

Core Function: School Leadership and Decision Making



Effective Practice

Focus the principal's role on building leadership capacity, achieving learning goals, and improving instruction

Overview: School improvement requires principals to assume roles that allow them to improve instruction and build leadership capacity of staff so that learning goals are achieved. The principal must shape an academic vision that includes high expectations for student learning, share and cultivate leadership among staff, improve instruction by being intimately involved and connected to teaching and learning, provide a hospitable educational climate, and effectively manage people, data, and school processes.

Evaluate your Practice: How does the principal model and communicate high expectations for student learning? How are staff members encouraged to pursue professional learning and growth opportunities? Does the principal share leadership with staff who possess the competencies to lead progress towards the school vision and goals? How does the principal build leadership capacity in others? Is the principal able to spend significant time on instructional tasks (keeping a log can provide data), and if not, what duties can be managed by someone else? Does the principal frequently conduct classroom observations and look for research-based practices, and are these data periodically aggregated and shared? Are teachers given prompt and constructive feedback that is used to plan professional development? Is there a structure in place to allow staff to share with each other their strengths relative to effective practices and what they have learned in professional learning? How does the principal share and celebrate successes within the school? By what means does the principal solicit and encourage constructive critique of the school's progress and improvement process?

Introduction

Principals in low-achieving or high poverty, minority schools tend to have a greater impact on student outcomes than principals at less challenging schools (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Therefore, principal leadership is critical to many low-performing schools in order to institute changes that will result in school improvement and academic success. While it may have once been expected that principals would handle all of their schools' leadership tasks, it is no longer possible for one person to lead a school entirely on his or her own, given the ever growing burden placed on schools (Von Frank, 2011). The principal must work in collaboration with stakeholders to establish the vision and learning goals for the school and then ensure that staff members are in the best roles to maximize their own knowledge and skills, as well as ensure that the necessary resources are available to implement the vision (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2007). This practice brief highlights the research support for the roles that principals must assume within their school communities in order to bring about improvement and students' academic success.

According to the Wallace Foundation (2013), there are five key responsibilities for principals as leaders. Each of these responsibilities must interact with the others in order for optimal leadership to occur.

1. Shape a vision of academic success for all students.

Principals must establish a schoolwide commitment to high academic standards and a focus on goals for student progress. This is critical because research has shown that high expectations contribute to the closing of the achievement gap (Porter et al., 2008). Effective principals ensure that all staff adopts these high expectations, which are critical to establishing a schoolwide learning improvement agenda (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010). The principal "must create a 'shared vision of learning' that allows for commonality across stakeholders and provides motivation for hard work and continual improvement" (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013, p. 17). This vision for learning

includes not only the students, but also the adult learning that is essential for students' success. The principal must help educators see that they have a stake both in elevating their own professional growth and in elevating the growth of their colleagues, and all share collective responsibility to improve student learning (Lambert, 2002).

The principal must not only espouse the school's vision and expectations for the success of all students, but also demonstrate them in his or her own behavior as well (Lucas & Valentine, 2002; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy, 2007). As Murphy (2007) describes:

Effective principals and other school-based leaders articulate the vision through personal modeling and by communicating with others in and around the organization...They demonstrate through their actions the organization's commitment to the values and beliefs at the heart of the mission as well as to the specific activities needed to reach goals. (p. 73)

This modeling of expected behaviors not only clarifies how teachers and students should act, but can also lead to the empowerment of teachers in their practice and informal leadership roles (Lucas & Valentine, 2002). Principals can model behaviors that contribute to positive school cultures and academic success, for example, by personally enforcing discipline with students, which leads to a true sense of shared responsibility and a genuine feeling of support for teachers (Murphy, 2007). By remaining active in the process of curricular and instructional decisions, observations, and growth, principals demonstrate the importance of teaching and place value on the teachers themselves in carrying out the school's vision (Murphy, 2007).

2. Cultivate leadership in others.

Distributed leadership in schools involves sharing responsibility on all administrative levels, working through teams, and engendering collective responsibility for student outcomes (Ritchie & Woods, 2007). The more willing principals are to share leadership, the better students' academic success and teacher motivation (Louis et al., 2010). Research shows that a principal's influence does not diminish as others gain influence in situations with distributed authority in decision-making. In fact, when principals and teachers share leadership, teachers' relationships with one another and with the principal

are improved and made stronger (Louis et al., 2010). Further, principals need not be concerned that they will lose influence as others gain influence. Although "higher-performing schools awarded greater influence to most stakeholders...little changed in these schools' overall hierarchical structures" (Louis et al., 2010, p. 8).

Redding (2007) states that, "The principals' role is not only to share leadership, but to build the leadership capacity of others in the school" (p. 43). Effective school leaders can build this capacity in part by running the school through a collaborative or shared lens (Murphy et al., 2007). Through their practice of shared leadership, effective principals encourage collaboration among staff and a sense of school community:

Effective school leaders are especially skillful in creating learning organizations and fostering the development of communities of learning. They are vigorous promoters of professional development, they nurture the growth of communities of professional practice, and they shape school organizations to adhere to the principles of community (Murphy et al., 2007, p. 187)

Encouraging professional growth (e.g., conferences, embedded professional learning) and providing opportunities to influence enhances the "the professionalization of teaching" as a career and can truly empower teachers (Marks & Printy, 2003; Wahlstrom & Seashore Louis, 2008). In addition, by creating formal leadership structures such as a leadership team, staff members will grow and develop in their roles, and the principal will be able to share leadership tasks among them (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). Leadership teams often consist of lead teachers, instructional coaches, and assistant principals; because of the wide range of experiences within these groups, the delegation and distribution of tasks should be conducted according to their areas of expertise (Spillane, 2005). In addition, a principal does not have expertise in every area of his or her instructional responsibility, particularly when it comes to secondary content areas. Principals should share or distribute leadership to those with content area expertise and should partner with the leadership team to oversee their work (Hallinger & Murphy, 2013).

3. Improve instruction.

Effective principals focus on improving instruction, prevent teacher isolation, and connect with teachers

(Portin et al., 2009). Principals should strive to be the instructional or learning-focused leader in their building and should strive to spend at least half of their time working directly with teachers to improve instruction (Blase, Blase, & Phillips, 2010). Freeing up time for administrators to be more directly involved in improving day-to-day instruction and connecting with teachers through empowering leadership teams appears to be part of the reason that shared leadership improves student performance. Horng, Klasik, and Loeb (2009) report that in high- versus low-performing schools, as rated by state accountability systems, principals spent significantly less time on administrative tasks and more time on day-to-day instructional tasks. In order to be effective instructional leaders – by visiting classrooms, contributing to curriculum development, and coaching teachers – the principal must step away from more managerial responsibilities (Murphy et al., 2007; Hallinger & Murphy, 2013). The leadership team can find ways to free up additional principal time for instruction-related work by delegating some operational tasks (e.g., scheduling, reports, ordering and handling materials) to other staff (Wilhelm, 2015).

Principals also track teacher success and monitor curriculum and classroom instruction regularly in the classroom through formal and informal evaluations, classroom visits, observation sessions, and informal conversations (Louis et al., 2010). They compile reports that provide individual teacher feedback, as well as aggregate staff strength areas and areas in need of improvement without revealing individual teacher identities. This data can be used to connect individual teachers, small groups, and/or schoolwide staff with appropriate professional learning opportunities (Redding, 2007). Effective principals also provide feedback continually rather than waiting for end-of-year evaluations (Mendels, 2012). They provide direct and immediate feedback to both veteran and novice teachers to help improve their teaching by making frequent and spontaneous observations of classroom instruction (Seashore-Louis et al., 2010). Hull (2012) summarized research which showed that good principals provide further support to improve instruction by 1) emphasizing the value of research-based strategies and applying them to suit their school's context; 2) encouraging teacher collaboration; and 3) providing more time for teacher planning.

4. Create a climate hospitable to education.

In order for teachers and students to focus on learning, the principal must establish a setting that is safe and orderly, as well as a community that is responsive and supportive of students (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2007). In addition, teachers must feel that they are part of a culture that values good instruction. When teachers rank their schools as having a strong instructional climate, they also tend to rank their principals as having established an atmosphere of caring and trust. In addition, they are more likely than faculty at other schools to find the principals' motives and intentions to be good (Louis et al., 2010). Without a community focus on issues that matter, teachers tend to be pessimistic and feel undervalued (Knapp et al., 2010). In order to build such a community, principals should focus on respect for every member of the school community; a positive, blame-free, solution-oriented, professional environment; and the inclusion of all staff and students in a variety of activities (Portin et al., 2009). This positive community should include the principal acknowledging and celebrating individual, team, and school successes (Parsons & Beauchamp, 2012).

5. Manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.

Principals must be good managers, getting the jobs of a school accomplished with the available resources. Effective principals hire selectively and weed out those who are not strong contributors. They also maximize the strengths of effective teachers by providing plenty of opportunities for them to demonstrate leadership and share their strategies with other teachers (Scherer, 2007). Groups of teacher leaders can supply a variety of professional knowledge needed for sustained school improvement and provide nonthreatening support and advice to novice teachers (Franklin, 2012).

Effective principals utilize data to diagnose and illustrate problems, as well as to understand the underlying causes of those problems (Louis et al., 2010). Once causes of challenges are understood, good principals drive solutions by setting goals, getting the faculty on board, encouraging students and teachers, communicating with families, and monitoring results (Porter et al., 2008). These principal efforts should occur within a "culture of candor," with all stakeholders given opportunities to voice their constructive observations and recommendations (Murphy, 2007). Finally, principals must understand

that change is a process and often does not happen quickly; they must have patience, but determination, and model this for the rest of the team (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Indicators to Support the Effective Practice
The principal makes sure everyone understands their role in continuously elevating professional practice.
The principal develops the leadership capacity of others in the school.
The principal models and communicates the expectation of improved student learning through commitment, discipline, and careful implementation of effective practices.
The principal participates actively with the school's teams.
The principal keeps a focus on instructional improvement and student learning outcomes.
The principal monitors curriculum and classroom instruction regularly.
The principal spends at least 50% of his/her time working directly with teachers to improve instruction, including classroom observations.
The principal compiles reports from classroom observations, showing aggregate areas of strength and areas that need improvement without revealing the identity of individual teachers.
The principal celebrates individual, team, and school successes, especially related to student learning outcomes.
The principal offers frequent opportunities for staff and parents to voice constructive critique of the school's progress and suggestions for improvement.
The principal plans opportunities for teachers to share their strengths with other teachers.

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