

Sensing and Timing in Change

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SCHOOLS are becoming more complex and are requiring more from their instructional leaders than traditional approaches to curriculum construction. Only if instructional leaders respond to the evident forces which affect schools can they become effective as initiators and leaders of constructive program improvement. The nuances which include sensitivity to mood, timing, and blending of forces are becoming increasingly important in the process.

School leaders today are expected by the public to give more aggressive leadership in the change process than they were in the past. Supervisors and curriculum directors only need to look around to observe the increasing rapidity with which teachers, youth, and the public react to school programs. The expectations for schools are at an all-time high. Parents are demanding more efficiency. They expect fuller utilization of school plants; they desire ways to reward staff according to effectiveness; and they are beginning to demand educational results commensurate with school expenditures.

Urban schools are expected to do something about social equality by giving more attention to the inclusion of course content which is fair to minority groups and the adoption of teaching techniques which give the poor an equal chance to succeed. Also much of the American public is losing patience with schools which continue to permit students to drop out or pass through without gaining a reasonable degree of competence.

Nor can instructional leaders overlook the attitude of youths themselves. Young people perceive cross-culture, cross-generation, and authority barriers to communication. If school leaders do not want rebellious youth, young people's perceptions must be taken into account as new programs are planned.

The preceding are only a few of the many observations an instructional leader will make from the study of the society which schools serve. In drawing inferences for program revision, instructional leaders must rely most heavily on their backgrounds in sociology, psychology, and political science. And unless they become more efficient as initiators of action, they will continue, as many do now, spending all their time reacting to outside demands of an emergency nature, leaving little time for constructive leadership.

Sensing need for change has become an important function of the instructional leader. He must establish procedures by which problems as viewed by parents, students, and teachers can systematically be identified. It is suggested that he communicate with them consistently. The purpose of such discussions is not to establish new general educational goals. For regardless of the way in which a statement of general goals is prepared, it is likely to have little or no im-

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pact unless it is tied to a systematic program of implementation. Further, since such statements cover *all* aspects of the school curriculum, it is simply not possible for the administration to design equally comprehensive approaches to implementation that are realistic and financially attainable. As a result, no direct action is generated by these statements. An alternate approach is that each year be formulated in relation to the foremost problems and issues of concern to the educational system. These would be systematically identified each year.

After the identification of problems, task forces made up of educational personnel may be established to analyze the problems and suggest approaches. The recommendations of the task forces become the immediate priority goals for the school system. The long and arduous tasks formerly performed by committees in revising the highly general educational objectives are given a lower priority than the more specific goals related to special problems.

A Sequence of Actions

Timing of a sequence of actions is as important as the identification of programs to be undertaken. Some programs can be undertaken immediately, while others should not be attempted on a broad front. Pilot classes or pilot schools can illustrate what can be done if the objectives are clear, if materials are appropriate, if the staff is sympathetic with the special purposes, and if the staff is adequately prepared. Pilot programs also have the advantage of giving the public time to gain assurance that new approaches are sound. Such programs should be monitored carefully so that variables can be ad-

justed quickly to overcome the weaknesses that emerge. Often something goes wrong, but what? Here the instructional leader helps identify the problems and assists in developing alternate strategies.

In addition to broader insights, the well-prepared instructional specialist must understand the need for involvement of the staff; must possess the skills to help groups state achievable objectives; and must know how to bring together the many elements that make a useful instructional package, including suggested processes, materials, and evaluative techniques. He must also realize that all good plans include ways for teachers to assess individual differences within the class and to sense the reactions of students, readjusting methods as necessary.

The instructional leader uses his sensitivity and skills in human relations to lessen professional risk. All levels share in the risk so that an individual teacher or a school principal who dares to try a new approach is not left with the entire burden of responsibility if failure results.

In summary, instructional leaders are encouraged to become students of the society which schools serve. They may be less well prepared to do this than to do the more technical job of program development. Processes are suggested for identifying problems of concern by continuous discussion with parents, teachers, and students, and then for phasing in programs after study by task forces. Currently the greatest need of supervisors and curriculum workers is to develop skills of identifying problem-based perspective involving the direct application of conceptual insight into contemporary issues of educational policy and leadership. □

Humanizing the Secondary School

By the ASCD Secondary Education Council

NORMAN K. HAMILTON and J. GALEN SAYLOR, editors

Price \$2.75

NEA Stock Number: 611-17780

Pages: 144

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA
1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

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