

The Practical Leader

Improving the Schools of Today

Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Skillful Instructional Leadership

In a Nutshell

Being an instructional leader is the most important role of a school principal. When a principal works with their teachers to improve the curriculum and instructional practice there is a positive impact on student learning (Grissom, Loeb & Master, 2013). But recent studies found that just spending time on instructional leadership activities didn't necessarily improve student learning. Far more important was the type of activity and the way principals interacted with their teachers. Walkthroughs, which principals describe as their most frequent instructional activity, were actually negatively associated with student achievement, particularly in high schools. But time spent coaching teachers, along with time spent on formative evaluation and working on curriculum, was associated with improved student outcomes (Grissom, Loeb & Master, 2013; May, Huff & Goldring, 2012).

This brief will focus on how a principal can create a culture that promotes professional growth and improved teaching while engaging teachers in coaching and other formative evaluation activities to improve their teaching.

Summary of Findings:

Principals are expected to be instructional leaders. The dilemma is that they are also expected to manage all other aspects of their school's program including the budget, hiring and evaluating personnel, managing student behavior, and operating student activities. A recent study found that, on average, principals spend just 12.6% of their time on activities related to instruction, much less than on management or student activities. Among instructional activities the most frequent activity was conducting classroom walkthroughs (5.4%) followed by formal teacher evaluation (2.4%) (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013).

The Principal as Instructional Leader

Given the limited time principals devote to instructional leadership it is important that they use their time wisely and focus on tasks that are linked to improved student achievement. The studies cited earlier offer some guidance. What those studies found was that principals who created systems for more prolonged engagement with teachers on curriculum development and instructional design were more likely to impact student outcomes. Four leadership activities support this work.

1. Embrace the Instructional Role

Creating a culture characterized by collaborative work between a principal and teachers is particularly challenging with the emphasis on disciplinary content and the standards that guide content area instruction. Principals simply cannot know enough about all of the subjects to operate as a hands-on participant in the process. But a principal can serve as a catalyst for collaboration between teachers and between the principal and teachers. Central to that instructional leadership role is creating opportunities for all teachers to interact and learn from one other (Blasé & Blasé, 2004; Marshall, 2013; Sullivan and Glanz, 2013).

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

A focus on instructional leadership requires a principal to embrace roles often not associated with the principalship. The most successful instructional leaders are comfortable facilitating conversations about teaching and learning, recognize the importance of being a learner and promoting learning among their teachers, and understand the importance of participating, along with their teachers, in the work to improve instruction. They abandon the traditional position of authority and recognize that their role must include that of “learner,” working with teachers and other school staff to investigate and seek solutions that will improve student learning (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013).

From . . .	Toward . . .
Solitary decision maker	Participant in Learning Process
Expert	Learner
Director	Facilitator
Dominating Leader	Participating Leader

2. Creating A School Culture That Supports Professional Learning

Effective instructional leaders recognize the importance of nurturing a school culture supportive of professional learning. They understand that there are significant differences between a novice teacher in the first year of his/her career and a veteran teacher who has been recognized for his or her skilled instruction and they know that their interaction with that teacher can either promote or inhibit professional learning in their school.

The Effective Instructional Leader . . .

- Understands that teachers are adults and respond well to the principles of adult learning;
- Recognizes that all teachers are not at the same stage of their career and should not be treated alike;
- Supports the needs of teachers at different stages of their career cycle;
- Helps teachers to understand and learn from their teaching and from career events;
- Accommodates the varied roles of teachers;
- Considers the socio-cultural context of teaching;
- Is empowering and motivating;

Adapted from: Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordon (2013). *Supervision and instructional leadership: A developmental approach* (9th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Many teachers perceive supervision to not be helpful. That’s because it is often directive and focused on problems (Blasé & Blasé, 2000). But when supervision is constructive and interactive the response is quite different (Grissom, Loeb & Master, 2013). When leaders engage teachers in supervisory conversations that focus on meaningful learning, they are construed to be supportive and “skillful” instructional leaders (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013).

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Principals who are the most effective instructional leaders work collaboratively with teachers to support the integration of reflective practice and professional learning into school practices. Successful instructional leaders:

- Acknowledge the difficulties of growing and changing, including the natural resistance to change, and the risk-taking that is involved.
- Talk openly, and frequently, with teachers about instruction, make suggestions, give feedback, and solicit teachers' advice and opinions about classroom instruction.
- Develop cooperative, nonthreatening partnerships with teachers and promote group development that is characterized by trust, openness, and freedom to make mistakes.
- Model effective teaching skills when working with their staff.
- Support development of coaching skills and reflective conversations among educators.
- Apply the principles of adult learning to staff development programs. (Blasé & Blasé, 2000)

3. Strengthen Effective Communication Skills

Talking with a teacher about their teaching, and coaching teachers, is the key to effective supervision. Understanding the principles of effective communication is essential. Skillful leaders develop a repertoire of approaches to promote reflection, seek clarification and support professional growth. The most skillful separate their "own perceptions from the teacher's without accusing or putting the other person on the defensive" (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013).

Skillful leaders use these effective communication techniques.

- They listen attentively and acknowledge what the teacher is saying. For example, they say things like "Tell me more," "I understand," or "I'm following you."
- They use nonverbal cues to show you're engaged. For example, provide affirmative nods, keep your arms open rather than closed, maintain eye contact, face the speaker and use a barrier-free space rather than across the desk.
- They provide an opportunity for reflecting and clarifying. Some prompts you might use are "So, you would like . . .," "I think you're saying . . ." or "You feel . . . because . . ."

Skillful leaders avoid these barriers to effective communication.

- They don't judge a person's motives by criticizing, labeling or diagnosing. Instead, they listen, and seek clarification. For example, don't say "The lesson was poor . . ." or, "With more experience you'll . . ."
- They don't offer solutions by lecturing, ordering, threatening or suggesting. For example, don't say "What I would do is . . ." or "If you don't . . ."
- They don't avoid the teacher's concerns by diverting the conversation, using sarcasm or reassuring them inappropriately. For example, don't say "It's not so bad . . ." or "I'm busy and can't talk right now . . ." or "Speaking of . . ."

Teachers value, and respond to, coaching and other opportunities to reflect on their own teaching. This collaborative approach engages teachers but, at the same time, doesn't reward less skillful teaching. Teachers value the chance to work with their principal and/or other teachers to analyze their instruction and develop plans for strengthening their practice (Grissom, Loeb & Master, 2013; May, Huff & Goldring, 2012).

Similarly, teachers crave feedback and an opportunity to reflect on their work. Rather than resisting supervision, they seek authentic risk-free opportunities to talk about their teaching and to grow professionally (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013).

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

4. Become a Powerful Coach

Principals hold two distinct roles---evaluator and coach. While evaluation is necessary, there is increasing recognition of the importance of coaching. This takes on greater urgency when the evidence is that coaching, along with other forms of instructional leadership, is related to improved student outcomes. The principal, rather than being the expert and telling a teacher what to do, serves as the “lead coach” responsible for engaging teachers in a process that respects them as learners, and works with them to reflect on their teaching and identify ways to strengthen their practice. When principals serve as coaches it is critical that the two roles remain separate and that clear boundaries be established about how information from coaching will be used. The evidence is that teachers are able to separate the roles (May, Huff & Goldring, 2012)

The primary role of the coach is to ask questions that are open-ended and promote cognition. Listening, probing for deeper meaning, and being non-judgmental are critical skills. Good coaching is built on a foundation of trust. It occurs when the coach creates a open, respectful and inviting setting. Coaching cannot be forced. Good coaches share several traits. They . . .

- **Enroll Teachers** – Coaching cannot be see as punishment or as a requirement. Good coaches create a setting that welcomes teachers and in which teachers choose to participate.
- **Identify Teacher Goals** – A top-down approach rarely works. Good coaches help teachers identify goals for their work and support the teacher’s efforts to improve.
- **Listen** – Perhaps no other skill is as important as the ability to listen intently to those being coached. Good coaches create a setting where teachers feel comfortable, can be candid without fear of retribution, and are curious and inquisitive.
- **Ask thoughtful Questions** – Good coaches ask thoughtful, open-ended questions that promote reflection. They are interested in promoting teacher cognition rather than providing answers.
- **Provide Feedback** – Good coaches don’t provide feedback in the traditional sense. They don’t tell teachers what to do. But they are comfortable using data from an observation, or comments made by the teacher, to provide feedback. All feedback is precise and non-judgmental. Good coaches are always open to the teacher’s point-of-view. (Garmston & Wellman, 2008; Hirsch & Killon, 2007)

A Three-Step Coaching Model

The coaching process generally involves three phases---planning, observation, and analysis and reflection. Much like the clinical supervision model the approach is designed to engage the teacher in reflecting on their teaching, a formative process (Williamson & Blackburn, 2009).

Step 1: Planning - During this step the teacher and coach meet to discuss the coaching, identify a focus for data collection, and agree on when an observation will occur.

Step 2: Observation/Data Collection - This step includes a visit to the classroom and collection of data that will inform a discussion about the focus area identified in the planning phase.

Step 3: Analysis and Reflection - This phase provides an opportunity to meet with the teacher to talk about the observation and the data that were collected. The emphasis is on engaging the teacher in a conversation to analyze and think about his or her teaching. Conclude with agreement on follow up and appropriate next steps.

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Conditions for Successful Coaching

The conditions that support effective coaching include

- Presume positive intentions.
- Talk with the teacher to identify a focus for the work. Assume the teacher can analyze and reflect on their teaching and identify an area for growth.
- Ask clarifying questions to understand the context (students, content, prior learning), the lesson and the teacher's thinking about the design and delivery of the lesson.
- Remain non-judgmental
- Listen attentively and authentically; use paraphrasing to indicate that you are listening and understand what was said.
- Focus the work on an area identified with the teacher. (Garmston & Wellman, 2008)

Summary

Improving teaching and learning is the most important role of a principal. Successful instructional leaders work with their teachers to critique their teaching and select strategies for improving instruction. Principals recognize that their role is to facilitate the professional growth of their staff and understand the importance of an open, non-judgmental approach to the work.

Online Resources

Instructional Coaching – A Report of the Annenberg Foundation

<http://annenberginstitute.org/pdf/InstructionalCoaching.pdf>

This report shares lessons from research on instructional coaching and the components of a successful coaching model.

Institute for Instructional Coaching

<http://instituteforinstructionalcoaching.org/guide-home>

After completing a free registration this site offers tools and resources for coaching teachers.

Should Principals Stop Visiting Classrooms?

<http://tinyurl.com/prfblxh>

This article from the Washington Post summarizes the two recent studies about the link between some instructional supervision activities and student learning (Grissom, Loeb & Master, 2013; May, Huff & Goldring, 2012).

Coaching Teachers: What You Need to Know

http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2011/02/15/tln_coaching.html

This helpful article from *Education Week* reports on a recent study about coaching teachers. It discusses the benefits of coaching and identifies several important tips for principals.

Mentoring and Coaching – Education Development Center (EDC)

<http://cse.edc.org/products/teacherleadership/mentoring.asp>

This site provides useful tools for mentors and coaches.

Coaching Tips from a Former Principal

<http://www.edutopia.org/how-to-instructional-coaching-tips>

This article identifies key lessons from a principal who uses instructional coaching to improve her school.

RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

Effective Instructional Time Use for School Leaders: Longitudinal Evidence from Observations of Principals
(Grissom, Loeb & Master, 2013) – *Educational Researcher*

<http://tinyurl.com/lb5zl2e>

A Longitudinal Study of Principals' Activities and Student Performance

(May, Huff & Goldring, 2012) – *Journal of School Effectiveness and Improvement*

<http://tinyurl.com/m9uur8u>

Related Oregon GEAR UP Research Brief - Meaningful Teacher Evaluation - <http://tinyurl.com/mlg7u4o>

Print Resources

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Hirsh, S. & Killion, J. (2007). *The Learning Educator: A New Era for Professional Learning*. Oxford, OH: Learning Forward.

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