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Leadership Practices of Elementary School Principals

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

A variety of recommendations have been suggested during the past two decades in response to the need to improve America's schools. The effect of leadership on a school frequently emerges as a key component in achieving significant school reform. Many leadership models and specific behaviors for school principals have been presented and discussed in the literature.

Principals today must serve as leaders for student learning. They must know and understand academic content and pedagogical techniques. They must be able to work with teachers to strengthen their instructional skills. They must collect, analyze and use data to improve test scores. They must seek to rally students, teachers, parents, local health and family service agencies, youth development groups, local businesses and other community members around the common goal of improving student performance. They must also develop the leadership skills and knowledge necessary to effectively exercise autonomy and pursue successful academic strategies. Some observers have stated the principalship has become a uniquely challenging job with more and more demands placed on the principal each year.

How are principals meeting the challenge in academically successful elementary schools? Do principals in less successful schools see themselves differently than principals in more successful schools? Are principals' self-assessments of leadership behavior consistent with their teachers' assessments of the principal's leadership behavior? These questions were addressed in a study recently completed in South Carolina. The study focused on the relationship between the leadership practices of elementary school principals and academic success as measured by the schools' state report card. The Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) (Kouzes and Posner, 2003) was used to survey randomly selected elementary principals and their teachers. The principals assessed their own leadership practices using the LPI – Self, and the teachers assessed the leadership practices of their principal using the LPI – Observer. The LPI is based on the five Kouzes and Posner (2002) tenets of leadership presented in their leadership model. Those five tenets are: (a) Modeling the Way, (b) Inspiring a Shared Vision, (c) Challenging the Process, (d) Enabling Others to Act, and (e) Encouraging the Heart. A brief overview of their model and a summary of the findings provide several lessons for both practicing elementary principals and those responsible for preparing tomorrow's school leaders.

Applying the Tenets of Leadership

Modeling the Way

The leadership practice of *Modeling the Way* establishes principles and values concerning the way people should be treated and the way goals are pursued. Principals must lead through a set of principles, values, and beliefs. They must consistently base their decisions on an appropriate core set of values and beliefs. They cannot allow the demographic or socioeconomic profile of the school to deter them from their primary mission, namely student academic progress. An educational philosophy

that believes all students can achieve and that the school will ultimately be successful is an essential core value for a principal.

Principals of effective schools model the way by setting an example for others to follow. Teachers admire principals “who walk their talk” and serve as role models for the behaviors they seek to instill in others. Honesty, integrity, being ethical, and relying on a set of principles are the qualities that teachers and staff most value in their school leaders. The actions of the principal are noticed and interpreted by others as “what is important.” Common examples of principals modeling desired behavior include: the principal demonstrating good attendance and punctuality, the principal’s participation and involvement in staff development, and the showing of love, appreciation, and respect for children.

Inspiring a Shared Vision

If you don’t know where you are going, you will never get there. For a principal to be successful, they must have a vision of what they want the school to accomplish. A vision is a compelling picture of the future that inspires commitment, and provides purpose, meaning, and significance to the work of the school. It provides guidance and direction for the school, staff, students, and administration. A clear vision allows the principal to focus on the most important issues, and prioritize what is essential to the academic development of the school.

Successful principals passionately believe they can make a difference. They envision the future, creating an ideal image of what their school can become, and enlist others in their effort. They are able to inspire their staff to work and strive for a common goal. To enlist support for a school vision, the principal must know everyone’s dreams, hopes, aspirations, and values. The staff, students, and parents have to believe the principal has their best interests at heart. The leadership practice of *Inspiring a Shared Vision* is consistent with principals setting ambitious goals and possessing a vision that all children will do well. It is their personal conviction, confidence and belief in the vision that keeps them focused and sustains them.

Enable Others to Act

The principal needs to foster collaboration, build spirited teams, and actively involve everyone in academic initiatives. The successful principal understands that mutual respect makes a successful school, and strives to create an atmosphere of trust and dignity. They enable others by making each person feel capable and more powerful. Effective principals understand that their staff has to have the freedom to grow and achieve their full potential. Teachers need to know they can be themselves and that diverse points of view are acceptable.

Successful principals provide the focus, parameters, and support required to help teachers function more effectively. They ensure teachers are given the opportunity for professional development by scheduling workshops and allowing teachers to attend professional conferences. They allow teachers to experiment and take risks in planning, preparing and delivering instruction. They establish and maintain a collaborative school culture, where teachers work together to brainstorm, analyze and solve problems. Effective principals enable others to act by including teachers in the decision making process as much as possible. Cotton (2003) noted that involving the staff in decision making had the greatest impact on teacher morale and students’ achievement.

Challenging the Process

The leadership practice of *challenging the process* is essential for a principal seeking to improve the academic standing of a school. Successful principals understand they must demonstrate the courage to take risks to turn a low performing school into an academically successful school. They realize the status quo is not good enough.

Among the most important qualities a principal can bring to a school are passion, conviction, and confidence in others. For principals to be successful change agents, they must ultimately find solutions to a school's problems. The passion and conviction they bring to the job will help them sell the importance of embracing change. For example, a common response from some faculty will be "We have tried that before and it did not work; or, we have always done it this way, why change now." It is essential that the principal build coalitions within the school and community to offset such resistance and effectively implement important academic initiatives.

Encouraging the Heart

Principals use the leadership practice of *encouraging the heart* to show appreciation for their teachers and create a culture of celebration. Teachers become frustrated and discouraged during difficult times, and the principal must periodically lift their spirits through genuine acts of kindness. Low performing schools have more than their share of problems. Principals need to genuinely praise teachers and let them know they are appreciated by those leading the academic improvement effort. A principal's praise and show of appreciation is a powerful motivator and helps teachers become creative in their work.

Successful principals create a culture where each staff member believes their accomplishments will be noted, appreciated, and celebrated by the school community. They write notes of thanks, recognize contribution privately and publicly, and acknowledge individual efforts. Small celebrations are noted and parties or luncheons are sponsored at the conclusion of some projects.

Findings

A total of 84 elementary principals agreed to participate in a study utilizing these five tenets of leadership. Of these, 50 also returned three teachers assessments of the principal's leadership behaviors. The LPI utilizes a ten point scale with six questions addressing each of the five leadership tenets. The maximum total points (a perfect score) for each tenet is a 60.

Table I provides the mean score on each tenet for the principal's self-assessment. It then divides the scores into 2 categories: academically more successful (MS) and academically less successful (LS) schools. Schools rated excellent, good, or average on their 2003 public school report cards were grouped into the successful category and those rated below average or unsatisfactory were grouped into the less successful category. The results indicate that principals rated themselves very high on all five leadership tenets and saw little difference in their behavior on any of the leadership tenets. Perhaps most notable, there was no substantial difference in self assessment scores between principals in schools rated more successful and schools rated less successful. Principals generally saw their own leadership behavior the same regardless of how their school had been rated. (Insert Table I)

Table II summarizes the results of the teachers' assessment of their principals' leadership practices on the same five tenets. The scores indicate that teachers from academically more successful schools rated their principals substantially higher on each leadership tenet than the teachers from less successful schools rated their principals. Teachers' assessments of the principal's behavior generally paralleled principal's self assessments in academically successful schools. In the less successful schools they clearly did not, scoring their principal much lower. As was the case with the self-assessments, teachers did not differentiate very much between the 5 leadership tenets. (Insert Table II)

Conclusions and Implications for Principal Preparation Program

The principals in unsuccessful schools did not link their leadership practices to their school's lack of academic success. On four of the five leadership tenets: *Modeling the Way*, *Inspiring a Shared Vision*, *Challenging the Process*, and *Encouraging the Heart*, principals in less successful schools actually rated themselves higher than principals in more academically successful schools. On 20 out of the 30 individual questions, principals from unsuccessful schools rated themselves higher than principals from more successful schools. This disconnect is contrary to the leadership research and conventional wisdom which does link the quality of leadership to a school's academic standing. The performance of the principal is generally regarded as a primary factor in raising student achievement in successful schools (Cotton, 2003). Leadership is often regarded as the single most important factor in the success or failure of institutions such as schools (Bass, 1990).

By contrast, teachers in the successful schools clearly did link the leadership of the principal to the academic performance of the school. Teachers' assessment of the principal's leadership behavior was much higher for principals in more successful schools and occurred on all five leadership tenets.

Preparation programs clearly need to emphasize the connection between principal performance and a school's academic success. Many practicing elementary principals have not made that connection. Recently developed theories of leadership, like the Kouzes and Posner model, emphasize leadership behaviors more than management skills. A more detailed study of recent leadership models might provide a deeper understanding of how leadership is viewed in a school setting and more reflective consideration by those seeking the principalship.

Perhaps most significant for those preparing tomorrow's leaders is what the study says about relying on self-assessment as the singular tool for appraising leadership behavior. Could it be that increased accountability has reduced principals' openness and willingness to admit their own limitations? How do we nurture a more open discussion of individual limitations when it seems many simply want to affix blame for poor academic results? Regardless of the motivation behind the very high self-assessments, college preparation programs, mentors and professional development programs can play an important role in helping link individual principals to others' perceptions of their leadership behaviors.

Emphasizing the need for a more 360 degree system would help principals more effectively integrate the perceptions of others into their work. Helping aspiring principals recognize that their teachers will connect them to the school's academic success can help broaden their perspective. Principals are viewed and judged in a very public fashion. For them to improve on their limitations and grow in their professional roles they need to be honest with themselves and seek honest feedback. As Kouzes and Posner (2002) point out; self knowledge comes from an internal search process that requires honesty and the support and counsel of others. Asking others to reflect on our behavior makes us able to

examine the assumptions that are guiding our actions. Successful leadership is in the eye of the beholder, and only when we appreciate how others see us can we truly understand and adjust our own leader behavior. Preparation programs can help by preparing administrators for this reality.

Table I Principals Self-Reported Mean Scores on LPI Academically Less Successful vs Academically More Successful Schools Descriptives (LS= Less Successful; MS= More Successful)

Leadership Tenets	N	Mean
Model the Way LS	39	51.59
MS	45	51.24
Total	84	51.40
Inspire a Shared Vision LS	39	50.26
MS	45	47.89
Total	84	48.99
Challenge the Process LS	39	49.77
MS	45	47.78
Total	84	48.70
Enable Others to Act LS	39	51.90
MS	45	52.20
Total	84	52.06
Encourage the Heart LS	39	51.59
MS	45	49.73
Total	84	50.60

Table II

Teachers' Mean Scores for Principals on LPI

Academically Less Successful vs Academically More Successful Schools

Descriptives (LS= Less Successful; MS= More Successful)

Leadership Tenets	N	Mean
Model the Way LS	23	31.33
MS	27	51.69
Total	50	42.32
23	32.05	
27	51.47	
50	42.54	
Challenge the Process LS	23	32.05
MS	27	50.88
Total	50	42.22
Enable Others to Act LS	23	31.41
MS	27	52.38
Total	50	42.73
Encourage the Heart LS	23	31.10
MS	27	50.92
Total	50	41.80

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