

7-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Grigsby, Bettye; Schumacher, Gary; Decman, John; and Simieou, Felix III (2010) "A Principal's Dilemma: Instructional Leader or Manager," *Academic Leadership: The Online Journal*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 3.

DOI: 10.58809/SGKG9221

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss3/3>

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Academic Leadership Journal

A Principal's Dilemma: Instructional Leader or Manager

Introduction

A quality curriculum and effective instruction are key elements to ensure successful teaching and learning on a campus. Due to the current climate of school reform, principals are held more accountable for student success making school leadership even more critical (Levine, 2005). The principal is the individual best positioned within the school to evaluate the curriculum and evaluation process (Parkay, Hass, & Anctil, 2010). This requires that the principal become deeply engaged in the school's instructional program (Hallinger, 2005). Traditionally, principals were expected to set clear goals, allocate resources to instruction, manage the curriculum, monitor lesson plans and evaluate teachers (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008). Today, the principals' responsibilities include a deeper and broader involvement in the mechanics of teaching and learning, the use of data to make decisions, and prescribe and participate in meaningful and innovative professional development (King, 2002). As a result, principals must find a way for managerial and instructional responsibilities to complement and support each other instead of being in constant competition (Shellard, 2003).

Purpose of Study

This study focuses on the emphasis principals' place on the design and delivery of curriculum and instruction on individual campuses and the extent federal regulation has impacted principal behaviors as instructional leaders. The transformation from the principal's role of manager to that which is inclusive of instructional leadership is due to the steady increase of the regulations governing the accountability system culminating in No Child Left Behind. In fact, "... one in three principals says implementation of NCLB is the most pressing issue he or she is facing" (Sergiovanni, 2009, p. 44).

This transformation has also prompted more attention to determining common goals in principal preparation programs through the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards (Glatthorn & Jallal, 2009). With the structuring of these standards, universities must use innovative strategies to ensure aspiring principals are equipped with the necessary tools for successfully implementing and monitoring curriculum.

Literature Review

The emphasis placed on the leadership role of the principal has changed during the past 30 years (McEwan, 2003). Today's leader is expected to be the "chief learning officer," an individual who is responsible for developing and supporting a collaborative school culture focused on teaching and learning (Green, 2010). Instructional leadership refers to the knowledge and skills principals possess to effectively support the academic program (Shellard, 2003). In other words, instructional leadership is anything leaders do to improve teaching and learning by gathering evidence of student achievement that demonstrates improvement (King, 2002). Instructional leaders must be prepared to focus time, attention, and effort on changing what students are taught, how they are taught, and what they are

learning (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001). Ultimate accountability for student achievement is incumbent upon the instructional leader.

Expected behavior, customary function, and routine actions are terms used when referring to the role a person plays in an organization. The role of an instructional leader is to (a) provide instructional leadership through the establishment, articulation, and implementation of a vision of learning, (b) create and sustain a community of learners that makes student and adult learning the center focus, (c) facilitate the creation of a school culture and climate based on high expectations for students and faculty, (d) advocate, nurture, and sustain a school culture that is conducive to student learning and staff professional growth, (e) lead the school improvement process in a manner that addresses the needs of all students, (f) engage the community in activities to solicit support for student success, and (g) utilize multiple sources of data to assess, identify, and foster instructional improvement (Green, 2010; Jenkins, 2009; Wanzare & Da Costa, 2001).

When speaking of responsibilities, terms such as particular obligation, duty, charge, and undertaking come to mind. These include having a comprehensive understanding of school and classroom practices that contribute to student achievement, knowing how to work with faculty/staff to implement continuous student improvement, and knowing how to provide the necessary support for faculty/staff to carry out research-based curriculum and instructional practices (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001).

In order to successfully fulfill the roles and responsibilities of leadership, instructional leaders must have a vision of what they want the school to become. This vision should be encapsulated within the ISLLC standards. Teaching and learning should be the main focus. This vision should be communicated to each stakeholder in a way that they will share the same vision. Based on this vision, a plan should be developed in order to fulfill the goal of meeting the needs of all students. Once the vision has been established, developed, and implemented, sustaining the vision is necessary by supporting teachers' professional growth in the form of professional development.

Effective professional development consists of activities directly focused on teachers helping students achieve learning goals and supporting student learning (ASCD, 2002). Instructional leaders become teachers of teachers by facilitating lifelong learning when promoting professional development (DiPaola & Hoy, 2003). According to Lewis (2000), learner-centered or research-based professional development contributes to effectiveness. Professional development should be extended beyond the one-shot workshop by promoting ongoing learning opportunities for teachers to learn in the same ways they are expected to teach.

The purpose of effective professional development is to improve a teacher's ability to teach (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008). Collaboration with the teacher is key to developing and implementing effective professional development for increased student learning. NCLB requires that federal funds only support professional development activities grounded in scientifically-based research (Yell & Drasgow, 2005). Activities listed under NCLB should:

- improve teachers' knowledge of the academic subjects they teach;
- be a part of the school wide educational improvement plans;
- help teachers teach students to meet challenging standards;

- improve classroom management skills;
- be connected to effective instructional practices based on scientifically based research;
- substantially increase the knowledge and teaching skills of teachers;
- be aligned with state standards;
- provide instruction in methods of teaching children with special needs;
- include instruction in the use of data and assessments (US Department of Education, 2010).

In order for professional development to be effective, data from a variety of sources should be used to determine activities; data should be presented in various formats; be ongoing and continuous; and include an evaluation process to assess effectiveness. One way instructional leaders can be trained in providing effective professional development that leads to increased student achievement is through principal preparation programs.

Principal preparation programs should provide the necessary tools for instructional leaders to succeed as leaders in today's high-pressure, achievement-based accountability environment (Bottoms, O'Neill, Fry, & Hill, 2003). The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) states in Standard 2 that a school administrator promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth (CCSSO, 2008).

Methodology

A qualitative research design was used to gain better insight into the principals' involvement with the design, delivery and monitoring of curriculum and instruction, support provided for teachers through classroom visits, and quality of professional development. Two questions guided this study:

1. What do principals perceive is their level of involvement in curriculum and instruction on their campus?
2. What do principals perceive is the extent of their responsibility of curriculum and instruction on their campus?

Participants

A sample of 35 principals from various school districts in the Houston metropolitan area participated in the study. The participants consisted of 15 elementary, 10 middle, and 10 high school building principals. Data was collected through 30 minute individual interviews on their respective campuses. Years of experience ranged from 12 to 26 years in education, at least 4 years as an assistant principal, and 1 to 12 years as the building principal.

Data Analysis

This study was completed using a [content analysis](#) approach to identify emerging themes from the principals' perception regarding their roles in instructional leadership. Transcribed texts of interviews were uploaded to Crawdad software. This program provides key word scores, concept mapping,

comparison, clusters, and theme analysis. Once key phrases were determined, a conceptual analysis was performed. The phrases most relevant to curriculum and instruction were further analyzed. The frequency of the phrases as well as subtle differences in the wording was used to determine relevance. Categories were created. This process was applied to elementary, middle, and high school principal interviews. Based on the conceptual analysis three themes emerged for each level.

Results

Findings are reported according to the thematic units which emerged during the analysis of the principals' interviews for each level .

Elementary Principals

The role of the instructional leader, responsibility of the instructional leader, and effective professional development were the themes that developed from the elementary principals' interviews.

Role of the instructional leader

Elementary principals discussed having a shared vision of success through site-based decision making meetings, providing adequate planning time for teachers, and creating a school mission centered on continued professional learning and reflection.

Responsibility of the instructional leader

- Analyzing data with the faculty to determine strengths and areas of concern.
- Searching for best research-based strategies and instruction to improve student achievement.
- Conducting multiple walk-throughs and providing constructive feedback.
- Staying informed by attending national conferences, networking with other principals, and reading journals.
- Knowing where to find answers about curriculum and instruction, and
- Making informed decisions based on the campus needs.

Effective Professional Development

- Should always be purposeful and meaningful to the teachers in attendance.
- Teachers should be properly trained to increase teaching success.
- Principals should attend many of the workshops with teachers to stay informed.

Middle School Principals

The emerging themes from the interviews with middle school principals were: Creating a vision, role of the instructional leader, and responsibility of the instructional leader.

Create a vision of success for teachers and students

- Keep teachers focused on student achievement and learning.
- Create an atmosphere that will allow teachers to be successful in the classroom.
- Make curriculum and instruction an absolute priority.
- Become the “Lead Learner” – Set the example.
- Encourage risk-taking.
- Develop a long range plan encompassing support and training for all teachers.

Role of the instructional leader

- Receive minutes from meetings between literacy coaches and teachers.
- Provide resources and necessary technology.
- Make sure teachers receive the curriculum.
- Pass on information obtained from the district office.

Responsibility of the instructional leader

- Provide relevant professional development that is data driven and related to teacher needs to improve instruction.
- Conduct walk-throughs to ensure the curriculum is taught and effective instructional strategies are being utilized.
- Stay informed of changes in curriculum and instruction by attending national conferences.
- Read curriculum-based published literature.
- Model lessons for individual teachers.

High School Principals

The following themes emerged from the interviews with high school principals: State accountability, role of the instructional leader, and responsibility of the instructional leader.

State accountability

The school's performance on AYP and the state ratings are a reflection on the principal's performance. One principal stated, “If we are acceptable and meet AYP, then I have been successful in doing my job.”

Role of the instructional leader

- Attend meetings chaired by leadership team.
- Oversee leadership team assigned to monitor specific departments.
- Hold leadership team accountable for monitoring classroom instruction.
- Conduct leadership meetings to maintain focus.

- Communicate to teachers that the district curriculum is available on-line.
- Determine professional development based on teaching experience.

Responsibility of the instructional leader

- Make sure state curriculum is implemented.
- Stay informed of curriculum changes by attending district level meetings and subscribing to a distribution list.

Discussion

The elementary school principals in this study appear to be more attuned to curricular issues. These administrators consistently spoke about improving their own professional growth to help teachers. Research shows that effective instructional leaders recognize their own need to develop a broad knowledge base in curriculum and instruction and therefore seek professional development activities to achieve that goal (King, 2002). These principals spent 60% – 80% of their time in classrooms and concentrated on areas that directly impacted instruction. Conversely, research shows that most principals spend one-third or less of the average work week of 62 hours participating in curriculum and instruction (Schiff, 2002). The instructional leadership style was more collaborative. This group of principals has moved more toward the instructional model of leadership.

The middle school principals in this study placed more emphasis on instructional strategies and provided support/training for teachers to become successful. Also, principals did not conduct meetings with the entire department to discuss data and strategies. This group is also moving more toward the instructional leadership model.

The high school principals in this study delegated the majority of their curriculum and instructional responsibilities to leadership teams on the campus. Effective instructional leaders recognize the talents and expertise of others, provide opportunities for leadership development, and create a broad base of leadership in their schools (DiPaola & Hoy, 2003). However, these principals must remain cognizant of the fact that they are ultimately responsible for student achievement. Professional development was not designed based on classroom observations, but instead it was determined according to the teacher's years of experience. These high school principals are still in the managerial mode of thinking when it comes to curriculum and instruction.

One commonality that was missing at every grade level was the lack of community involvement with sharing and soliciting support from the community. The instructional leader may have a vision but it must be communicated so community members understand the common goal and be knowledgeable of the desired results (Green, 2010).

Even though there has been an increase in the accountability for principals, only elementary school principals in this study provide evidence about more contemporary philosophies of leadership in curriculum and instruction. Based on the interview data, these principals exhibit a better balance of managerial and instructional leadership at this level. Middle school principals are slowly moving in that direction, while high school principals have not fully transitioned into the mode of instructional leadership.

Recommendations and Conclusions

Recommendations for Building Principals

1. Meet with every department after each benchmark test to discuss results and determine strategies that would improve the areas of concern.
2. Have teachers note any suggestions for improvement to the curriculum after each grading period. Compile and send to the person in charge of curriculum writing.
3. Visit curriculum writers during the summer months to become more aware of the curriculum. Your presence speaks volumes.
4. Provide meaningful professional development based on analyzed data and teacher need.
5. Conduct walk-throughs and provide meaningful feedback to all teachers.
6. Model lessons for teachers.
7. Share the vision of curriculum and instruction with the community. Involve parents/grandparents and businesses in helping the vision come to fruition.

Implications for Principal Preparation Programs

Principal preparation programs may not be providing the practical experience that principals need to be successful instructional leaders to meet the accountability demands of school programs. Levine (2005) suggests that preparation program pedagogy needs to focus on the demands of practicing leaders – combining both on-the-job training and classroom instruction.

Hess and Kelly (2007) ask:

The vital question is whether the lack of attention to certain schools of thought regarding management may leave aspiring principals prepared for the traditional world of educational leadership but not for the challenges they will face in the 21st century. Principal preparation programs that pay little attention to data, productivity, accountability, or working with parents may leave their graduates unprepared for new responsibilities. (p. 268)

Bottoms et al. (2003) suggest recalibrating preparation programs to emphasize the core functions of the high-achieving school: curriculum, instruction, and student achievement.

Implications for principal preparation programs include:

1. Create an urgency that curriculum and instruction is a key component to student success on a campus. This should become an overarching theme in principal preparation courses such as Curriculum & Instruction and the Principalship. Field-based projects could connect course instruction content with practical applications.
2. Provide principals with the tools needed to help teachers be successful in the classroom: data analysis/disaggregation/understanding, research-based instructional strategies and effective professional development. Principal preparation programs should provide multiple opportunities

for aspiring administrators to analyze student performance data and use this information to plan instructional methods that will lead to performance improvement.

3. Train in ways to manage time so that there is a healthy balance between managerial and instructional leadership. For example, in the Principalship course, students could engage in a literature review and/or reading of current literature examining strategies that principals utilize to ensure the proper balance in their performance responsibilities.
4. Partner with school districts to provide real world training for aspiring administrators. Professors of principal preparation programs should work with school leaders to solve specific problems within curriculum and instruction. This should be continuous throughout the program (Bottoms et al, 2003).

This article was modified from a presentation at the National Conference of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) annual conference in San Antonio, TX, August 2009.

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VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]