

Instructional Supervision: The Winter and the Warm

Carole Crews

Interpersonal relations and school policy and administration are sources of dissatisfaction to school supervisors. Recognition and achievement, though often scarce, are important satisfiers.

Instructional supervisors hold a unique position in the nation's school systems. Whether called consultants, coordinators, or curriculum specialists, they are expected to assist and guide teachers in ways that will improve their performance and effectiveness.

For supervisors themselves to be effective, they must be motivated to work beyond minimum standards. Knowing factors that affect how supervisors feel about their jobs is important to those who supervise them. I asked 85 central office supervisors in Louisiana to describe actual job experiences that resulted in positive and negative attitudes toward their work. Most seemed to appreciate the chance to describe highs and lows in their work situations. Each related two experiences—one that led to extremely good feelings about the job and another that led to extremely bad feelings. I analyzed the descriptions and classified them to determine the primary factors that are dissatisfiers ("the winter") and those that are satisfiers ("the warm"). Their two main sources of job dissatisfaction were interpersonal relations and school policy and administration. Sources of satisfaction were achievement and recognition.

Dissatisfier: Interpersonal Relations

Experiences involving poor working relationships and strained personal relations between supervisors and teachers constituted two-thirds of the stories included in the interpersonal relations

category. These results indicated that the "private cold war" between supervisors and teachers still continues. The remaining third of the stories involved supervisors' relationships with superiors, principals, peers, and parents of students.

Responses included:

- Being unable to establish effective communication lines with teachers during supervisor-teacher conferences;
- Having suggestions for improving instruction ignored by teachers;
- Being accused by teachers of coercion in decision-making processes;
- Being criticized by teachers for "creating extra work" and establishing unreasonably high standards in curriculum development activities;
- Receiving little or no support or input from teachers in curriculum conference meetings because they felt that the new ideas proposed constituted criticism of their current methods;
- Receiving negative comments from teachers who wanted more expert assistance in specialized areas from "generalists";
- Being blamed by teachers when supervisors enforced state or local policies and regulations;
- Being made to feel inadequate by principals;
- Being ignored, bypassed, or demeaned by superintendents and school board members;

- Having curricular changes instituted by supervisors nullified by principals and superintendents.

Dissatisfier: School Policy and Administration

Frustrations common to many supervisors—lack of authority, role conflict, role ambiguity, ineffective organization of work, and lack of strong support for supervision—were evident in my analysis of stories coded in this category. Several supervisors revealed that they chose to retire early or seek employment elsewhere because they were tired of fighting politics and inept organizational management.

Examples of incidents concerning school policy and administration included the following incidents:

- Being “put in the middle” between assistant superintendents and superintendents;
- Seeing no evidence of long-range planning at the district level;
- Seeing evidence of too much politics, too often, by too many in our school systems;
- Having supervisory work made more difficult by the lack of strong, consistent administration by school principals;
- Being assigned responsibility for telling teachers that they were to be dismissed;
- Having responsibility without authority to make decisions;
- Being responsible for supervising so many teachers that effective supervision was impossible;
- Being overwhelmed with paperwork;
- Being unable to perform supervisory duties effectively because of time spent on responsibilities unrelated to supervision;
- Being held responsible for teacher performance without a voice in teacher selection;
- Seeing teachers released by school boards despite supervisors’ recommendations to allow more time for improvements;
- Being discriminated against by boards in matters of salary and sabbatical leave policies.

Satisfier: Achievement

Supervisors felt good about their work when they saw evidence that their efforts contributed to

improvement of educational programs. Most responses were about two areas—in-service education and curriculum development.

Achievement-related incidents described by supervisors included:

- Planning, organizing, and coordinating in-service workshops and activities for teachers;
- Providing experienced teachers with support, suggestions, and learning experiences that enabled them to improve their teaching performance;
- Helping beginning teachers to “get on the right track” in the development of professional skills and attitudes;
- Developing special programs (kindergarten, gifted and talented, math, reading, and so on);
- Providing expertise in special areas to teachers after new instructional programs were adopted;
- Assisting teachers in the development of curriculum materials;
- Initiating curriculum revisions that were successfully developed and implemented by teachers;
- Seeing tangible results of work with federal programs through significant achievement gains by students in target areas;
- Motivating teachers to pursue advanced degrees or to take additional university coursework;
- Obtaining federal/state funds for special programs.

Satisfier: Recognition

Supervisors described the tremendous psychological lifts they experienced when their accomplishments were acknowledged by teachers, superintendents, school board members, principals, parents, and students. One described receiving an award from the teachers of the school system as “equivalent to receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor.”

Although it produced positive and long-lasting psychological effects, recognition was uncommon. As one supervisor put it, “It isn’t every day in the week that an instructional supervisor gets praise for anything he or she does; therefore, you must stretch the praise you do get for as long

as you can." Another supervisor said, "This is a thankless job. Rewards for a supervisor are few and far between." An important source of job satisfaction evidently remains relatively untapped.

Incidents coded as recognition included:

- Receiving praise from school board members for initiating and implementing successful instructional programs;
- Receiving awards from teachers and superintendents for service to school systems;
- Being complimented by principals for helping teachers improve their teaching performance;
- Receiving high ratings and complimentary remarks from teachers in their evaluations of in-service workshops and activities;
- Having teachers personally express their gratitude for supervisory assistance and support;
- Getting positive feedback from parents regarding students' achievement in programs developed by supervisors.

Summary

The results of my study indicate that the motivation of supervisors is greatly affected by the organizations within which they work, the structure of their jobs, their working relationships with others, and the support systems for supervision within their districts.

Supervisors who have a sense of accomplishment and feel appreciated are in a position to achieve success in future efforts to improve educational programs. Their contributions may be lost, however, if they are caught in a web of negative teacher attitudes or immobilized by poor organization and management. We cannot afford that; we need their talents.



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