Leaders are faced with an avalanche of legitimate competing priorities that make it difficult to focus in a disciplined way. With this in mind, in our study we sought to understand where leaders placed their priorities and how persistent and pervasive was the loss of focus experienced by overloaded leaders, and the implications for student achievement. The evidence discussed in this chapter demonstrates that the cost of leadership diffusion is high and the rewards of leadership focus are great.

Competing Demands on Leadership Attention

Leaders face three distinct types of demands for their attention: programs, processes, and practices. We have already explored the damage inflicted as a result of the Law of Initiative Fatigue, in which programs proliferate and ultimately overwhelm the available time, resources, and emotional energy of the leaders and teachers. In one elementary school, for example, we observed seven separate literacy programs, all competing for teacher attention within the same 90-minute literacy block.

Processes—such as teacher evaluation, data analysis, and the completion of required reports—also compete for leadership time and attention. Unfortunately, some of these processes elevate compliance over substantive leadership. For example, one district distributed a model building plan that was dutifully copied by some principals, who simply cut and pasted sections of the model plan, including descriptions of processes for grade levels that were not represented in their particular schools.
Many processes are driven by policy, law, or labor agreements. Legislation and administrative regulations in some states require leaders to create written plans, establish goals, and monitor performance on a dizzying array of topics, from student achievement and safety to worker safety and blood-borne pathogens. Each requirement, when considered individually, made sense at the time it was established. But, collectively, the weight of the process requirements placed on school leaders is counterproductive. The mandatory 20-minute “training” on blood-borne pathogens alluded to earlier is interspersed among a dozen other announcements to a preoccupied group of teachers and administrators, very few of whom find the instruction illuminating. While it is easy to blame legislators and school boards for burdensome processes, educators and their professional associations sometimes bear equal responsibility for the consequent failure in leadership focus. Collective bargaining agreements may restrict how leaders make use of time in faculty meetings and how administrators provide feedback to teachers. Research on the value of leaders providing effective monitoring and feedback for teachers is irrelevant if leaders are distracted by other policy priorities or subject to grievances when they pursue effective practices. Some restrictions on leadership are the result of inappropriate generalizations. In some jurisdictions, only the principal is permitted to conduct teacher observations and evaluations, whether the staff includes 20 teachers or 200. Such a requirement undermines effective replication of the best professional practices and limits the frequency and impact of observations of teaching practice.

One of the most pervasive results of leadership diffusion is the increasing reliance of educational administrators on prescribed programs that claim to be “teacher-proof.” The leader need not engage in thoughtful interaction with professional educators if the only question is whether the teacher “delivered” the program, an observation that could be applied with equal rigor to the person who delivers textbooks, computer programs, or furniture. Leaders who assess delivery of programs have a relatively easy chore, evaluating by a brief observation and checklist. Leaders who assess the implementation of practices, by contrast, face a more complex challenge, one that requires more than a cursory visit but instead entails multiple observations. If there is a theme to the research on leadership impact, it is that “practices, not programs” are the key to developing and sustaining a high level of impact.
Clusters of Effective Leadership Practices

We have found three essential clusters of leadership practices that positively impact student achievement: focus, monitoring, and efficacy (Figure 3.1). By “focus” we mean that leaders identify and monitor no more than six priority instructional initiatives that are linked clearly to specific student needs. By “monitoring” we mean the regular (typically at least once per quarter) systematic observation of adult actions—what teachers and leaders do in order to improve student learning. By “efficacy” we mean the personal conviction of teachers and administrators that their actions are the primary influences on the academic success of students.

While “focus” sounds appealing to the overwhelmed leader, the inevitable question is, “focus on what?” Our research suggests that the “what” question must be preceded by the far more important issue of how leaders focus. Once a cluster of effective practices is identified, then the “what” question will be resolved based upon the needs of a particular school in a particular year. Sometimes the target for focus may be safety and discipline, other times reading comprehension, other times student engagement, and other times parent involvement.

FIGURE 3.1  Clusters of Effective Leadership Practices
But none of these identified priorities will ever benefit from effective leadership without the confluence of the three essential practices. Our evaluation of 15 leadership practices revealed that a combination of high scores in these three practices—focus, monitoring, and efficacy—yielded strikingly positive results for all schools and all subjects for which we were able to gather student achievement results: reading, writing, math, and science. The power of this combination of leadership practices was consistent, with similar results in the United States and Canada, as well as in student results for high- and low-poverty schools, high- and low-second-language schools, and high- and low-special-needs populations.

Consider the example of formative assessment. There is substantial published research (Hattie, 2009; Marzano, 2009a) that suggests that formative assessment has a positive impact on student achievement. It would be more accurate, however, to say that formative assessment, in the context of a cluster of other related practices, influences achievement. Formative assessment in isolation is no more effective than placing a computer in the classroom and hoping that it will, without software or instruction, improve student results. Formative assessment—accompanied by data analysis, use of the assessment to improve teaching practices, and careful application of those improved teaching practices to student learning—will, in combination, have a strong probability of improving student results. Therefore, it is not a single strategy that improves learning, but rather it is a collection of teaching and leadership practices that, when applied in concert, improve student achievement. It becomes apparent that only by focusing on a limited number of priorities can a school go beyond labels like “formative assessment” to the underlying supportive practices that for that program will produce the desired results.

**The Logic Behind the Focus Imperative**

We have already explored the essential nature of focus, and we can infer from the data an informal “rule of six,” meaning that schools begin to lose their ability to focus after leaders claim to have more than six priorities. The logic behind the imperative for focus becomes clearer when one considers the other two elements of effective practice, monitoring and efficacy.
Finding Your Leadership Focus

**Monitoring**

Monitoring, in the context of this study, is not merely the collection of data on student performance. Rather, “monitoring” refers to the observation and recording of specific teaching and leadership practices. For example, schools with a commitment to nonfiction writing monitored not only student scores in writing but also the frequency with which teachers in all subjects required nonfiction writing activities from their students. In another illustration, leaders (including administrators and board members) who wished to improve the frequency and quality of classroom observations monitored how many times they visited schools and assessed the clarity and specificity of their visits.

Effective monitoring includes three characteristics. It is frequent, it addresses adult actions, and it is constructive.

**Frequency of Monitoring**

First, monitoring must be frequent. Annual monitoring is remarkably ineffective, with data that are late and irrelevant, typically about students who are no longer in class. The impact of frequency is nearly linear, as schools with weekly analysis of student performance and teaching strategies far outdistance schools that monitor only quarterly, semi-annually, or annually (Oberman & Symonds, 2005). The impact of frequent monitoring is directly analogous to the findings reported by Marzano (2007) that frequent monitoring of student performance is directly related to improved achievement. Just a moment ago, the idea of a school having only six priorities might have seemed preposterous—leaders simply must focus on far more than six things. But what if we reconsidered the imperative “focus” in the context of monitoring and created the standard that anything worthy of the label “priority” would require monitoring by the leader at least every week or two? Now, six priorities monitored weekly in a 36-week school year results in 216 discrete instances of monitoring, and the idea of adding a single additional priority with 36 additional instances of monitoring suddenly becomes a daunting task. It is particularly noteworthy that the definitive meta-analysis of leadership practices (Marzano et al., 2005) came to a conclusion that is strikingly similar to ours—higher levels of leadership focus are associated with greater gains in student learning. After an exhaustive review of more than 1,600 studies of the impact of leadership on student achievement, Marzano et al.
identified 21 leadership practices that were associated with immediate and long-term change. Only 3 of the 21 practices met the criteria for both levels of change, and effective monitoring was one of those three.

**Monitoring of Adult Actions**

The second characteristic of effective monitoring is that it is focused on adult actions, not merely on student test scores. With modern data collection systems, it may be seductively easy for leaders to claim to engage in monitoring by posting a blizzard of automatically generated charts and graphs of student performance. But if we were monitoring the health of students, surely we would consider more than graphs, however prolifically and elegantly produced, of their weight. We would want to know the causes, not just the effects. If the students lost weight, were they dieting? What were their exercise patterns? What other influences caused them to lose weight? Did they have eating disorders? Were they abusing drugs? These questions would take more time to address, but surely they are at least as important as the simple query of the students’ weight.

Similarly, school leaders are now drowning in data (Reeves, 2008–2009), but the data are meaningless unless we consider the causes that lead to the outcomes—that is, the actions of teachers, school leaders, and policymakers. Therefore, a consideration of student achievement results in reading, math, and science must be considered not only as a statement of test scores but also as an assessment of teaching and leadership practices. Monitoring of teachers and school leaders has an unfortunate history—one more likely associated with evaluation, collective bargaining agreements, and job security than with a genuine attempt to improve practice. Nevertheless, there are some outstanding monitoring practices that have been able to coexist with labor agreements (Marshall, 2010). My previous study of leadership evaluation (Reeves, 2009a) suggests that evaluation of leaders suffered from many of the flaws common in teacher evaluation—it was late, it was ineffective, and it tended to regard any behavior above the threshold of felonious assault as “satisfactory.” The words “needs improvement” in evaluation should be normal, but in the context of typical monitoring and evaluation systems, the phrase “needs improvement” is a career killer. In the present study, monitoring that was most effective provided frequent and specific feedback to teachers and leaders.
Constructive Monitoring

The third characteristic of effective monitoring is that it is constructive. Although there are many variations on the walk-through to encourage greater observation of instructional practices in the classroom, all of them can be divided into two broad categories: the witch hunt or the treasure hunt. In the former case, the observer is equipped with a checklist and almost invariably can identify what the teacher is missing. This game of *gotcha!* inspires adversarial relationships and, in many cases in the past decade, has led to the demise of what might otherwise have been promising and thoughtful engagement among teaching professionals. If the price of professional learning and effective feedback is the loss of job security, then we should not expect our colleagues to be enthusiastic participants.

By contrast, even highly unionized school systems have embraced the “science fair” approach to identifying, documenting, and replicating effective practice. Specifically, the science fair (Reeves, 2008a) provides a clear and consistent method for teachers and leaders to document and share professional practices. Connecticut is an international leader in advancing educational accountability by employing methods ranging from a generating a list of test scores through thoughtful, public display of effective professional practices that are directly linked with student achievement. In one recent meeting, more than 400 teams of teachers from throughout the state identified specific data on student achievement, associated the data with measurable professional practices of teachers and administrators, and displayed their findings on three-panel displays in a science fair that brought unanimous acclaim from policymakers, administrators, and union leaders. The guidelines for creating a positive climate for monitoring through a science fair are provided in Appendix D.

Efficacy

The third element of the cluster of professional practices that enhance focus for school leaders is a variable we call “efficacy.” In order to understand the power and meaning of the concept of efficacy, try this experiment with your colleagues. Ask a simple, open-ended question: “What are the causes of student achievement?” For the purposes of the study described in this book, the responses to this question were revealed in
documents created by teams of administrators and teachers. But the same kind of inquiry can be conducted in any meeting where people are free to speak their mind. By asking the question and noting the responses, you will find that two categories emerge. The first category of responses includes variables that are outside of our control: parental support, nutrition, home language, and so forth. The second category of responses focuses on variables that are within our control: curriculum, assessment, feedback, teaching, leadership, and such. Schools with a high score in efficacy have far more responses in the second category than in the first. These schools operate under the philosophy that, while demographic characteristics of students are certainly important, the actions of teachers and leaders have a greater impact. Either point of view becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Reeves, 2006a), a result that is a direct reflection of the pioneering research on the power of expectations documented in *The Pygmalion Effect* (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 2003). More than four decades of research and practice on the power of efficacy leads to the inescapable conclusion that the beliefs of teachers and school leaders have a significant effect, for better or worse, on the performance of students. This power of this variable can be synergistic—magnifying the impact of other teacher influences. Good assessment and curriculum, for example, have greater impacts on student achievement when teachers and administrators have high levels of belief in the effectiveness of those strategies.

**Focus, Monitoring, and Efficacy: The Combined Impact on Performance and Morale**

While the imperative for focus is at the heart of this book, the greatest impact on student achievement stems from the combination of this cluster of leadership behaviors. Effective monitoring is possible only when leaders focus on no more than half a dozen instructional leadership priorities. Authentic efficacy is present only if leaders and teachers believe that they have a personal and profound influence on student results. The best news is that the combination of these variables has an impact not only on student performance but also on staff morale. The belief systems of teachers and leaders are directly associated with their levels of stress,
anxiety, and burnout (Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008). When staff members believe that their efforts are effective for students, their levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout are lower.

This is a strikingly counterintuitive finding. Leaders may think, “I can’t ask my staff members to engage in more effective practices—after all, their spouse was just laid off, their neighbor is suffering through a home foreclosure, and their adult children have just moved back into a formerly empty nest.” In fact, the opposite is true. Even at a time of personal and economic distress, what staff members need above all is not relief from leadership expectations, but precisely the opposite. Leaders must expect more because it is their expectations that drive efficacy—the belief and reality that the actions of adults do influence student performance. It is imperative that our colleagues know that within the safe harbor of the classroom and the school, our actions still matter, that we do influence results—that we have efficacy.