

Working with School Personnel

MEMO TO: Superintendent

FROM: Curriculum Director

In our conference the other day you asked four questions. These were: (a) From what activities this past year have members of the curriculum and supervision department *profited*? (b) What is the number one *problem* your department is facing? (c) What *plans* have you made? (d) What *proposals* do you have for the future? Here are my answers:

Profits

Opportunities to participate in state and national conferences have certainly "charged our batteries." Our supervisor serving on the state mathematics advisory committee has brought to us the latest developments in that field. The national figure in art who came to our district as a consultant was of great help to all of us, but especially to our art supervisor. The experience of developing the programmed booklet in science opened our eyes. (Can we order a teaching machine or two for experimental purposes?)

The staff seminars have helped us achieve "unity with diversity." The work

of our master calendar committee has resulted in much less frustration for teachers, principals and supervisors. Planning with the architect for our new school helped us clarify our objectives and our procedures. (It was easier to tell him how to design the building than to give him our educational specifications.) And last, the employment of non-credentialed noon supervisors has raised teacher morale and given them more vigor to pursue instructional improvement activities.

Problem

Probably the number one barrier to more effective supervisory services is the lack of a clear-cut definition of the role of the supervisor.

It is not difficult to accept the job of the school principal—it has its positive connotations—there are essential, concrete, specific functions to be performed, but the connotation for the supervisor tends to be negative. His function ap-

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pears to be that of "checking up on" or "correcting weaknesses."

The supervisor's position is often defended on the grounds that the district has so many new teachers each year, or that many of the teachers are not fully qualified — therefore, supervisors are needed. Do we not have a job with experienced teachers? The emphasis and trend now are on the individual building as the basic unit for curriculum improvement and the building principal responsible for supervision. Those individuals, therefore, who have the titles of supervisor, consultant, coordinator, and having a "staff" as contrasted to a "line" relationship find themselves in an ephemeral position—in somewhat of a professional "no man's land." What is the job of the principal and what is the job of the supervisor?

Added to this is a trend toward "helping teachers," "special teachers" and "master teachers"—all of whom are taking over the former function of supervisors. There is the implication that to assist other teachers no special training is needed. This suggestion can do little to build up the ego of the credentialed supervisor—the person who has the special education to qualify him for this position. Furthermore, the reasons often presented for employing the helping teachers—other teachers are more ready to accept their help, and their salaries are generally lower—add to the supervisor's uncertainty and insecurity. Should we be certain that any persons we add will have adequate preparation?

There is also some evidence to suggest that what the principal sees as his role in supervision is quite different than the way the supervisor sees the principal's role and vice versa. The actual functions of these two positions seem to

change with the changing size of the district. All of which seems to compound the confusion and support the need for a clarification of roles.

Partly because of these developments several school systems have called in outside consulting firms to assist them with their staffing problems—what types of positions should we have? What should be the job description for each position? And what type of administrative organization is best? The question could be raised as to whether an industrial consulting firm or professional educators should be making these recommendations, but the fact remains that such studies and recommendations are long overdue.

The study in one large system proposes an Operations Planning and Research Division, in place of the present Curriculum Division. This new division would have responsibility for developing subject material and advising on teaching techniques. The study further proposes that supervisors be called "instructional advisors" and that they advise "master teachers," who would in turn help classroom teachers. These "master teachers" would work under zone or building administrators and would not operate as members of the curriculum department.

The recognition of the place of research in this department is sound. The title "instructional advisor" is positive and descriptive. However, the idea that the advisor should advise certain teachers who, in turn, would advise other teachers needs to be challenged. Will the "master teachers" be professionally qualified? Or is there the implication that no special education is needed to supervise teachers?

Careful thought needs to be given to

the pros and cons of having the "master teachers" responsible not to the curriculum department but to building principals.

We do not have to accept this delineation of responsibility, but all districts need to sharply define the roles. Such a definition would help boards of education, the public, and school personnel have a better understanding of the roles. And it could be that with a clearer definition of function, supervisory services could be increased rather than decreased as is the case in too many situations. Supervisors might become indispensable rather than expendable.

Plans

Mr. Superintendent, you asked what plan we have done to improve our skill. Our staff, as a result of observations we have made, comments we have received, and experiences we have shared, formulated the following list of "self-reminders."

The supervisor to be accepted has to bring more to the teacher than he expects of the teacher. Probably there is a reason why we do not find committees from teachers associations going to boards of education requesting more supervisors. This could be that it often appears to teachers that the addition of each new supervisor seems to mean more work for classroom teachers. This one wants teachers to do more with bulletin boards, the next one with teacher-pupil planning, and the third puts the pressure on for more attention to the gifted.

The supervisor secures the support and enthusiasm of teachers by providing them opportunity to participate in exciting, worthwhile activities. Most teachers

have a desire to improve in their work and welcome an opportunity to be involved in an experiment, a research study or a special project. Such involvement gives status, recognition and satisfaction.

The supervisor stimulates thought and improvement by asking the right questions. How do we get teachers to focus on problems of importance? Here is a teacher who spends too much time on trivia. "I just love to teach about the rubber gatherers of Brazil because it is such a wonderful experience for children to construct their thatched roof huts."

One supervisor reported to a group of teachers that at a military training center the instructors in their lesson plans divided the content of a given subject field into three aspects: (a) must know; (b) should know; (c) nice to know. The supervisor asked the teachers if they could classify those things that they were teaching into these three categories. It was both disturbing and enlightening to the teachers to see how few facts could be classified as "must know." There slowly evolved the feeling that probably certain concepts were the "must know" of the subject under consideration.

The services of a supervisor are sought by the secure teacher. No matter how friendly the supervisor feels he is, how easy he believes he is to talk with, or how much respect he has for each teacher—these are of little consequence unless the teacher fully understands and sees these attributes in the supervisor. Attention needs to be given to this aspect of supervisor-teacher relationships. A teacher must have some confidence to seek supervisory assistance. It follows that the strong teacher more often asks for help than does the weak teacher. (This is also true of the principal.)

The supervisor recognizes and appreciates the good maverick traits in teachers. It is too easy to evolve a "good teacher" stereotype when intellectually we know there is no one way to teach. Martin Mayer, in his book, *The Schools*, contends that "Sarcasm in those to whom it comes naturally shows the child that the teacher really cares about what is being taught—and it probably eradicates errors more efficiently than any other form of correction."¹ A little later he makes the observation "... that a great teacher can do anything he damn pleases, with any subject and any class, that for such rare teachers there are no rules—or, rather, that all rules are made to be broken."² We need more great teachers and great teachers do not fit into a mold.

The supervisor continually questions and challenges presently accepted practices seeking improved procedures. Content and method, once introduced, tend to become fixed. It took quite a while before it was common practice for elementary teachers to have three reading groups. About the time the practice is generally accepted, there is need to ask the question: Is there a better way to teach reading? Some authorities are strongly recommending individualized reading programs. This is the way we should be looking at all aspects of education.

Proposals

Mr. Superintendent, can we arrange to have each potential principal spend a year or two working in the curriculum department? This experience seems to give the principal a better understanding

¹ Martin Mayer. *The Schools*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961, p. 194.

² *Ibid.*, p. 195.

of the educational program and a better appreciation of the services we can render teachers. He is then more likely to utilize our services in his building.

Can we expect elementary teachers to become and remain experts in teaching all subjects unless we provide them more help? What would you think of adding additional specialists in the various areas to our staff and then permitting each teacher to select one or two specialists to work with him regularly during the year? The following year he would select one or two specialists in other areas. By observing and talking with these experts could he not maintain a degree of expertness in each field? Or is this too expensive?

One last question, Mr. Superintendent: Is there something we could do to help establish a national foundation for educational research? Maybe, if some support could be secured from foundations and from various corporations, school districts all over the country could then "subscribe" for research service from this foundation. Through this subscription, districts could participate in national research projects and could receive reports on research projects. We certainly need the research to give us direction in our instructional improvement activities.

Do you think we might discuss these proposals in a staff meeting?

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