The Principal as Instructional Leader: A Second Look

Of more importance than any lofty concept of the principal's leadership are crucial, mundane support functions—which can be carried out by supervisors and teachers as well as by principals.

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The past five years have seen a growing emphasis on the pivotal role of site administrators in maintaining and effecting all types of innovative practices. From his research on a wide range of innovations, which involved a three-year longitudinal study of 19 elementary schools in a large school district, Hall (1979) concluded that "our own research findings lend evidence to the notion of the importance of the administrator to the change process" (p. iv—30).

The descriptions of the few effective inner-city schools by Edmonds and Brookover invariably depict principals as playing a strong role in their success—by articulating a schoolwide emphasis on reading and math, setting high expectations for students, imparting a belief that teachers are responsible for students' learning, and not blaming parents and environmental factors for failure.

It would thus appear, from both the school effectiveness work and from innovation research, that a key to enduring, sustained effective educational services is the site administrator—especially the principal (Hall, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Brookover, 1981; Berman and McLaughlin, 1978). Through visible and clear support, the principal can significantly affect the implementation and institutionalization of educational change. At schools where the principal actively supports a change model, there is typically less variance among teachers in their assessed levels of implementation, and a higher likelihood that innovation will last.

Research Questioning the Administrator's Importance

Other literature, however, indicates that it may not always be necessary for site administrators to be actively involved in instructional leadership. Kennedy (1978) demonstrated that effective federally funded compensatory education programs—like Follow Through—have succeeded in urban districts with minimal support from the principal. In fact, Meyer and others (in press) detailed how a Follow Through program thrived in an inner-city school for 13 years with
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The major studies of curriculum reform have shown that considerable change can take place with training, introduction of new materials, and commitment of school personnel.

4. An analysis of support functions can give coherence to comprehensive, multi-level, multi-instrument understanding of educational innovations. Most studies of educational change focus on only one or two aspects of the process. Some examine teacher behavior and teacher perceptions of an implementation's success while ignoring administrative aspects, while others use only classroom-level observations of the degree of implementation. The concept of support functions provides focus for integrating findings from several sources (teachers, supervisors, principals, administrators, and external change agents) using a variety of techniques (naturalistic observations, interviews, and questionnaires).

Conclusions

Brookover (1981) recently criticized the Phi Delta Kappa study of effective schools for its failure to identify the components of effective leadership, a factor specified as a characteristic of successful schools both in the case studies and in the literature review. On the basis of this report, it would be very difficult to describe the specific behavioral characteristics of school principals or other leaders that should be encouraged ... (p. 440).

We believe that those components of effective leadership, which we label instructional support functions, need not all be carried out by the principal. Realistically, most schools will need more than one person to adequately carry out all these activities anyway.

The case for support functions is not without its limitations, however. Some would argue that it merely shifts the responsibility for carrying out essential functions from principals to others—supervisors, resource teachers, and curriculum specialists. These people typically work under constraints as severe as those of principals; most do not have the necessary time, authority, or training.

In order to offer the type of detailed, constructive feedback that is most helpful to teachers, a specialist must have a great deal of knowledge of teaching processes and issues in curriculum design. This is often lacking in supervisors and specialists; they often feel "rusty" and reluctant to give more than general advice to teachers. Procedures for training these individuals or recruiting exemplary teachers into these positions will be needed. On a positive note, recent attempts at retraining teachers and supervisors have led to positive results (Good and Grouws, 1979; Stallings, 1980), though it is too early to generalize from the small number of studies conducted.

In some ways, our views on the factors that consistently contribute to success in improving inner-city schools depart from "conventional wisdom." However, replacing the currently fashionable theme of "principal as instructional leader"—and all its nostalgic yearning—with more down-to-earth, mundane lists of crucial activities that need to be performed makes the problem of improving urban education a little more understandable.

For example, Datta (1981) labeled the federal Follow Through project as the "mod-
el of all subsequent directed change efforts.” Teachers were given extended in-service training over a period of years by outside consultants trained in a specific educational model. Among the most significant findings in this body of research were the following:

1. In the federal Follow Through project, direct instruction performed better than other models in basic academic skills and cognitive conceptual skills (Stebbins and others, 1977), though this conclusion has been strenuously debated (House and others, 1978). The authors of the national Follow Through evaluation concluded that only the direct instruction model succeeded in large cities like New York. Kennedy (1978) suggested that the combination of a clearly articulated, highly specified educational model and the assertive “no-nonsense” behavior of the Direct Instruction staff served as major contributors to its success in these rather adverse conditions.

2. Gersten and others (1982) demonstrated strong relationships between observed level of implementation of the Direct Instruction model and student achievement in seven schools in one large urban Follow Through site. Interviews with teachers (reported in Cronin, 1980) showed that the clarity of the model, and especially the practical nature of supervisors’ feedback, were consistently deemed the most positive features of the model; teachers emphasized how useful it was to get down-to-earth, specific answers to questions about motivating low-performing students, correcting student errors, placing children, and other practical matters. Another finding from the interviews was that as teachers observed dramatic improvements in student performance, particularly with regard to low-performing students, their attitudes toward the innovation gradually improved. This relates to Berman and McLaughlin’s finding that teachers who felt they could reach the most difficult students (high sense of efficacy) were more successful than those who did not.

References


