

# Profile of the Principalship

**A national survey shows that today's principals are not, and cannot be, "instructional leaders" in the conventional sense.**

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Time was when even the youngest child had an opinion concerning the function of the school principal. Often the principal was a formidable "Big, Bad Leroy Brown, baddest man in the whole damn town." Young and old respected, feared, and relied on the principal to keep the ship of state called "school" on course.

Certainly many of us can recall such an image, but it is not the image projected today. The contemporary principal is sometimes an unfamiliar figure to students, and even to some teachers. To a few teachers the principal represents the other side of the negotiations table, or is considered the building accountant or public relations specialist. To the upper echelon of administration, however, the principal is touted as "the instructional leader," an innovator capable of improving test scores and providing inspiration.

A cursory review of the role(s) of the principal can be summed up by simply saying the job is in the eye of the beholder. This ambiguity is compounded by both local edict and legislative mandates. Educators, legislators, and laypersons are all quite

willing to add to the list of the principal's responsibilities without inquiring about the current ones. Either these groups have been oblivious to the change in the classic definition of the role (principal, teacher, or instructional leader), or this function has become secondary in many minds to the more basic tasks of management. And despite individual, professional, and union organization efforts, the PHD (Piled Higher and Deeper) phenomenon continues while the principal's responsibilities become more complex and more reactive than proactive. As a result, innovative instructional leadership is shelved and replaced by the realities of personal survival and crisis management.

## Phase One

What do principals do? If instructional innovation or lack of leadership in curriculum modification is a problem, why? Don't education administrators care? Are they incapable, unimaginative, or inundated? These questions were the basis of a three-phase time and activity study of the principalship. The first phase, a feasibility study to test the relevance of the items on the instrument and the practicality of its application, was administered to 14 middle school and junior high principals, who represented school districts of the

Arkansas-Oklahoma Consortium for the Emerging Adolescent. The consortium, consisting of districts of various sizes, concentrates on improving instruction in the classroom.

The feasibility study required the participants to indicate their major activity each 15 minutes from 8:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. The activities were categorized into five functions—office responsibilities, faculty/community relations, curriculum, students, and professional development—and each encompassed several sub-descriptors, 35 in all. As a matter of comparison, the superintendents of the 14 principals were also interviewed for their perceptions of the principals' major responsibilities.

While the purpose of the feasibility study was to test the practicality of the instrument, when the forms were returned with suggested modifications, the 15-minute time blocks were also tallied. The following is the cumulative amount of time the principals devoted to selected activities (descriptors) during one Friday in April.

- |                            |          |
|----------------------------|----------|
| • Paper work               | 27 hours |
| • Parent conferences       | 11 hours |
| • Personnel conferences    | 11 hours |
| • Discipline               | 8 hours  |
| • Scheduling               | 8 hours  |
| • Cafeteria                | 8 hours  |
| • Supervision              | 6 hours  |
| • Instructional leadership | 2 hours  |

Maybe because it was Friday or because April is atypical or the principals weren't representative—regardless of the possible discrediting factors, the numbers indicated that instruction wasn't being promoted on that day. Paradoxically, the summary of personal interviews with superintendents reflected virtually an inverse list. The chief administrators believed "the principal is the instructional leader foremost," "supervision is the key to successful administration," and "delegation is the key." Rhetoric versus reality! If instructional leadership was required to steer the ship of state, that ship was sadly adrift in 14 schools that day, if the data were correct. However, the feasibility study was only to test the instrument; the data were interesting but not necessarily valid.

## Phase Two

Input from participants in the feasibility study was incorporated into a time-activity format. Then a schedule

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for a regional study involving middle school and junior high principals in Arkansas and Oklahoma was developed. Sixty-one administrators agreed to participate by completing the forms on five days over one month—Tuesday, Thursday, Wednesday, Friday, and Monday. These days were staggered to obtain a summary of a full five day week yet not overburden the participants to the extent they would not accurately complete the forms. Again, five functions were identified and 35 descriptors were used. All data were key-punched and cross-referenced in terms of the profile of the respondents.

The majority (43) held a master's degree and averaged six years of administration experience. The majority (51) were male and the median age was 38. The school enrollments varied: 14 schools with 300 students or less; 23 schools reporting 600 students or less; 22 ranging from 600 to 900; and five with enrollments over 900. There was a balance of rural, suburban, and urban schools; 32 principals reported communities of greater than 30,000 population.

Eleven principals had no assistant principals; 38 employed one; and seven employed two. Nine principals reported no clerical assistance, but the majority (41) had one or two. Perhaps the role of the principal is to provide instructional leadership, but again the "is" and the "ought to be" were far apart when the data were summarized. Most of the principals' time (32 percent) was spent on office responsibilities (as in the feasibility study), while the curriculum category—including subcategories of scheduling of students, coordinating, course placement, supervision, and observation—collectively took up 14 percent of the principals' time.

The profile of the day of a "typical" mid/junior high principal in Arkansas and Oklahoma could be summed up in five increments of time. From 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. the principal's major activities were in the office; from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. the activities were more varied but focused mainly on discipline, parent conferences, and office duties. From 11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. the majority of time was spent on supervising the cafeteria. After 1:00 p.m. and until 4:00 p.m. the midmorning activities basically repeated themselves, while after 4:00 p.m. the

major activities were extracurricular and professional development. Two hours in the cafeteria? Discipline and office duties morning and afternoon? Certainly this is not "news" to practicing administrators, but it does contribute to the mounting evidence that "instructional leadership" is a limited function. Is the principal being inundated by secretarial/nonprofessional tasks? Is it by mandate, by a lack of understanding of the instructional leadership function—or is it by choice?

### Phase Three

In order to investigate these questions on a more random basis, a national survey was conducted to include all levels of the principalship, elementary, mid/junior, and senior high school. The survey was a cooperative effort of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the University of Tulsa, and both national elementary and secondary principals' associations. It included a sample of 163 elementary, mid/junior high, and senior high principals. As in the regional study, a wide range of school enrollments and community sizes was represented. For two days principals checked their major activity during 30-minute increments from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., selecting from among 28 activities in seven categories.

The profile of these principals was similar to that of previous respondents.

Categorically, 82 elementary, 54 mid/junior high, and 31 senior high principals responded. Their experience ranged from one to 30 years; their ages from 27 to 63. One hundred reported that they did not have an assistant and 56 reported having one. Generally, secondary administrators had more clerical assistance regardless of school size; 92 reported one full-time clerk, 54 had two, and the remainder had three or more. Interestingly, most (130) intended to remain in the principalship as a professional career.

How did the majority of principals use their time? They were found most often in the office responding to communications and engaged in other forms of paper work. While these responsibilities diminished somewhat for secondary administrators, the office role consistently dominated other categories. It is disturbing to note that 40 percent of the elementary principals' major activity was office responsibilities. Even cafeteria management, the regional "biggie," drew less time with an overall 15 percent average. At least "cafeteria principals" see the kids. Elementary school principals, usually regarded as closer to the classroom, may be the last bastion for curriculum leadership. Perhaps a tighter budget or the flood of paperwork is increasing their secretarial chores. It appears evident, however, that the bonds attaching principals to the office are growing

Figure 1. Cumulative Time Comparison

Activity	Daily Percent	Average (Hours per week)	Range (Hours per week)
Office Responsibilities	32%	9.9	1.3-20.5
Faculty/Community Relations	25	7.8	1.3-13.5
Curriculum	14	4.5	0.8-14.5
Students	21	6.7	0.8-17.0
Professional Development	7	2.3	0.0-15.0
Unaccounted for Time		8.8	

Figure 2. A Percentage Comparison of Time Reported as Major Functions by School Principals

ROLE	ELEMENTARY n=82	MID/JHS n=54	SENIOR n=31
Instructional Leadership	(10)	(25)	(10)
Classroom Supervision	(10)	—	(10)
Teacher Evaluation	—	—	—
Staff Development	—	—	—
Scheduling	—	—	—
Planning	(10)	—	—
Selecting Materials	—	—	—
Testing/Evaluation	—	—	—
Total	30	25	20
Office Responsibilities	40	45	30
Community Relations	5	0	5
Student Relations	10	10	20
Extracurricular Supervision	5	5	10
Personal/Professional Development	5	5	5
Faculty Relations	5	10	10



stronger and stronger.

There may be consolation in the figures listing instructional leadership as the second ranked role. But analysis of the subcategories identified in Figure 2 and related to this role indicates that of seven leadership functions, classroom supervision and teacher evaluation occupied much of the time and were listed as major activities. Certainly those are important functions, but vital functions such as staff development, scheduling, selecting materials, or testing/evaluation were not shown as major activities for even 30 minutes over a two-day period.

It would be misleading to imply that none of the principals reported major involvement in other activities including instructional leadership. But the reported involvement on the average was not comparable in those areas. Neither do the data gathered for all three phases of the study reflect conformity among the three levels. Perhaps the reporting of the national results has been oversimplified, but it is indicative; as reported by the principals themselves, instruc-

tional leadership is generally being compromised in favor of office mandates.

**W**hat can be done? Instruction, relevant curriculum, and enhancing learning opportunities are the bases for a positive learning climate. How much time should be allocated to these factors? Using seven instructional leadership tasks (supervision, teacher evaluation, staff development, scheduling, planning, selecting instructional materials, and processes of student evaluation) as categories, the principal could ask: In terms of task and my participation, how much time each day, week, or month should be devoted to these top priority activities, and which can be specifically delegated? The answer can be clarified by questions the faculty might be asked: Why are we doing what we are doing? Do we agree on the rationale for existence of this school? What is the desired profile of our ultimate student product? These questions are often passed over as assumptions, yet they are the rationale

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for the seven leadership tasks. We often assume that faculties know these purposes and understand and agree on the means and ends, yet substantial diversity exists among many faculties with regard to purpose and function. How then can a leadership procedure define the rules of the game and enable the education team to concentrate on common goals?

More questions need to be asked to define the "name of the game" for the participants. First, what needs must we fulfill as functioning adults? This question provides an opportunity for faculty members to relate to a proposed end product, the young adult in society. Second, what do we want children to accomplish in school that will enhance their future as functioning adults? What knowledge do we hope to impart? What behavioral changes do we seek as experts in the profession? Third, what is the order of events, and what taxonomy can we develop and implement in terms of our curriculum that will support human needs and improve the profile of our ultimate product?

These are the higher order questions basic to organizing for instructional leadership. They don't require complicated statements nor must they be stated as ultimate truths. They do require that someone (the principal) organize a forum for their discussion and definition. The questions can be followed by a unifying statement of institutional purpose, and from there supportive instructional strategies and appropriate models can be cooperatively designed. These in turn can be reflected by a scheduling and staffing format that undergirds the original question, Why? Throughout this process the principal's role should be catalytic, synthesizing and continually pressing for closure on the real issue of schooling, the purpose for being. This sequential framework for administrative leadership is simply a suggestion. Modifications for specific situations are obviously in order. But, again the key question requiring faculty response is, why are we doing what we are doing?

What other steps might be taken to recognize the functions of those administrators in the middle? Foremost is a redesignation of the principalship from the historic definition of "instructional leader" to a contemporary description as "education manager." The principal hasn't had

the opportunity to concentrate on instruction as a primary activity for 30 years! The problems created by the increase of student mobility after World War II were compounded by a technological knowledge explosion. The instructional leadership role was further wasted with the onslaught of federal funds and paperwork in the 60s and even more so at the negotiations table and with the desegregation activities during the 70s.

Today's principal is engaging in crisis management and general operation. No conceptualizing, no "think tanks"—the perceptive contemporary principal simply can't step over a fight in the hall or ignore paperwork deadlines and proceed to the science curriculum meeting. Thus, the function of the principal in instructional improvement in the 80s must be clearly defined as a partnership with teachers in which the leadership responsibility is identified as instruction expeditor. Maybe that's what it always has been but that's not very evident in today's assessments.

Another modification is an overhaul of the preservice and continuing education programs designed to prepare administrators. The classic administration program assumes that aspiring administrators emerge from the classroom and, through a graduate program, understand the techniques of motivation and the processes for implementing instructional strategies. This is oversimplification of a very complex task. Consequently, a series of courses on people management, public relations simulation, accounting, civil law, and time management should be required. These are survival courses for education managers that can be followed in due time by a capstone of theoretical structures in curriculum. These refinements should be a continued requirement for licensure.

The continuing education of principals now in the field should concentrate on ways to improve time use, tactics for delegation, and processes for assessing needs and initiating sound instructional programs. Practicing principals should formulate a master plan and rationale for program development and use that as a culling device to establish the "is and ought to be" for their school instructional program. Of course, they should use commercially prepared

systems when applicable, but be prepared to marshal the inhouse talent when a special prescription is in order. The topics in their continuing inservice should be liberally sprinkled with stress management, communication techniques, and other coping skills. The difference between a fledgling and a "pro" is pronounced. Their respective education programs should also be pronounced.

Finally, the term of employment for the principal should provide for adequate professional and financial reward, but not guarantee employment "in perpetuity." Education management is strenuous and time takes its toll. Sabbaticals, reassignment to the classroom with added compensation, special assignments in the area of management expertise, and other alternatives should be considered for professional employment. The "educational manager" should be protected from professional burnout and afforded more guaranteed alternatives to a future in education. The objective innovator (the creative instructional strategist,) becomes a subjective conformist just to survive while the curriculum is relegated to the status quo. It is impractical to require continued, long-term creativity and to expect the pace for innovative leadership to be maintained.

The American principalship of the 80s, like all roles in education, will continue to change. It is imperative that education planners be sensitive to these changes and clarify the contemporary roles and needs of the principal. Survey information should serve as a benchmark to build a relevant role and to encourage supportive training. In order to maximize this leadership/management function for the 80s, it is obvious that recognition of what the principal really does is imperative.

Planning and initiating the higher orders of leadership, recognition of the total role factors, clarifying preservice and inservice activities, and an equitable reward system all can contribute to making the principalship more livable, hence more productive. The role of the modern day principal can still be based on the historic concept of "principal teacher," but it is imperative that educators recognize all aspects and think outside the lines of tradition by combining reality with the skills of instructional leadership. ■

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