

The Instructional Leadership Role of Central Office Supervisors

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Supervisors want to spend more time on instructional improvement but for many reasons don't. It should be made clear that instructional improvement is their primary function.

In order to hold supervisors and consultants accountable for their most important responsibility—improvement of the instructional program and teacher effectiveness—a redefinition of their job expectations is needed. A study we conducted in Tennessee found that central office supervisors spend only 59 percent of their time in roles that have direct bearing on the improvement of instruction. Our study identified ten roles that encompass all the activities in which supervisors and consultants reported involvement. The five roles directly related to working with teachers and the instructional program were:

- *Information and Dissemination*—activities such as keeping up-to-date through reading, visiting and attending professional meetings; sharing relevant and available information about new ideas and practices; and being available to people who need information

- *Resource Allocation*—making materials and human resources available to those who need them, and facilitating acquisition and distribution of resources

- *Training and Development*—assisting others in acquiring desired competencies; developing instructional guides and materials; conducting and planning inservice;



Too much time on paperwork

Photo: NEA, Joe DiDio

and materials and textbook evaluation

- *Observation and Evaluation*—visiting and observing in schools; clarifying system expectations for others; evaluating for instructional improvement; and reporting on staff performance as required by the system (supervisors spent most time in this role)

- *Motivation*—encouraging consideration of new ideas; working with individuals and groups to effect needed changes; being an idea stimulator with others; providing positive reinforcement for efforts and accomplishments; and participating in system activities that influence goals.

Our study also indicated that supervisors were spending considerable time in five roles identified as important to the functioning of

schools, but which have limited relationship to improvement of instruction or helping teachers. These were:

- *Host Ceremonial*—serving as host, presiding, performing ceremonial duties, speaking at routine functions, and representing the system at community or other events

- *Formal Communications*—providing official and policy information to individuals and groups, officially representing the views of the system, and ensuring proper information flow

- *External Contacts*—developing links with people in significant positions, both within and outside the system

- *Crisis Management*—coping with day-to-day problems, resolving personnel conflicts, negoti-

ating with others to gain maximum commitment to established priorities, and being involved in situations of conflict or controversy

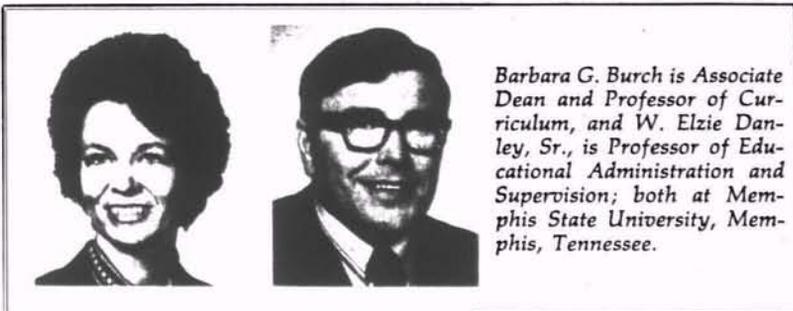
- *Maintenance* — completing routine reports and paperwork, handling office details and routine correspondence, and follow-up on requests and questions (supervisors spent more time in this role than the other four roles).

Given the opportunity to express how they desired to spend their time, supervisors indicated they would like to spend about 20 percent more time in the five roles most directly related to improving instruction and working with teachers. Some supervisors said there were factors that prevented them from doing this, but supervisors who felt no such restraints were spending no more time in the instructionally-related roles than the others.

The reasons for this state of affairs remain unclear; supervisors tend to blame factors other than themselves. Of the eight restraints indicated, only one—poor time management—is a limitation of the supervisors themselves. The other seven restraints (too much paperwork, insufficient personnel, externally-imposed regulations, inadequately prepared and uncooperative staff, unclear job expectations, limited resources, and unexpected demands) are all external factors.

Supervisors may be suffering from an ailment that many of us experience: placing the blame elsewhere when we find ourselves not doing what we think we should. Perhaps the time has come for them to accept responsibility and give more than lip service to what their jobs should be.

To be sure, working with teachers to improve instruction is a very difficult task and a heavy responsibility. It is easier to be visibly productive and accountable



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in the number of reports filed, schools visited, textbooks cataloged and delivered, and meetings attended than it is to be accountable for improving instruction. However, supervisors must find ways to spend more time in roles that improve the quality of teaching.

Specific Suggestions

Central office supervisors feel a responsibility for improving the instructional program, but they are rarely held accountable for student success or failure. If anyone is held accountable, it is likely to be the school principal. On the basis of our study we suggest that superintendents and school boards make it clear that they expect supervisors to be responsible for instructional leadership and that they incorporate their expectations into the accountability system of the school district.

A revised job description is critical. The new definition should emphasize the need for supervisors to focus on instructional concerns and thus relieve the prevailing tendency for them to be "jacks-of-all-trades." Some of the activities supervisors are now engaged in—clerical functions, for example—will need to be assumed by others.

State departments of education can help by insisting that positions they fund for instructional improvement be used for that purpose. Because many school districts have not provided adequately for administrative and sup-

port positions needed to handle daily operation of the system, they give the title of "supervisor of instruction" to individuals who in reality are administrative aides. This will continue as long as state agencies fund such positions without inquiring about the actual duties of those who fill them.

Graduate preparation programs designed to prepare instructional supervisors should also be modified. Too often such programs focus primarily on the management role of school leaders and not enough on their instructional improvement responsibilities. Central office supervisors cannot provide instructional leadership if they have not been trained for it.

Summary

Our study indicates that supervisors and consultants are spending only a little over half their time in tasks directly related to the improvement of instruction. If this is to be remedied, individuals and organizations must clarify the role of the instructional supervisor and find ways for supervisors to be accountable for the improvement of instruction. This is a complex undertaking which should involve local educators, local boards of education, state departments of education, education departments in higher education institutions, and the supervisors themselves. Only a concerted effort among them all will enable supervisors to make a greater contribution in their instructional leadership roles.

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