. Another prevalent whole-school strategy is Response to Intervention (RtI), which is a problem-solving framework that uses data to

evaluate the effectiveness of instruction across grade levels, and then matches interventions to individual student needs. RtI is often implemented in conjunction with Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), a problem-solving model that recognizes the importance of a proper school learning environment. PBIS seeks to address behaviors through explicit teaching and reinforcement of positive behaviors rather than disciplining children for infractions.

Top Challenges in K-12 Public Schools



The Leader in Me is part of this mix of whole-school improvement models addressing student behaviors, school culture, and the learning environment. Since the official launch of *The Leader in Me* in 2009, FranklinCovey reports that over 2,000 schools have used the program to improve school culture, teach social and emotional skills and improve learning outcomes. What distinguishes *The Leader in Me* from other prevailing whole-school improvement models is its emphasis on leadership.

Integrating the teaching of leadership skills into K-12 education curriculums is in line with significant current and emerging academic research on educational effectiveness. The types of leadership skills identified as effective include private leadership development in skills such as goal setting, personal planning, organization, and student motivated learning; as well as public leadership development in skills such as group collaboration, empathic listening,

public speaking, and classroom and/or school-wide leadership. *The Leader in Me* attempts to teach these skills through specific, focused techniques and activities that include: student planning and goal setting, student self-assessment, student-led conferences, and providing leadership roles, which include public speaking, project management, and group collaboration.

Education Direction wanted to know how this leadership focused model is performing at addressing the social-emotional and other educational challenges faced in today's school environments. We also wanted to see how this model compares with other well-known models and initiatives.

In order to evaluate *The Leader in Me's* effectiveness in relation to other whole-school improvement models, Education Direction conducted a nation-wide survey of 669 K-12 principals to learn their perspective.

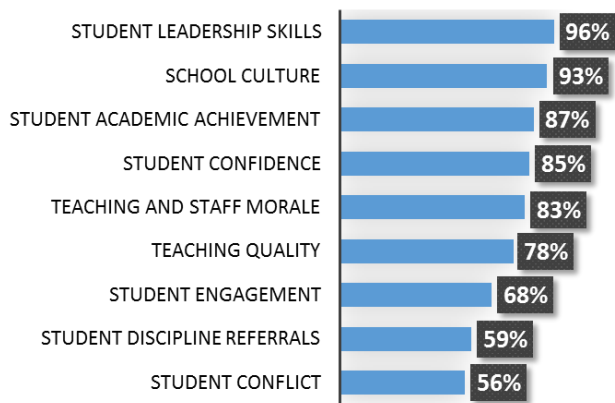
Survey Objectives

1. Understand principal perspective on the importance of "life skills" in the learning environment.
2. Define the primary challenges that principals indicate are impacting learning at K-12 schools, and determine *The Leader in Me's* ability to meet those challenges.
3. Measure *The Leader in Me* against other whole-school improvement programs to evaluate relative impact, satisfaction, and success.

Life Skills and Leadership

The first objective in our survey was to understand how principals view the teaching of “life skills” such as leadership skills and other social emotional learning. Given the challenge of poor student conduct, many of the programs in our study, including *The Leader in Me*, target social and emotional learning in some form or another. In the wake of standardized testing and school reform efforts focused on academic improvement, we asked principals how important social and emotional skills are, relative to academic skills – particularly in the context of student long-term life success.

% of Principals Who Say TLIM has had a Positive Effect in This Area



Our survey found 99% of principals believe these “life skills” are either equally or more important than academic skills in the continuing success of their students. We also asked specifically about student leadership as one of these skills, referring to the concept that children can be leaders in their schools and leaders of themselves. Of all the principals surveyed in the study, 84% believe this form of leadership is a valuable behavior and mindset in children and 69% indicate student leadership should be used more often to enhance a child’s education.

Challenges that Inhibit Learning Objectives

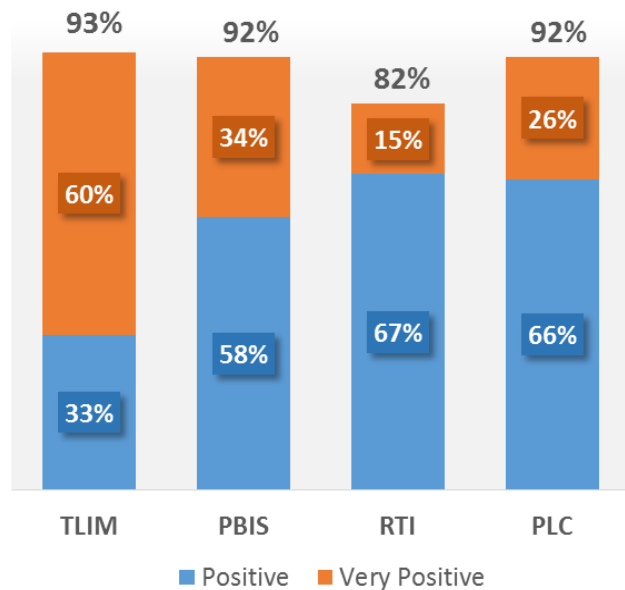
A second main objective of our survey was to understand what challenges principals see as negatively affecting learning at their schools, and

to determine *The Leader in Me’s* ability to improve the learning environment. When principals were asked what challenges negatively affect learning outcomes at their school, the most common factors noted were absenteeism (58%), lack of student motivation (58%), classroom disruption (46%), and classroom disengagement (40%).

To understand the extent to which *The Leader in Me* is being used to address these challenges, we asked principals if they had implemented *The Leader in Me* at their school, and if so for how long. We also asked them why they had implemented the program, and we asked about program outcomes.

Principals implementing *The Leader in Me* indicated the main reasons they chose to implement the program were to improve school culture (72%), improve student academic achievement (53%), and to teach 21st century or social emotional skills (52%). Other reasons cited included to decrease disciplinary issues, increase teacher engagement, and to empower students in their own learning.

Effect on School Culture



When asked about outcomes a very large percentage of principals indicated that *The Leader in Me* has had a positive effect on developing student leadership skills (96%), had a positive effect on school culture (93%), had a positive effect on student academic achievement (87%), and improved student confidence (85%). In addition, a majority of principals indicated that *The Leader in Me* has had a positive effect on teacher and staff morale (83%) and teaching quality (78%), and has increased student engagement (68%). Other effects noted included reducing student discipline referrals (59%) and reducing student conflict (56%).

Program Impact, Satisfaction and Success

Our final objective within the survey was to evaluate *The Leader in Me* in the context of other whole-school improvement programs. We wanted to understand how *The Leader in Me* is perceived by those principals who are implementing it and how the program compares to other widely-used school improvement programs. Specifically, we sought to understand the degree to which *The Leader in Me's* leadership-focused curriculum achieves its goals in relation to social emotional learning and school improvement.

We asked principals to evaluate their whole-school improvement programs using three broad performance indicators: 1) Impact of the program, 2) Satisfaction with the program, and 3) Program value. These broad indicators were assessed using the following evaluation criteria: academic achievement, student leadership capabilities, school culture, teaching quality, teacher and staff morale, overall satisfaction, and perceived value of the investment in the program. Principals were also asked to rate their likelihood to recommend the program as an indicator of program success.

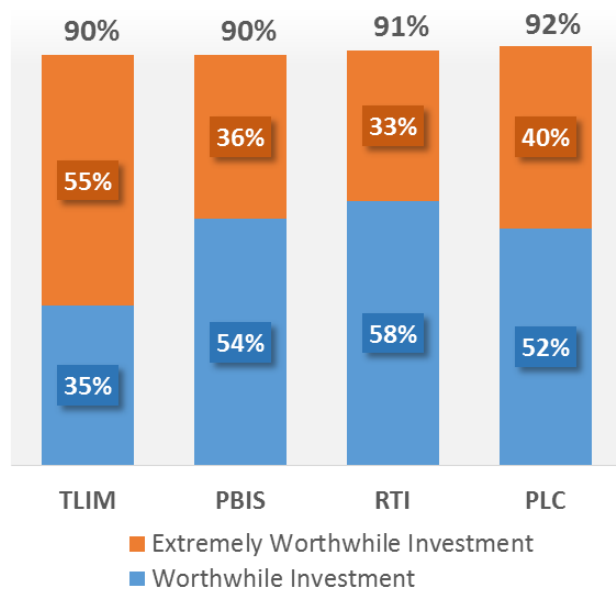
The outcome was highly informative. While each whole-school improvement program in the study maintained a strength in one or more of the above areas, the cumulative results of the

performance indicators illustrates *The Leader in Me's* consistently high ranking among more widely used programs such as PBIS or PLCs. In some cases, *The Leader in Me* program actually outscored other programs in our research.

Evaluation Criteria Results

Because we were attempting to measure a program's ability to positively affect whole school transformation, one of the key indicators that we looked at was how each of the programs have affected school culture. Significantly, *The Leader in Me* did very well in this regard, with 93% of *The Leader in Me* principals indicating the program has had a positive effect on school culture. This was slightly higher than for PBIS, PLCs, or RtI. There was also a higher percentage indicating that *The Leader in Me* had a "very positive effect," indicating the depth to which respondents perceived the program to be helpful.

Value of the Program



Student Leadership Capabilities

As the name implies, *The Leader in Me* emphasizes the value of leadership in improving educational outcomes. Given *The Leader in Me* is actually designed around teaching leadership skills, we also wanted to understand how *The*

Leader in Me does in addressing one of the specific learning outcomes it was designed to achieve. As indicated two-thirds of principals surveyed see a need for greater use of student leadership to enhance education. In this context *The Leader in Me* succeeds quite well. 96% of *The Leader in Me* principals state the program has had a positive impact on student leadership skills, as compared to 85% of principals for PBIS, 55% for PLCs, and 48% for RtI.

In order to gain a more granular perspective on how students and faculty are responding to this education, we asked additional questions around the leadership context. 71% of *The Leader in Me* school principals surveyed say their staff and faculty view their students as leaders, and 80% of these principals say their students view themselves as leaders within their school. Among the other whole-school improvement programs, strong leadership capabilities appear to be unique to *The Leader in Me*. For instance, only 40% of principals from PLCs, RtI, and PBIS view their students as leaders, or believe their students view themselves this way.

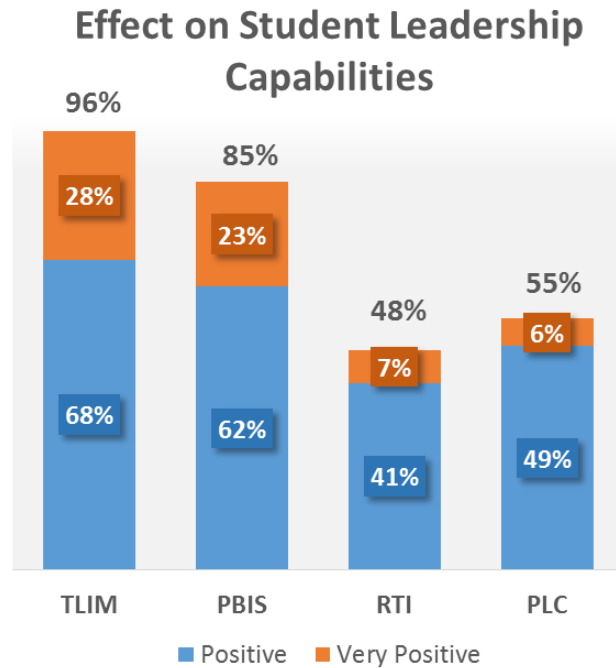
Academic Achievement

While *The Leader in Me* was not designed to directly influence student academic scores, 87% of *The Leader in Me* principals believe it has had a positive effect on student academic achievement. This is slightly lower than, but in line with, the other programs tested. Interestingly, a higher percentage of *The Leader in Me* principals indicate the effect has been “very positive,” suggesting a higher degree of confidence amongst *The Leader in Me* principals.

Overall Value

When it came down to overall value, *The Leader in Me* was ranked in line with other well-known and widely-used programs. 92% of principals implementing PLCs, 91% implementing RtI, and 90% implementing *The Leader in Me*, as well as 90% implementing PBIS said these programs were a worthwhile investment. A very high 55% of principals indicated that *The Leader in Me* has been an “extremely worthwhile investment,” a

number higher than any of the other programs we tested.



Program Satisfaction

In gauging overall satisfaction of each of the programs we found that *The Leader in Me* scored higher than any of the other widely-used programs that we tested. Again on this question we found that a significant number of *The Leader in Me* principals indicated the highest level of agreement. In this case 51% indicated they are “very satisfied” with the program, and a total of 92% indicated being satisfied or very satisfied. The highest overall satisfaction score for any of the other programs was 89% for PBIS.

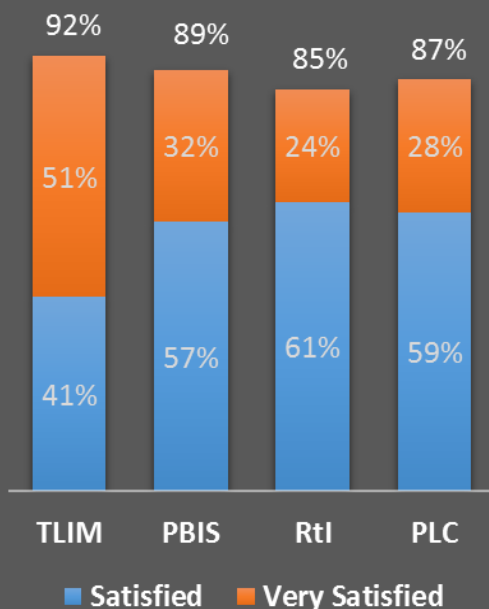
Conclusion

Our overall objective in our survey was to understand the key challenges that current principals face with regard to learning at their schools, and to identify how *The Leader in Me* compares with other programs in terms of addressing these challenges. Considering the highly positive results relative to other widely-known and accepted programs, it is clear that *The Leader in Me* principals see it as an effective and comparable solution to improving school culture, building student academic achievement,

The Leader in Me Program Satisfaction

“Students like having responsibility & ownership in our building. Teachers say kids really know and understand the language and strive to lead. Parents and adults say they can't believe we are able to teach these kind of skills to such young kids - it's impressive.”

Overall Satisfaction



teaching leadership skills, and offering a transformation model to improve the overall success of the school in its teaching objectives.

Survey results indicate *The Leader in Me* is an equally if not more successful model, with unique value in establishing student leadership capabilities and transforming school culture. While it was not designed as an academic improvement framework, the cascading effects of an improved learning environment and positive student behavior appear to translate to improved academic outcomes. Principals are highly satisfied with *The Leader in Me*, a strong indicator of program success.

References and Methodology

¹Academic research that notes the positive impacts of teaching different aspects of leadership skills includes:

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. New York: Routledge.

Gardner, H. (2004). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.

Lezotte, L. and K. McKee Snyder (2014). *What Do Effective Schools Do? Reenvisioning the Correlates*. Bloomington. Solution Tree.

Louis, K., Wahlstrom, K., Michlin, M., Gordon, M., Thomas, E., Leithwood, K., . . . Moore, S. (2010). *Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning*. University of Minnesota & University of Toronto.

² Education Direction sent online survey invites to over 30,000 K-12 principals in the United States, 669 of whom responded to our complete survey for a 2.2% completion rate. Included in our sample are 102 principals that had implemented *The Leader in Me* at their school. As a comparison, 465 of responding principals indicated they had implemented PLCs, 569 had implemented RtI, and 428 had implemented PBIS. The survey was conducted May-June 2015.



Education Direction has a singular goal: to improve student outcomes in K-12 public education. We accomplish our mission of improving instruction, building coherence, and creating capacity by means of research, strategic consulting, and professional development.