IMPROVING INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY:
Tools for School Leaders

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Nowhere is the task of improving schools more critical than in America's high schools. It is there that students face critical decisions that shape their future. But nowhere is the potential to positively impact the education of generations greater than the high school.

> *We're at a critical juncture. This is a pretty good school doing lots of the right things. But we still aren't serving some students well. We need to become much more comfortable talking with one another about our teaching if we are going to make a breakthrough with these students. There's a lot of knowledge and skill among the staff. But the culture is isolating and teachers are uncomfortable talking with one another about their work. That has to change.*

These comments by a Tucson high school principal characterize the challenge. Schools must become places that assure each student, regardless of background or experience, access to a high quality educational experience, one that prepares them to participate fully in our society. They must also become places where conversation about the tough issues related to teaching and learning become the norm.

A recent NASSP poll of members reported that only 16% of principals' time was spent on instructional issues while more than half (78%) was devoted to student supervision or management concerns. Because of the size and complexity of most high schools, principals find it a challenge to spend time working with staff on instructional quality. For many principals the work is done at the department or program level. Regardless of responsibility, improving instruction is a key function of school leaders and principals play a significant role in creating a climate where conversations about instructional effectiveness are common and part of the everyday operations of the school.

Tools for School Leaders

There are many ways that principals can focus the work of school personnel on improving instruction. Each approach will be described in some detail and supported by a set of online resources.

Establish Norms of Collaboration – Nothing is more fundamental to the work of schools that creating a climate where participants are comfortable discussing complex and difficult issues, where it is safe to suggest alternatives or to pose tough questions. Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman (1999) described norms as "skills that become the 'normal' behavior in a group." In some groups the norm is silence. In others it is open, honest dialogue. Garmston and Wellman identified seven norms of collaboration that, when implemented, can create a climate characterized by a spirit of inquiry and openness to new and creative ideas. The seven norms include:

- Promoting a spirit of inquiry
- Pausing
- Paraphrasing
- Probing
- Putting ideas on the table
- Paying attention to self and others
- Presuming positive intentions

Information about the norms, including guidelines for using the norms, and a toolkit of resources for working with staff on the norms is available at the Center for Adaptive Schools website (www.adaptiveschools.com). The June 2007 Feature Article at *The Principals' Partnership* website discussed the link between the norms and school improvement (www.principalspartnership.com/feature607.html).

Examining Student Work – One powerful way to learn about your school's instructional program and to improve the educational experience of students is to look at authentic student work. In many schools teams of teachers, either at the department level, or course level, examine the work of students as a way to clarify their own standards for student work, to strengthen common expectations for students or to align curriculum across faculty.

Looking at student work is a complex task that significantly alters the norms of a school. It necessitates a climate where faculty are comfortable sharing their work with colleagues and revealing things about their classroom practice. The Annenberg Institute for School Reform suggests several preliminary steps:
- talk together about the process and how to assure that it is not evaluative;
- identify ways to gather relevant contextual information (e.g., assignment, scoring rubric);
- select a protocol or guideline for the conversation that promotes discussion and interaction;
- agree on how to select work samples;
- establish a system for providing and receiving feedback that is constructive.

Several online resources are available to support his work. The Looking at Student Work website (www.lasw.org), supported by the Annenberg Institute provides over 10 protocols that can be used for conversations about student work. The site also provides a detailed description of the rationale for examining student work as well as numerous supporting materials.

Langer, Colton and Goff (2003) describe a collaborative approach to the analysis of student learning in *Collaborative Analysis of Student Work* (www.ascd.org). It includes a detailed description of strategies for creating a culture of collaborative inquiry and identifies the steps to launch a process of examining student work.

A discussion of the process used in one district (School Leaders Look at Student Work - *Educational Leadership*, March 1999) is available at www.ascd.org. Go to Publications, Educational Leadership, Archived Issues.

Instructional Walk-Through - Another way to gather data about the instructional program is to conduct a walk-through. The purpose of a walk-through is for teachers and/or principals to gather data about the instructional program by visiting classrooms. There are different kinds of walk-throughs, some administrative, some collegial. It is also important to prepare the staff for the process of a walk-through and it is important to recognize that a short visit to any classroom provides only one snapshot of the instructional program.

In a Los Angeles school of nearly 3900 students instructional walk-throughs are part of the school improvement process. Each month the school leadership team identifies an instructional focus based on classroom instructional strategies that work (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001; available from www.ascd.org). Teams of teachers conduct the walk through, chart their observations and post the information on large chart paper in a central location. Faculty meetings are used for content area teachers to meet, review the data and develop explicit plans for improving instruction in the focus area.

A Research Brief about walkthroughs is available at the website of *The Principals' Partnership* (www.principalspartnership.com/library.html).

Student Shadow Study – One technique for gathering information about the curricular and instructional experiences of students is to conduct a shadow study. It involves selecting students at random and following them throughout the day. The protocol, originally developed by NASSP, suggests charting the experience of students at 5-7 minute intervals. This allows the observer to show the ebb and flow of activities during the day. Spending the entire day with a student, and documenting their experience, provides interesting insights into the school day. Of course, students quickly figure out that something is going on. The best approach is to talk with the student and to assure them that you are not gathering information about them to report to the office.

Teachers or other personnel, not administrators, best conduct shadow studies. Because shadow studies can create some anxiety for both students and teachers, it is important to discuss the process and be clear about goals prior to launching such a project.

After gathering the data it can be used to launch conversations at the faculty or departmental level about the experience of students. The patterns that emerge across students and across classrooms can provide helpful guidance to improve instructional quality.

Specific information about the Shadow Study Technique is available in an earlier NASSP publication, *How Fares the Ninth Grade? A Day in the Life of a 9th Grader* (Lounsbury & Johnston, 1985).

Faculty Study Groups - Study group is a generic term applied to a variety of types of small group discussion. Study groups are used in many schools to research a proposed program, to examine student achievement data, or to look at school improvement initiatives. Murphy (1999) found that study groups are most successful when the faculty decides what the group will study and participation is voluntary. In some schools the focus is book study. One Michigan school organized into collegial groups to read and discuss Schmoker's *Results Now* (2006). A school in Utah established study groups to examine each of the nine research-based instructional strategies identified by McREL (Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning; www.mcrel.org) (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001).

Information about faculty study groups is available at the North Central Regional Lab (www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/methods/technlgy/te10lk44.htm) and from the Whole Faculty Study Group website (www.murphyswfsg.org/index.htm).

Instructional Improvement Tools and Resources

There are several other comprehensive school reform sites that provide a set of tools that can be used to improve instruction. They include:

Turning Points Comprehensive School Reform Model - www.turningpts.org/tools.htm.

> This site, while focused on middle school reform, provides nearly 20 instructional tools including peer observation forms, a process for establishing norms, and strategies for looking at student work.

Annenberg Institute for School Reform – www.annenberginstitute.org

> This institute provides numerous resources for high school leaders. It includes access to their publication *Voices in Urban Education (*www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/index.php), publications on improving classroom practice, and a new 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 for download.

Coalition for Essential Schools – www.essentialschools.org

> The coalition, built on the work of Ted Sizer, has been involved in transforming schools for over twenty years. The focus is on "creating and sustaining a personalized, equitable and intellectually challenging school." The Coalition of Essential Schools Network includes schools across the nation and the website provides access to hundreds of resources on topics like classroom practice, leadership, change, school design and community connections (www.essentialschools.org/pub/ces_docs/resources/resources.html).

Conclusion

The role of instructional leader is the most important role of a principal. Shaping a school's instructional program impacts the educational experience of every student at that school. Creating a school culture that welcomes collegial conversation about curricular and instructional practices, that is built on the belief that through these conversations schools improve, and that views challenging and difficult issues as an opportunity for improvement is the hallmark of the nation's most successful schools.

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