FIRST THINGS FIRST:
Improving Instruction in America's High Schools

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> *I know that my first priority is working to improve instruction but almost
> every day something happens---a call from the central office, an irate
> parent, a major student problem, the need to speak at a community event.
> Making instruction a priority is my toughest job.*
>
> *Utah High School Principal*

High school principals hold one of the most demanding and complex jobs in America. They are expected to be engaging speakers, thoughtful planners, creative problem-solvers, skilled politicians, and superb financial planners. But no role is more important than the one they have supervising their school's instructional program.

Nearly every state has used or adopted the ISLLC standards as the basis for getting a license to be a school principal. At the heart of those standards is an emphasis on the principal's role improving the quality of teaching and learning. Standard 2---Leadership for Teaching and Learning---is described as the "core work of education leaders."

No other role has the potential to positively impact a school like the role of instructional leader. A positive school culture creates an environment where everyone can learn---students, teachers and administrators. Leaders in such an environment are comfortable sharing responsibility. They recognize that distributed leadership is a powerful tool to improve instruction, strengthen curricular alignment and improve student assessment.

This article will discuss easily accessible tools that high school principals can use to strengthen their role as an instructional leader. Department chairs and other curricular leaders can use many of the tools as they work with teachers and other personnel to improve student learning.

Tools to Improve Instruction

A wide variety of resources are available to help principals with their instructional duties. The following resources are all available online. A brief description of each is provided along with the link to the site.

Coalition of Essential Schools

The *Coalition of Essential Schools*, a school reform initiative focused primarily on high schools, provides a vast collection of tools, strategies and resources (www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/resources/resources.html) dealing with school culture, curriculum, data collection and analysis, instruction and family collaboration.

Horace, the journal of the coalition is also online and provides articles about both research and practice.
http://www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/resources/horace/horace.html

CES Interactive allows principals to participate in online discussion groups with other principals about school reform issues. A free online account can be created to access the site. http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/homebase/main?x-p=emailcheck

Essential Blog provides a tool to pose a question, respond to a query or engage in conversation about school topics. It is available at: http://www.essentialblog.org/

McREL – Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning

McREL is one of the regional education labs and provides resources for improving classroom instruction, classroom strategies for at-risk students and information and models of schools that are high performing with high needs.

Five major research studies from McREL synthesize knowledge of effective schools, effective classrooms and effective leaders. They can be downloaded for free at http://www.mcrel.org/successinsight/Research/tabid/2372/Default.aspx. The reports include: What Works in Schools
              School Leadership that Works
              Schools that "Beat the Odds"
              Classroom Instruction that Works
              Classroom Strategies for At-Risk Students

McREL also provides resources that support school improvement. They include:
   • *Success in Sight* - http://www.mcrel.org/successinsight/, is a guide to balancing continuous improvement with effective schooling. This site provides specific approaches that can be used to focus on the "right" solution and maintain momentum.
   • *Keys to Learning* - http://www.mcrel.org/keystolearning/, is a tool for looking at curriculum and how to make curriculum engaging for all students. The site includes strategies and resources.

Annenberg Institute for School Reform

The institute (www.annenberginstitute.org) advocates "smart education systems (SES) to integrate high-quality educational experiences in all aspects of student lives---at school, at home and in the community. It provides resources for high school leaders including access to their publication *Voices in Urban Education* (www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/index.php), publications on improving classroom practice, and a report *Beating the Odds: How Thirteen NYC Schools Bring Low-Performing Ninth-Graders to Timely Graduation and College Enrollment* (www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/BTO.php).The complete report is available online.

College Pathways Rubric - One tool that can be accessed online is the College Pathways Rubric (www.annenberginstitute.org/Products/CollegePathwaysRubric.php). It allows you to assess your current program at helping students graduate on time and be prepared for college-level work.

Teaching and Learning Review – Also available is a process and interview tools to examine teaching and learning in your school (www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDo/TL_Review.php). It is designed to build capacity for open and honest discussion about how schools serve all children and youth.

Learning Points – North Central Regional Educational Lab

Another regional education lab, Learning Points (www.ncrel.org), provides additional resources for curricular and instructional improvement. Two tools are particularly helpful to school leaders. They include:

Indicators of Engaged Learning, (www.ncrtec.org/capacity/profile/profeng.htm), provides a rubric for assessing whether your students are engaged in their learning. It allows you to rate your school on each indicator and then chart your response. It provides useful information to launch a conversation with teachers about the ways they engage students in their learning.

Math and Science Curriculum Mapping Tool (http://currmap.learningpt.org/default.htm) offers an interactive site to assist in mapping math and science curricula. The site is a joint project between NCREL and the US Third International Science and Mathematics Study (TIMSS) National Research Center at Michigan State University.

Center for Adaptive Schools

The Adaptive Schools Network (www.adaptiveschools.com) provides resources for working with parents, teachers, and other personnel on school improvement. The emphasis of the network is on conducting productive conversations. At the center of their work is use of the Norms of Collaboration (http://www.adaptiveschools.com/pdf/SevenNormsToolkit.pdf) to facilitate conversation about difficult and challenging issues.

Norms of Collaboration Inventories (www.adaptiveschools.com/inventories.htm) - This site provides several tools to assess the norms and work habits of groups. Groups can use information from the inventories to help improve their capacity for conversation about school improvement issues.

Skill of the Week (http://www.adaptiveschools.com/thisweekssb.htm) - The site includes a *Skill of the Week* that enhances your capacity for leading collaborative groups. The complete archive is available at the site.

In addition to accessing the resources of the network you may want to read the June 2007 Feature Article at The Principals' Partnership website discussed the link between the Adaptive Schools Framework and school improvement (www.principalspartnership.com/feature607.html).

Final Thoughts

One of the most important things that principals do is to create a culture in their schools that is open to conversation about complex curricular and instructional issues. Locating resources that can be used by school personnel to assure a high quality educational experience for all students is critical to the success of your school. The resources identified in this article can help to launch the conversation and support school improvement efforts.

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