

Nearly every study conducted in recent years indicates that education, compared with business and industry, is undersupervised,¹ yet claims persist that school systems are "top heavy" with administration.

A recent ASCD publication confirms the fact that instructional supervisors are among the first personnel to be cut in a budget crunch.² Large and small districts alike seem to have suffered the same reduction (as high as 60 percent) in supervisory and curriculum support personnel. While all administrative positions have come upon hard times, those without constituencies—general supervisors, curriculum coordinators, and specialists—seem to be the most vulnerable.

The Rise and Simultaneous Fall

The decline of the supervisor, best understood in a political context, can be attributed to four major factors.

As the supervisor's position grew in importance and power over the past three decades, those who believed they had lost influence as a result (primarily building level administrators), harbored feelings ranging from ambivalence to resentment. Most often these sentiments were not apparent on the surface, but as the supervisor's position became tenuous, principals were far from unanimous in their support of the need for such services. While some principals viewed the addition of supervisors as a resource to be valued and nurtured, others saw their appearance as a challenge to the principal's authority; an erosion of power brought about by a lessening of the teachers' dependence on the building administrator. In other cases, principals expressed concerns about leadership ambiguity, the result, some claimed, of shifting allegiances and loyalty.

As supervisors assumed greater responsibility for curriculum and began to participate in screening and selecting personnel, the gap widened. With increasing availability of funds for curriculum planning and inservice

Survival Kit for Supervisors

In the battle to keep their jobs, supervisors should be developing essential skills to make themselves indispensable.



Wayne Worner is Professor of Educational Administration, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia.

activities in the 60s came expanded budget authority and control. Building principals expressed concern about who was really in charge of instruction in the schools. They also perceived that supervisors helped create a demand for additional reporting and paperwork for principals.

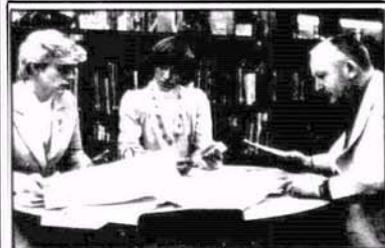
The second major factor contributing to the loss of political support for supervisors has been the changing relationship between supervisors and teachers. As supervisors' involvement in evaluation activities grew, the extent to which they could provide support and services to teachers diminished. This change in function was accompanied by dramatic changes in the nature of teachers and their perceptions of all supervisory personnel. With supervisors taking on new coloration in the eyes of teachers, their once-strong support from this group disappeared.

The loss of political support within the system has been compounded by the "soft" funding base for many supervisory positions. Many school systems have used external funding to employ administrative support personnel for project administration and have assigned these same personnel to general administrative or supervisory tasks as well. In many cases the school system provided partial financial support for the positions to justify using the personnel for districtwide assignments. Often, however, the ratio of funding was not consistent with time assigned. It was not uncommon, for example, to fund a position 25 percent local-75 percent project, and then reverse the distribution of time assigned. As external funding declined, many schools had to scramble to cover supervisory and support services carried out by personnel paid for with disappearing external funds.

A final reason for declining support of supervisory positions relates to the competence of personnel occupying the positions. As supervisory positions opened up, many supervisors were selected from the ranks of teachers. Most often, those chosen were "master teachers" taking on the responsibility for helping others in their specific academic field or level. As the roles began to change, supervisors found themselves engaged in activities that exceeded their competence and interest. Personnel who had been selected for positions based

on their knowledge of subject matter and excellence in teaching found themselves planning workshops, monitoring budgets, evaluating personnel, writing proposals, and reading print-outs. Some adapted to the new expectations; others opted out; still others tried with only limited success to do what was expected of them, whether they enjoyed it or not. The uneven quality of performance by those assigned to positions far different from the positions they had accepted, carrying out functions they were ill-equipped to handle, has not generated support from those who depend on their service.

Regardless of the reasons, cutting back in local school systems is taking a heavy toll on supervisory and in-



"In light of their precarious political position, supervisors need to hone their basic survival skills."

structional support personnel. This is occurring at a time when public demands for equity, quality, and accountability are at an all-time high. It may not be rational to reduce the number of people who can provide the services and functions required to respond to those concerns, but it is happening and will probably continue.

Survival Skills

In light of their precarious political position, supervisors need to hone their basic survival skills. There are, in particular, six categories of abilities that are essential for supervisors in the rapidly changing climate of public education:

- **Technological skills**—the ability to use systematic planning techniques, decision-making models, basic flow charting, and computer technology.

- **Policy-making skills**—the ability to influence policy-making processes,

especially those at state and local levels; to interpret and implement governmental and court mandates for education.

- **Personnel management skills**—the ability to evaluate and train staff for program change; to understand and manipulate in positive ways the dynamics of group processes and organizational change; to recognize sociological and psychological dysfunction in individuals and groups.

- **Research skills**—the ability to conduct and interpret research and translate it into programs and practices; to collect, analyze, and use information from a vast array of sources for improving program quality; to encourage revision and updating of course content to keep up with the information influx.

- **Resource skills**—the ability to maximize the use of diminished resources; to bring innovation and creativity to programs and services when lack of funds threatens to endanger the benefits of educational programs.

- **Personal management skills**—the ability to manage one's own professional growth, not just to survive, but even, perhaps, to thrive.

An Increasingly Complex Task

While the listing above represents some of the skills supervisors in the 80s will be asked to demonstrate, it is far from complete. Structures, functions, assignments, and responsibilities of those assigned to administer and supervise school programs vary from one district to another.

What is clear is that those responsible for the oversight of curriculum and programs in public schools will face an increasingly complex task made more so by reduced political and financial support. Supervisors will be called on to do more with less. Only by reconceptualizing the role, and redefining the tasks and the skills required for accomplishing it, will supervisors be able to meet the challenges of the 80s. ■

¹ John Marlowe, "Use These Facts and Figures to Topple the Myth of Top-Heavy School Management," *The Executive Educator* 2 (December 1980): 20-22.

² "Supervisors 'Expendable' When Budgets Are Cut," *ASCD Update* 23 (March 1981): 2, 8.

Copyright © 1982 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.