

The Principal as Instructional Leader

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ABSTRACT

The principal's primary responsibility is to promote the learning and success of *all* students. In this article, I discuss how school principals can accomplish this goal by focusing on learning; encouraging collaboration; analyzing results; providing support; and aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Demands for greater accountability, especially appeals for the use of more outcome-based measures, requires the principal to be instruction oriented. Are the students learning? If the students are not learning, what are we going to do about it? The focus on results; the focus on student achievement; the focus on students learning at high levels, can only happen if teaching and learning become the central focus of the school and the central focus of the principal (Blankstein, 2010; Bulach, Lunenburg, & Potter, 2008).

How can principals help teachers to clarify instructional goals and work collaboratively to improve teaching and learning to meet those goals? Principals need to help teachers shift their focus from what they are teaching to what students are learning. We cannot continue to accept the premise that "I taught it; they just didn't learn it." The role of instructional leader helps the school to maintain a focus on why the school exists, and that is to help all students learn (Blase, Blase, & Phillips, 2010; Smylie, 2010).

Shifting the focus of instruction from teaching to learning; forming collaborative structures and processes for faculty to work together to improve instruction; and ensuring that professional development is ongoing and focused toward school goals are among the key tasks that principals must perform to be effective instructional leaders in a professional learning community (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006). This will require districtwide leadership focused directly on learning. School principals can accomplish this by (1) focusing on learning, (2) encouraging collaboration, (3) using data to improve learning, (4) providing support, and (5) aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Taken together, these five dimensions provide a compelling framework for accomplishing sustained districtwide success for all children (Fullan, 2010; Lunenburg, 2003; Marzano & Waters, 2010).

Focusing on Learning

Principals can help shift the focus from teaching to learning if they insist that there are certain critical questions that are being considered in that school, and principals are in a key position to pose those questions (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). What do we want our students to know and be able to do? The focus in a professional learning community is not on: Are you teaching, but are the students learning? How will you know if the students are learning? That points to student progress. How will we respond when students do not learn? What criteria will we use to evaluate student progress? How can we more effectively use the time and resources available to help students learn? How can we engage parents in helping our students learn? Have we established systematic collaboration as the norm in our school? These are the questions principals need to pose in order to shift the focus in schools from teaching to learning.

Encouraging Collaboration

A key task for principals is to create a collective expectation among teachers concerning student performance. That is, principals need to raise the collective sense of teachers about student learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Karhanek, 2010). Then principals must work to ensure that teacher expectations are aligned with the school's instructional goals. Furthermore, principals need to eliminate teacher isolation so that discussions about student learning become a collective mission of the school (Elmore, 2005; Senge, 2001, 2006).

Principals must develop and sustain school structures and cultures that foster individual and group learning. That is, principals must stimulate an environment in which new information and practices are eagerly incorporated into the system. Teachers are more likely to pursue their group and individual learning when there are supportive conditions in the school, such as particularly effective leadership (English, 2008; Northouse, 2010). Schools where teachers collaborate in discussing issues related to student learning are more likely to be able to take advantage of internally and externally generated information. Teachers can become willing recipients of research information if they are embedded in a setting where meaningful and sustained interaction with researchers occurs in an egalitarian context (Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2009).

One popular collaboration structure is teacher teams. Schools are recognizing that teachers should be working together in teams as opposed to working individually in isolation in their classrooms. High performing teams will accomplish four different things (Smylie, 2010): (1) They will clarify exactly what students should know and be able to do as a result of each unit of instruction. We know that if teachers are clear on the intended results of instruction, they will be more effective. (2) They will then design curriculum and share instructional strategies to achieve those outcomes. (3) They will develop valid assessment strategies that measure how well students are performing. (4) Then they will analyze those results and work together to come up with new ideas for improving those results. Regular assessment and analysis of student learning are key parts of the team's process.

Using Data to Improve Learning

How can schools gauge their progress in achieving student learning? Three factors can increase a school's progress in achieving learning for all students (Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2010; Love, 2009). The primary factor is the availability of performance data connected to each student. Performance data need to be broken down by specific objectives and target levels in the school curriculum. Then the school is able to connect what is taught to what is learned. The curriculum goals should be clear enough to specify what each teacher should teach. And an assessment measure, aligned with the curriculum, will indicate what students have learned (Popham, 2010a, 2010b). Also, teachers need access to longitudinal data on each student in their classroom. With such data, teachers are able to develop individual and small-group education plans to ensure mastery of areas of weakness from previous years while also moving students forward in the school curriculum.

The second factor is the public nature of the assessment system. Annually, the school district should publish a matrix of schools and honor those schools that have performed at high levels. This provides role models for other schools to emulate. At the school and classroom levels, it provides a blueprint of those areas where teachers should focus their individual education plans (IEPs) and where grade levels or schools should focus the school's professional development plans. The public nature of the data from the accountability system makes clear where schools are. Data should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, and disability. Performance of each subgroup of students on assessment measures makes the school community aware of which students are well served and which students are not well served by the school's curriculum and instruction.

The third factor in gauging progress toward achieving student learning is the specifically targeted assistance provided to schools that are performing at low levels. Before the advent of accountability systems, it was not evident which schools and students needed help (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008). The first step is to target the schools in need of help based on student performance data. Each targeted school is paired with a team of principals, curriculum specialists/instructional coaches, and researchers to observe current practices; discuss student performance data with staff; and assist in the development and implementation of an improvement plan. The targeted schools learn how to align their program of professional development to the weaknesses identified by the data. They learn how to develop an improvement plan to guide their activities and monitor the outcomes of the activities, all of which are designed to raise student performance levels.

Next, once a team of teachers has worked together and identified students who are having difficulty, then the school faces the challenge of how they are going to respond to the students who are not learning (Murphy, 2010). The challenge is not simply re-teaching in the same way in which teachers taught before, but providing support for teachers to expand their repertoire of skills and providing support and time for students to get additional assistance they need in order to master those skills. When students are not learning, principals must insure that professional development programs are in place to

give additional support to teachers and intervention strategies are in place to give additional support to students (Joyce & Calhoun, 2010).

Providing Support

Teachers need to be provided with the training, teaching tools, and the support they need to help all students reach high performance levels. Specifically, teachers need access to curriculum guides, textbooks, or specific training connected to the school curriculum. They need access to lessons or teaching units that match curriculum goals. They need training on using assessment results to diagnose learning gaps (Downey, Steffy, Poston, & English, 2009). Teachers must know how each student performed on every multiple-choice item and other questions on the assessment measure. And training must be in the teachers' subject areas. Only then can teachers be prepared to help students achieve at high levels.

In addition to professional development for teachers, all schools need an intervention and support system for students who lag behind in learning the curriculum. Schools need to provide additional help to students who lag behind in core subjects, either in school, after school, on weekends, or during the summer. Boards of education and school superintendents need to supply the financial resources to fulfill this mandate. This involves acquiring materials, information, or technology; manipulating schedules or release time to create opportunities for teachers to learn; facilitating professional networks; and creating an environment that supports school improvement efforts (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2008).

A focus on student learning usually means changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment - that is, changes in teaching. The history of school reform indicates that innovations in teaching and learning seldom penetrate more than a few schools and seldom endure when they do (Elmore, 2005). Innovations frequently fail because the individuals who make it happen - those closest to the firing line - classroom teachers, may not be committed to the effort or may not have the skills to grapple with the basic challenge being posed (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola 2006; Fullan & St. Germain, 2006). Principals need to insure that teachers have the skills to help all students perform at high levels.

Aligning Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Principals need to ensure that assessment of student learning is aligned with both the school's curriculum and the teachers' instruction (English, 2000; Popham, 2010a). When they are well constructed and implemented, assessment can change the nature of teaching and learning. They can lead to a richer, more challenging curriculum; foster discussion and collaboration among teachers within and across schools; create more productive conversations among teachers and parents; and focus stakeholders' attention on increasing student achievement.

For curriculum goals to have an impact on what happens in classrooms, they must be clear. When school districts, administrators, and students are held accountable for results, more specificity is needed in implementing the curriculum. In a high-stakes accountability environment, teachers require that the curriculum contain enough detail and precision to allow them to know what the students need to learn.

Professional learning communities attempt to align their assessment measures with their curriculum. English (2000) encourages schools to consider three principles in this endeavor. First, assessments not based on the curriculum are neither fair nor helpful to parents or students. Schools that have developed their own assessment measures have done a good job of ensuring that the content of the assessment can be found in the curriculum. That is, children will not be assessed on knowledge and skills they have not been taught. This is what Fenwick English refers to as “the doctrine of no surprises.” However, the same is not true when schools use generic, off-the-shelf standardized tests. Such tests cannot measure the breadth and depth of the school’s curriculum. Second, when the curriculum is rich and rigorous, the assessments must be as well. Assessments must tap both the breadth and depth of the content and skills in the curriculum. Third, assessments must become more challenging in each successive grade. The solid foundation of knowledge and skills developed in the early grades should evolve into more complex skills in the later grades.

If one accepts the premise that assessment drives curriculum and instruction, perhaps the easiest way to improve instruction and increase student achievement is to construct better assessments (Popham, 2010a, 2010b; Yeh, 2001). According to Yeh (2001), it is possible to design force-choice items (multiple-choice items) that test reasoning and critical thinking. Such assessments could require students to *use* facts, rather than *recall* them. And questions could elicit content knowledge that is worth learning.

To prepare students to think critically, teachers could teach children to identify what is significant. Teachers could model the critical thinking process in the classroom, during instruction, through assignments, in preparing for assessments, and in the content of the assessment itself. By aligning content with worthwhile questions in core subject areas, it may be possible to rescue assessment and instruction from the current focus on the recall of trivial factual knowledge. Assessment items could be created for a range of subjects and levels of difficulty. Then there would be little incentive for teachers to drill students on factual knowledge.

Conclusion

The instructional leadership of the principal is a critical factor in the success of a school’s improvement initiatives and the overall effectiveness of the school. The primary responsibility of the principal is to promote the learning and success of *all* students. School principals can accomplish this goal by focusing on learning, encouraging collaboration, using data to improve learning, providing support, and aligning curriculum, assessment, and instruction.

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