The Principal: Meeting Instructional Needs in an Urban School

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At E. C. Meservey School in Kansas City, Missouri, a principal and staff pioneer ways to improve instruction and the achievement of students.

A recent article in the National Elementary Principal by Arnold J. Keller, indicates that the leadership behavior of many elementary principals is inadequate in instructional improvement. This viewpoint has been documented by Harry F. Wallcott's study, "The Man in the Principal's Office." According to this research, principals are expected by their superiors to handle, without causing any waves, every problem of responsibility that might interfere with the efficient operation of the school or "system." This preoccupation with management details has caused, in my belief, many principals to abandon their major role of providing instructional leadership.

Another study has indicated that the behavior and practices of school principals play a crucial role in pupil achievement. For the principal to fulfill the role expectation of improving instruction, two conditions must exist. First, the system must make resources available to the principal and to the staff. This involves the granting of greater autonomy at the building level in terms of budget allocation, selection of instructional materials, and the assignment of personnel. Less paperwork and other administrative trivia should be assigned to the principal. Risk-taking individuals should be recruited and sustained in the principal's position. Risk-taking would be defined as a willingness to make a major commitment to the improvement of instruction and to challenge the system when one is distracted from this role. For too long, many principals have been survival experts and have neglected their major calling—that of changing and improving education for boys and girls.

Second, the principal and the staff must develop a plan of action for improving instruction and achievement. This involves ascertaining the needs of students, developing teaching strategies to meet the needs, and establishing a system of evaluation to determine the effectiveness of the program. Such a plan of action is termed: a clinical approach to teaching.

The authors of this article and the staff have developed a program of instructional improvement at the E. C. Meservey School in Kansas City, Missouri, with the full support and cooperation of the central administrative staff.

Historical Perspective

Of the 600 boys and girls enrolled in E. C. Meservey School, 99 percent are black. The


3 Daniel Klepak, Director, Office of Education Performance Review. School Factors Influencing Reading Achievement, State Capitol, Albany, New York. p. 64.
socioeconomic level of the neighborhood, which consists of single family dwellings, could be described as borderline poverty. During the 1972-73 school term, the school qualified for Title 1 services. In 1973-74, it no longer met the federal guidelines.

As measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the median achievement of the third- and sixth-grade students in 1972 was one of the lowest in the city. This indicated a mandate for change in the instructional program. The special teachers of Title 1 were used during the 1972-73 school year to develop a clinical approach to teaching. (This approach is described more fully later in this article.) The test scores of the students in the spring of 1973 showed a slight gain in reading and mathematics. In previous years, there had been a steady decline in the achievement of the children in these two areas.

With the loss of Title I services at the end of the 1973 school year, a new organization was proposed for the school term of 1973-74. This proposal was presented by the authors to the central administration and the school staff. Both groups gave their approval and the new organization was implemented in the fall of 1973.

Organization

The school was organized to accomplish the specific objectives of improving instruction and achievement in the critical areas of reading and mathematics. It also reflected the principal’s views concerning the role of instructional personnel. This could be classified as a form of differentiated staffing. The assistant to the principal’s role was changed from management duties to instructional duties. He became the consultant for mathematics and science with emphasis on mathematics. A regular teaching position was eliminated in order to have the services of a reading and language arts consultant. A job description was written for each of the individuals to clarify their roles and to specify their duties. Grade level chairpersons were chosen by the staff to work with the specialists in implementing the program.
The unique feature of this organizational pattern is that it does not require additional funds. The intent of the new structure was to demonstrate that instruction and achievement could be improved within normal budget allocations. Too often in the past, most pilot programs have been funded at the state or national level and have been dropped when the funds are exhausted. This is not the case at Meservey.

A Clinical Approach to Teaching

A clinical approach to teaching is the basic ingredient of the new organization and the major thrust for improvement of instruction and achievement at Meservey School. The approach has four components:

1. A thorough diagnosis of each child based on a point of reference is the first component. The point of reference for the diagnostic testing program was the taxonomy of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Diagnostic tests were developed and administered in the areas of mathematics problem-solving, mathematical concepts, English usage, punctuation, and reading comprehension. Test scores indicated that these areas needed the greatest concentration of effort by instructional personnel. Vocabulary was also a concern. A different technique was used to improve this area, though, and will be described later in this article.

2. The second component refers to an extensive prescriptive procedure. This involves using the results of the diagnostic tests to place children in instructional groups based upon their knowledge in the skills area. Through this process teachers were able to plan instruction more effectively. They no longer taught all skills to every student. Instead, they taught those skills for which test results indicated a lack of mastery on the part of the students. This is the “what” of teaching.

3. The third component was to develop teaching strategies based on the diagnostic tests and prescriptive placement procedures. Teaching strategies consisted of lectures, discussion groups, audiovisual presentations, teacher-made materials, programmed materials, peer and adult tutoring, traditional textbooks, and other techniques. This is the “how” of teaching.

4. The final component refers to evaluation. After each small increment of teaching, a mastery test was administered to each group to determine if they were ready to move to the next level. A norm-referenced test, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, is administered each spring to the third- and sixth-grade classes to give a global view of progress.

Role of the Mathematics and Science Consultant

The mathematics program was implemented by constructing a diagnostic test that covered several levels in mathematics problem-solving and mathematical concepts. These tests were administered at the beginning of the school year in order that the results could be used in differentiating instruction for the students in grades three through six. Resource units were secured for the science program, and teachers were assisted in developing teaching units based on data contained in these resource units.

The consultant met with the principal and grade-level chairpersons to place children initially in instructional groups for the mathematics program. He helped teachers develop a plan for each student based on the items of the diagnostic test. The consultant helped teachers plan teaching strategies, ordered materials to implement the program, provided in-service training for volunteers and teachers, and constructed mastery tests to follow each level of instruction. He also worked directly with individuals and small groups of children on a regular schedule once the program was started.

Many different materials other than textbooks were used to teach specific skills. Since most children spend a great deal of time watching television, the TV guide and the TV schedule from
the newspaper were used to teach basic combinations. Containers were brought to school from home to teach measurement concepts. The sports section of the newspaper was used to teach percentage.

In addition to the above, basic materials were provided by the school district. Frequent visits by the consultant to the classrooms and conferences with teachers ensured a continuation of the diagnostic, prescriptive, and evaluative process.

Role of the Reading and Language Arts Consultant

The reading program was implemented by administering a placement test published with the adopted reading series. Results of the tests were used to group children for instructional purposes in grades one through six. The skill classification of the comprehensive part of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills was used with each level to improve comprehensive abilities of the students. Additional materials were ordered that met the criteria of the above skill classifications. A great deal of the consultant's time was spent with teachers in helping develop teaching strategies to improve reading comprehension skills.

A commercial vocabulary improvement program was implemented at the same time. This plan had received favorable results in the St. Louis, Missouri, Public School System and was later published by a textbook firm. These materials were purchased and used with fifth- and sixth-grade students.

The language arts program was implemented by constructing diagnostic tests in English usage, punctuation, and capitalization. These tests were administered at the beginning of the school year in order that the results could be used in differentiating instruction for the students in grades four through six.

The consultant met with the principal and grade-level chairman to place children initially in instructional groups for the reading and language
Better educational leadership . . . must come from within the person who sits in the principal’s chair.” Photo: Joe Di Dio, NEA.

She helped teachers develop a plan for each student or group of students based on the results of the initial testing program. The consultant helped teachers in planning teaching strategies, ordered materials to implement the program, provided in-service training for volunteers and teachers, and constructed or purchased mastery tests to follow each level of instruction. She worked directly with individuals and small groups of children in reading on a regularly-scheduled basis, once the program was started.

The consultant perceived a need to create, in the students, a desire to extend their reading horizons and improve their English skills. Since this is in the affective domain, a different process was used to accomplish this objective.

An attractive learning resource center was developed during the 1973-74 school year. Community leaders were invited to the school as success models for the students. An incentive program was established for reading library books. Possibly more important than the above, teachers displayed a willingness to create an intellectual environment, where children were encouraged to improve their reading and language skills.

Results of the Program

There was a marked improvement in the achievement of the sixth-grade class by the end of the 1973-74 school year. Our school no longer holds the distinction of having one of the poorest academic records in the school system as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills.

In the spring of 1974, the District testing program changed from a graded format to an individualized testing plan based on levels that correspond more closely to the instructional objectives or skill development for each student. In Kansas City, four levels of tests were used with sixth-grade students. City-wide medians were computed for each level. At each of the four levels, the sixth-grade students at Meservey scored near or above city medians in reading and mathematics. The third-grade students did not reach city medians until the spring of 1975.

It should be pointed out, however, that more progress can be made since our third- and sixth-grade students did not meet large city national norms. We hope to reach this goal in the near future. It is encouraging to know that progress has been made since the new organization was implemented in the fall of 1973.

Conclusion

The organizational pattern at E. C. Meservey School is not a panacea for all of the instructional problems confronting elementary principals today. It is, however, a paradigm that works for this principal and his staff. The Kansas City District developed "Operation Read-Math" in the fall of 1974 to strengthen the reading and mathematics programs in all of the district's schools. Consultants were hired to work with a designated group of schools in each area of the city. Their function was similar to the role played by the two consultants at Meservey.

In the spring of 1975 the district-wide testing program indicated positive results. There was a reversal of the downward trend of student scores at the third-grade level. There was a slower decline in the scores of sixth-grade students. There was a slight improvement in the third-grade test scores in 1976 and a leveling off process for sixth-grade students tested. Hopefully, with more time and effort, the students at grade six will show an improvement in their reading and mathematics test scores in the spring of 1977 and in future years.
Today much is being written about the re-making of the principalship. This principal (Billy Groom) has been on the educational scene for some 21 years. Of this time, 13 years have been spent as an elementary principal or supervisor for a local school system. He holds the highest degree of his profession. He recognizes the importance of education and experience; however, these two factors are not the complete answer to providing better educational leadership at the principal level. This leadership must come from within the person who sits in the principal's chair. The principal must challenge pat beliefs and fixed ways of doing things. In other words, the principal must become a risk taker for better education. Many times this means challenging the "system" rather than going along as a survival expert.

As stated earlier, the system must change too. More autonomy must be granted at the building level. The principal and the staff know more about the individual needs of the students they serve than anyone. At E. C. Meservey School, a beginning has been made for improving instruction and achievement of the students we serve. It would also appear that this concept has contributed to the improvement of student achievement for the total school district. 4


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