

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

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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

seven different principals whose attitudes toward programs varied from outright hostility to indifference.

We found similar phenomena in East St. Louis, Illinois; Flint, Michigan; and other cities (Carnine and Gersten, in press; Good and Grouws, 1979). In each case, active instructional leadership was provided to teachers not by principals, but by carefully trained supervisors and staff consultants.

Our research in another urban district demonstrated how the quality of the educational program and the utility of its teacher training counteracted initial administrative indifference and hostility (Gersten and others, n.d.). Interviews with teachers in six of the seven schools overwhelmingly indicated that the principal was perceived as irrelevant to the implementation process, and the success of the program was consistently related to high levels of concrete technical assistance on day-to-day classroom matters. This school improvement effort was widely hailed as a great success—within the school and throughout the community—primarily because of unexpected, dramatic gains in academic achievement (Cronin, 1980).

Several specific types of tasks, which we call instructional support functions, seem to be necessary for instituting and maintaining change. Berman and McLaughlin (1977, 1978) found the following factors to be related to the endurance of educational innovations.

1. *Quality of Technical Assistance*—Concrete, extended inservice training of teachers in the specific details of the model (including timely, practical advice from consultants or other staff on classroom issues).

2. *Success with Difficult-to-Teach Children*—Teachers consistently reported more positive feelings about interventions that helped them succeed with students who had previously failed.

3. *Support*—A climate that includes both moral support from principals and teachers and concrete support from principals.

4. *Mutual Adaptation*—The extent to which projects grow out of perceived local needs and allow teacher participation in policy decisions and modifications of curriculum materials.

The wholesale acceptance of the last finding (mutual adaptation) has recently

been challenged by Datta (1981), who pointed out that mutual adaptation was a criterion for selecting projects to include in the original research. She also emphasized the difficulties in generalizing results gathered from Berman and McLaughlin's sample of loosely defined interventions to other, more clearly articulated and directed change efforts.¹ The other three findings, however, have been consistently replicated.

Based on the literature and our own experience, then, we conclude that effective educational programs in inner-city schools can succeed if (a) teachers are provided with specific, concrete training; (b) the educational model succeeds with difficult-to-teach students; and (c) there is a system for monitoring student and teacher performance. We believe these three factors are critical—regardless of whether or not the principal serves as a strong instructional leader.

This is an important point because the portraits of charismatic, exceptional principals painted by Benjamin (1981), Edmonds (1979), Hentoff (1966) and others are likely to have a depressing effect on those working toward improving inner-city schools. While one can marvel at the talent, energy, and vision of these few extraordinary individuals, it is clear that most principals simply do not—and in all likelihood cannot—perform at the same level. Nor do the majority of teachers and administrators expect them to do so (Mangieri, 1982). Schools cannot wait for these knights in shining armor to emerge.

This is not to say that the active support of an involved, knowledgeable principal is not necessary for a program to survive. When the findings on documented success in inner-city schools are pooled, it is clear that certain activities must be performed, and certain structures must be present; but it is less important *who* performs many of the activities. The activities that define this instructional leadership can be carried out, in part, by reading coordinators, parent groups, federally supported change agents, or a combination of all these.

Critical Behaviors vs. Leadership

There are four compelling reasons why a focus on instructional support functions (that is, actual critical behaviors) appears to be more fruitful than assum-

ing that the principal must be the instructional leader.

1. Functions are much easier to define, operationalize, and measure than the elusive notion of "instructional leadership." Furthermore, the functions can be measured in observable events—visits to classrooms, interactions between principals and teachers and supervisors and teachers, monitoring of student learning, and so forth.

2. When sociologists have empirically examined the effects of leadership in a variety of settings using a variety of models, they have found that none of the models of leadership explains much of the variability in observed performance. Kerr and Jermier (1978) argue that it makes more sense to measure attributes such as competence, knowledge, and observable performance—what they call "substitutes for leadership." They further maintain that leadership is not innate but that the nature of the school and situational variables can bring forth leadership qualities in an individual who previously did not exhibit them. Finally, Kerr and Jermier recommend an examination of the whole leadership structure (that is, the principal, vice-principal, supervisor, and others) rather than of the site administrator alone.

3. Research over the last decade has consistently shown that teachers do not perceive principals as instructional leaders (Mazzarella, 1977; Morris and others, 1981; Wolcott, 1973), nor do principals usually function as such. While there are exceptions—the schools cited by Edmonds (1979) and those in the Phi Delta Kappa report—we must face the fact that principals typically do not actively foster effective instruction (Lortie, 1975; Morris and others, 1981; Howell, 1981). On the whole, it makes more sense to consider a team approach in which critical support functions are carried out by those most able to perform them—not only the principal, but supervisors, teachers, curriculum specialists, and other available personnel.

Administrators obviously need to provide moral support for, or at least tolerate, educational changes in order for those changes to be introduced and maintained in a school system. But we contend that the requisite support at any administrative level—principal, director of federal programs, or superintendent—is not necessarily substantive.

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.

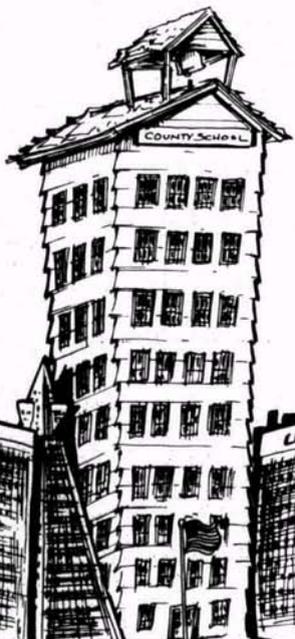
In order to offer the type of detailed, constructive feedback that is most helpful to teachers, a specialist must have a great deal of knowledge of teaching

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. □

¹For example, Datta (1981) labeled the federal Follow Through project as the "mod-

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el of all subsequent directed change efforts." Teachers were given extended inservice 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.

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