

Issues in Supervisor Roles: What Do Practitioners Say?

The ASCD Working Group on Supervisory Practices

Do supervisors agree about the relative importance of the issues they face? A group of ASCD'ers recently surveyed considers teacher evaluation, leadership for change, relationship to children, and source of authority as top-priority concerns.

Supervisors¹ are beginning to react to traditionally imposed roles! The growing need for stronger leadership for the improvement of instruction has made urgent the casting aside of outmoded concepts and the provision of some clarity as to the function and practices of instructional supervision. Unfortunately, this task has previously only been undertaken when less pressing agenda items allowed for discussion, issue analysis, and problem definition regarding supervisory behavior. It is not difficult to assess the reasons that newcomers to the field of instructional supervision are struggling constantly for clarity of purpose. However, the objectives most widely accepted even by "old time supervisors"—calling inevitably for the improvement of instruction—are being attained only by dramatic restructuring of ways of working.

A set of traditions concerned with the improvement of instruction extends back at least 100 years, making supervision of instruction, by whatever title, the oldest of the specialized professions in public school education in the United States. However, rapidly changing conditions in the society are reflected in the schools in ways

that necessitate reappraisal of supervisory practices.

The Working Group on Supervisory Practices was established by the ASCD Executive Council in 1975. The group convened in Chicago in November of that year to develop a plan of action. A survey of issues on supervisory practices was initiated during this first meeting, growing out of discussions of the concerns of many supervisors and the absence of reliable data. The purpose of the survey was to identify more clearly the issues or dilemmas that practitioners of supervision perceive as *most important* in relation to their efforts to improve instruction. The persistent top-priority issues were to be identified and studied more rigorously, with guidelines for better practices provided. Other compelling issues emerging from rapidly changing circumstances were also to be identified, though it was realized that they might have a lesser priority.

What We Found

From a list of seventeen issues devised by the ASCD Working Group, seven high-priority issues were identified on the basis of responses

¹ The term "supervisor" is used throughout this article as a generic term referring to a variety of positional titles found in educational centers throughout the United States (coordinator, consultant, curriculum director, specialist). All are concerned with improving instruction.

from 163 supervisors and others² from distinctively different parts of the country.

Table 1. shows the frequency of high-priority ranks assigned and the mean of ranks assigned to the top seven issues. Nearly 40 percent of all respondents assigned these issues high ranks. On the average, these seven issues were so highly ranked that the mean response to them was 3.2 or better.

The mean rank of these high-priority issues was markedly close. The issue statements remaining from the seventeen presented to responding supervisors were distinctly lower in frequency of high ranks.

Of the seventeen issues presented to respondents, no one issue was ranked overwhelmingly as first or second in importance. Conversely, not a single issue selected by the Working Group on Supervisory Practices was rejected. In fact, all

of the seventeen issues were ranked among the top-priority issues by at least 10 percent of the respondents. It is interesting, however, to consider those issues that seem highly important to *only a few*.

Table 2. shows the frequency of high ranks assigned to the ten *least* important issues. Of these less important issues, only issue 10, relating to the problem of diffusion of supervisory responsibilities, comes close to the highest priority issues in Table 1.

One set of the lowest ranked issues includes those relating to ways of working with others; issues 2, 6, 9, 10, and 12 refer to general supervision, collegial relationships, task assignments, sharing responsibilities, and directiveness. None of these, common as they are to the folklore of supervision, seems to be considered among the highest priority issues by these respondents. Issue 3, "Helping individual teachers *vs.* leadership for instructional change" is, however, one of those highest ranked.

The very lowest set of issues in ranked importance relates to external sources of expectations and organizational structure for supervisors; issues 5, 7, 8, and 15 (dealing with the way supervisors are organized, are assigned to a staff, are scheduled, and are working with team members) are not seen as highly important. Issue 5 was rarely given high rankings and received no top ranks. This item was not clearly stated due to a typographical error, thus raising the issue of validity of interpretation of the responses.

What Does It All Mean?

As surveyed in this instance, supervisors of instruction view teacher evaluation, leadership for change, their relationship to children, and their sources of authority as top-priority concerns. Teacher evaluation *vs.* evaluation of instruction was not only the most frequently high-ranked issue, but over half of those ranking it felt so strongly that they ranked it first or

² The respondents were all ASCD'ers—primarily public school supervisors (70 percent) or those associated with colleges and universities. About half of the respondents serve both elementary and secondary school programs, while the remainder are equally divided between elementary and secondary school programs.

Table 1. Highly Important Issues Regarding Supervisory Practices

Issue Number and Statement	High* Ranks Assigned		Mean Rank
	Number	Percent	
1 Teacher evaluation vs. evaluation of instruction only	88	54	2.4
3 Helping individual teachers vs. leadership for instructional change	85	52	2.5
11 Teacher and program as central focus vs. child and learning	73	45	2.6
4 Pro-active initiation of change process vs. responding to needs	69	42	2.7
13 Supervisor authority based on expertise and interpersonal relationships vs. conferred status and decision-making responsibility	65	40	2.9
17 Working to develop curricula and materials vs. improving classroom instruction	66	40+	3.0
16 Relying on teachers to promote their own improvement vs. cooperatively working toward goals	64	39	3.2

* High ranks refer to issues ranked as one, two, three, four, or five out of seventeen.

Table 2. Least Frequently Ranked as Highly Important Among Seventeen Issues

<i>Issue Number and Statement</i>	<i>Frequency of High Ranks Assigned</i>
2 General supervision vs. specialized supervision	42
5 Instructional program responsibilities only vs. a member of administrative staff	16
6 Collegial relationships with principals vs. a member of the staff	30
7 Assignments within a single school vs. among several schools	22
8 Highly structured schedules vs. flexible scheduling for supervisor's time	24
9 Program or subject task assignment vs. broad-issues approach	23
10 Diffusion of responsibility for supervision vs. concentration in hands of supervisory staff	52
12 To model, advise, suggest vs. to facilitate, interest, collaborate	45
14 Involvement in collective negotiations as management vs. as teacher vs. neither	31
15 Supervisor team vs. individual assignment	19

second in importance. The importance of leadership responsibilities for supervisors was emphasized by two of the highest ranked issues: issue 3, "Helping individual classroom teachers vs. leadership for instructional change," and issue 4, "Proactive initiation of change process vs. responding to expressed needs." Similarly, two separate issues, ranked among the highest, emphasized concern for the pupil and concern for learning outcomes as distinguished from improvement of instruction processes. This is reflected in strong responses to issue 11, "Teacher and program as central focus vs. child and learning," and issue 7, "Working to develop curricula and materials vs. improving classroom instruction."

Issue 13, "Supervisor authority based on expertise and interpersonal relationships vs. conferred status and decision-making responsibility" (one of the most recurrent in the literature), was given relatively high importance by these respondents. The significance of this issue regarding the character and source of authority for supervisory practices is reinforced by the high ranks

given issue 1, teacher evaluation, and issue 4, active initiation.

What this survey does not tell us, of course, is how supervisors stand professionally on these highly ranked issues. The importance attached to seven of the seventeen issues presented by the Working Group on Supervisory Practices may reflect concern, confusion, frustration, or even strong personal, professional commitment on the part of supervisors.

Other Possible Issues

The questionnaire utilized in this survey requested open-ended responses of three kinds. Respondents were urged to indicate other issues as follows:

A. Special problems of improving secondary instruction.

B. Special problems growing out of collective bargaining by organized teacher groups.

C. Special problems of supervisors in acquiring and refining professional supervisory skills and competencies.

Other issues in any area of concern were also requested. Many responses to these open-ended requests were received. Many were simply elaborations on issues already ranked. However, a few additional concerns were expressed frequently enough to suggest new issues, emerging concerns, or old issues not included among the selected list of seventeen.

By far, the most persistent concerns noted by supervisors regarding "Special problems of improving secondary instruction" were those reflecting the quality of their relationships with other members of the professional leadership team. The problems are reflected in oft-repeated and specific reference to the role of the administrator, principal, department head, or, by some other title, the authority figure and his or her lack of communication with/or understanding about the roles of supervisors.

The issue of "Collective negotiations by organized teaching groups" did not prove as provocative as the Working Group on Supervisory Practices had presumed it would be. The statements given were too varied to categorize; they did not reveal any common viewpoint or attitude toward "collective negotiations" nor

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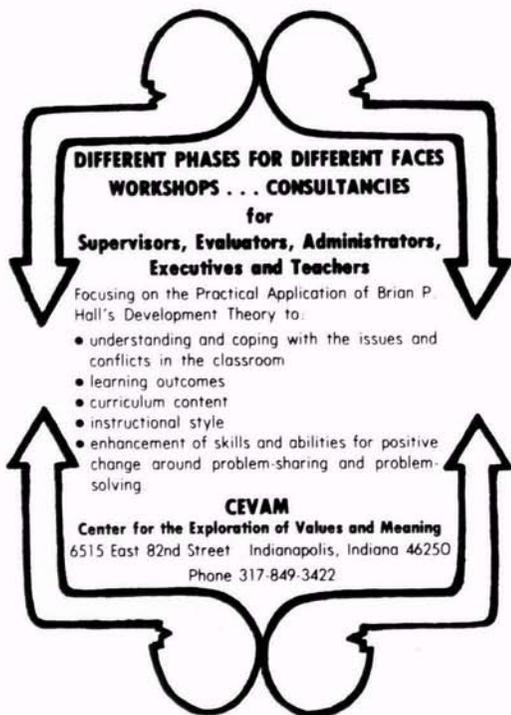
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strong antagonisms toward organized teaching groups.

In response to the invitation to list "special problems of supervisors in acquiring and refining professional supervisory skills and competencies," the majority of supervisors stressed the need for time and opportunities to ensure their own continued professional growth with additional time for preparation and research.

Summary

The Working Group on Supervisory Practices secured responses from ASCD'ers from various parts of the country, and tallied these data to reflect estimates of the relative importance of seventeen selected issues relating to supervisory practices. While all selected issues were ranked as "high priority" by a substantial number of respondents, no one issue was of overwhelming concern. Seven distinctly high-priority issues were identified, however.

It is obvious from this study, at least, that the "live" issues have to do with teacher evalua-

tion, leadership for change, and the supervisor's basis of authority for taking initiative. Several issues, still widely discussed, do not seem to have highest priorities in the minds of this group of ASCD'ers. For instance, general vs. special supervision, building- vs. central-office assignment, relationship to principal and other administrators, and scheduling of the supervisor's time are issues that do not rank at all high.

The Working Group on Supervisory Practices views this study as only a preliminary step in its work. Position papers will be drafted around both sides of several of these issues in the months ahead. It is hoped that such papers will stimulate discussion, research, and clarification of related problems. Some suggestions for "preferred practices" may even emerge. [E]

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