

The Search for Instructional Leadership: Routines and Subtleties in the Principal's Role

Successful principals are able to find resources where others see only problems.

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What do successful principals do—day in and day out—to develop and maintain effective instructional programs? For the past three years, the Instructional Management Program of the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development has sought to answer to that question. Funded by the National Institute of Education, we talked extensively to 42 principals who were nominated by fellow administrators as successful instructional leaders. For hundreds of hours, we collaborated with 17 of them who varied by gender, age,



ethnicity, and experience. We watched their activities, looking for consequences of their actions on teachers and on students, around their schools, and in classrooms. Their schools ran the gamut: urban and rural; large and small; poor and rich; new programs, entrenched programs.

We found no single image or simple formula for successful instructional leadership. We did find principals engaged in effective, routine acts that required no new programs, innovations, or extensive changes in their roles. Their successes hinged on their capacity to connect these routine activities to their overarching perspectives of the contexts of their schools and their aspirations for their students.

These principals assessed their environments, knew their limitations and strengths, and understood the kinds of programs and outcomes they desired for students. They not only saw themselves as pivotal points around which these elements turned, but they believed in their abilities to influence each of those parts. They directed their energies toward improving the social climate of their schools and the quality of the instructional organization.

Figure 1, which illustrates these relationships and depicts the centrality of the school principal in the process of instructional management, captures both the elements of schooling that influenced the plans and activities of our principals and those features they hoped to shape. But it is important to remember that the acts of instructional leadership that we witnessed were as richly varied as the settings and the individuals themselves.

Student Outcomes: No Single Vision

We pictured "Student Outcomes" as the end point of our model. Within our 17 schools, however, principals' concerns about student outcomes were often the starting places for their planning. Differences in expectations for children shaped their ideas about successful programs as well as their activities.

They all emphasized the importance of achievement, particularly mastery of language and computational skills. But beyond these fundamentals, they held other expectations relative to the student groups with which they worked. For example, a principal in a poverty area expressed this goal: "Minority kids [need to know] how to operate within the power system. [We need] to get the welfare kids off the welfare cycle."

A principal of a multi-ethnic school spoke of the importance of helping students learn to live in harmony: "Working harmoniously with people is really

important in a multi-cultural society. . . . We really have done a lot to understand ethnic backgrounds and [to learn] work together as a team."

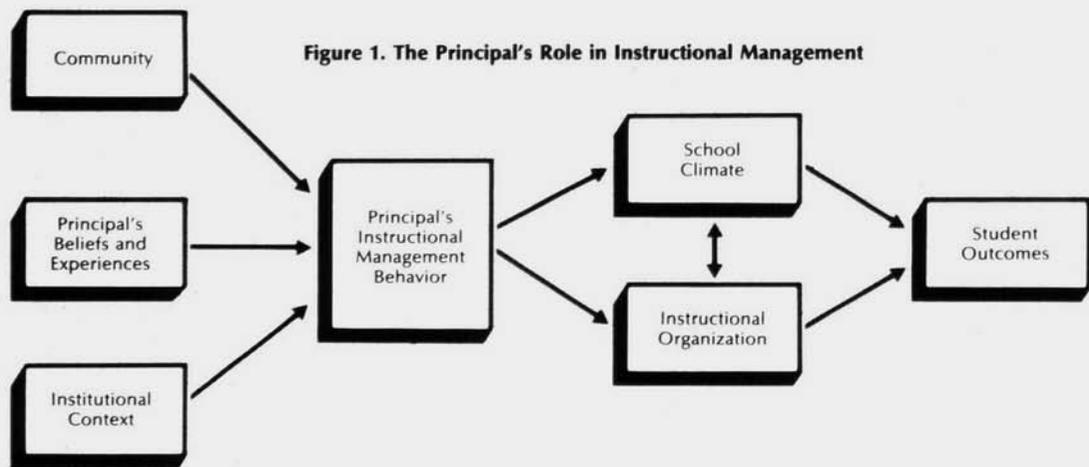
Some principals emphasized personal growth themes in their goal statements for students. One said: "Kids should come out of school feeling good about themselves and what they can do, and they should have learned to be responsible for themselves."

Finally, many principals expressed a desire to prepare students for their futures. One stated: "We have to educate a child to be able to fit into many kinds of employment and to adapt to change. Yet another said: "We're trying to prepare our students for adulthood, to earn their way in the world."

Principals' expectations for their students, then, were an essential aspect of their overarching plan and a source of influence on the nature of their routine activities. Their work was also contin-

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Figure 1. The Principal's Role in Instructional Management



gent on the community in which they worked, the institutions with which they were affiliated, and their own histories and beliefs. We placed these "givens" of their perspectives on the left side of Figure 1. We realized their importance when one principal described her view of effective schools:

An effective school has ears. Its staff puts together an instructional program that is congruent with what it hears in the community, and with what the district is saying. So we must do both and be true to ourselves.

The Community as a Valuable Resource

"Community" proved an important source of influence on the activities of principals. One principal commented that 60 percent of his daily activities entailed responses to community situations. In this instance, the neighborhood served by his school had fallen on hard times due to the closing of the town's industries. Its population grew transient. Domestic quarreling and child abuse soared. At one point, the principal said, "The police might as well open a substation right in my school." He felt that home and community problems affected his school, and he actively sought to minimize their influence.

He met his students each day as they arrived at school, greeting most by name as they streamed by. He watched their faces, listened to their tones, intercepted those who brandished their anger and

confusion, and provided opportunities for them to talk with him, at length when necessary. As an immediate effect, their restlessness might be subdued. For the long term, he summoned social worker, school nurse, learning specialist, school psychologist, classroom teacher, parents, and even police when the situation merited, to plan and intercede on a child's behalf. He followed these kids from day to day, from year to year, watching them in their classes and on the playground, talking, teasing, cajoling, gauging their progress.

This principal and others in similar straits also attempted to ameliorate fundamental community problems. They served in discussion groups, spoke to forums, established close ties with police officials—anything to interest community members in their schools. At the individual or family level, one principal organized food drives for the needy and visited hospitalized members of students' families. He believed that he had to "take the message of the school to the community" while at the same time making "the school aware of community needs and concerns."

Thus, principals were aware of the constraints and problems posed by their respective communities. Whether their schools served poor or wealthy neighborhoods, these leaders found opportunities to extend the available human and material resources to their schools. To this end, they developed networks of supporters who would volunteer time,

argue at board meetings, serve on committees, or help raise funds for new texts, supplementary programs, and building repairs. One principal capitalized on his community's poverty to encourage a local bank to finance an instructional computer center for the school. In another district, a principal garnered more than 17,000 hours of program aid from parent and community volunteers. These principals also displayed political savvy as they used their community work to build commitments that buffered their schools against capricious shifts in district policies. Some felt immune to criticism or censure because of the strength of their community alliances.

In short, many of the principals with whom we worked were able to find opportunity where others might see only problems. They strove to make their schools integral parts of their neighborhoods, and in the process found valuable resources and security.

Influences From the Institutional Context

In addition to the important community givens, we became aware of a nested system of institutions that directly affected our principals' activities. District mandates were foremost among these, but programs at both the state and federal levels also altered their plans and actions. Like the influence of community, we found that the effects of institutional contexts provide both constraints and opportunities.

We also found that different principals react very differently to the same kinds of programs. In two districts, superintendents were attempting to standardize instructional programs across their schools. As a result, decisions regarding instruction and materials were made at the district level. A principal in one of these districts criticized the centralized approach:

We used to be a highly decentralized district. The curriculum at any school would pretty well depend on the judgment of the principal and staff. In the last four years, we have moved to a very centralized district where the number of central office staff has increased immeasurably, and they have taken on the role of selection of objectives, materials, and textbooks. The principal's job becomes more difficult. . . . You become more of a curriculum manager than a curriculum leader.

This principal's reservation about centralization was based on his belief that curriculum and modes of instruction should be carefully chosen to meet the needs of students at individual schools. He insisted that this was best accomplished at the school level and resisted the effort to centralize.

Another principal, however, praised a very similar central office initiative. She participated wholeheartedly in a district instructional improvement project, volunteering the cooperation of her entire

staff instead of just the required pilot group. This program specified lesson design and behavior management skills at the classroom level. It also prescribed clinical supervision as the central feature of the principal's role in instructional management. This principal emphasized the advantages of the shared language and expectations about instruction that accrued from her entire staff's participation. Later, she pointed out how saying "yes" enthusiastically to this initiative allowed her to say "no" adamantly to others.

In the first instance, the principal saw the district-mandated instructional program as a violation of his autonomy. In the second example, the principal used the district initiative to increase her own. In both instances, we found their abilities to maneuver within district constraints to be important. The first mustered building support through resistance. The second gained district support through involvement. In these examples and others, we found principals exercising discretionary control at the building level despite common claims that such power is dwindling. Their key to control come from their community relations, their experience within the district, and their relationships with district superiors.

Our principals reacted more uniformly to state and federal programs, probably because participation in these programs translated readily into increased resources for their schools. Despite complaints about regulations and paperwork, principals depended on these sources of funding to maintain their instructional programs. Notices of cut-backs were always received with despair, and a good deal of effort was put into qualifying for available funds.

Personal Beliefs and Experience

Personal traits, experience, training, and beliefs were discussed by the principals as influential factors affecting their decisions and activities as instructional leaders. To a large extent, our observations bore out their claims.

In one instance, a principal described his strong democratic beliefs, and then discussed his view of the mission of schools:

We should try to educate all children and educate them the best way we can so that they can achieve the best they can. I think a child should become a self-reliant, independent, and worthwhile citizen in our country.

Those same democratic and egalitarian values were visible in his daily activities. He rarely mandated anything, but willingly expended the necessary energy to inquire about his staff's views before making decisions. In addition, students, parents, and even community members were routinely consulted about school programs; anyone interested found a forum and receptive ears.

Several principals had extensive counseling backgrounds and discussed the effect of that experience on their approaches to school leadership. Their skills and beliefs were visible in daily encounters with students and staff. First and foremost was their belief in the importance of communication. One said, for example:

An administrator must listen and you can't listen well if you just sit here not hearing anything except yourself. You've got to get up and get out because that's where the people are. How do you know if you're meeting needs? Needs constantly change.

This belief in communication was a prelude to action for this principal. Such attitudes and values, along with personal experiences, entered into the mediation process between community and district demands. Taken together, community resources, institutional contexts, and principals' backgrounds were potent precursors to their activities as instructional leaders.

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Avenues of Action: Climate and Instructional Organization

Cognizant of their constraints and goals, principals maneuvered to close the gaps between goals and realities. As we watched their activities, we observed two major avenues of attack: climate and instructional organization.

Discussing the climate of an organization in concise terms is a tricky business, but school climate is a notion that all of our principals embraced. They treated climate as a characteristic of their schools that they could monitor and change, one that encompassed both physical and social elements. Changing climate included everything from painting walls to organizing the way students lined up after recess. The comprehensiveness of the concept can be grasped from one principal's comment: "School climate starts at the curb." In general, they treated climate as a diverse set of properties that communicates to students that the school is a pleasant place to be, can help them achieve, and is a serious work place.

Instructional organization is our term for the technical features of instructional coordination and delivery to which our principals attended. When acting to improve instructional organization, they manipulated class size and composition, scheduling, staff assignments, the scope and sequence of curriculum, the distribution of instructional materials, and even teaching styles. We suggest that the elements of *climate* influence students' and staff members' feelings and expectations about the school, and that *instructional organization* delivers the reality.

The following story of one principal and his school illustrates the interrelationship of the two and how their manipulation can affect a school's capacity to deliver quality instruction. The school was bright and cheery; students conducted themselves well in classrooms, in the lunchroom, and on the playgrounds. Interactions among all members of this learning community were harmonious, but this had not always been the case. When the principal was first assigned to this school seven years earlier, he had found a poorly lit, unkempt building, with grey classrooms and hallways. Teachers were barely civil to one another at faculty meetings, and students argued and fought continuously.

The school was known in the community as the worst in the district.

The principal formulated a five-year plan to change the school's image and raise student achievement levels. School climate was his first point of attack. He organized parents into work parties that cleaned the school and brushed bright colors and graphics over the grey walls. Floors were polished and litter removed. Brighter lights were installed, carpets laid, and restrooms improved. More extensive changes occurred year by year, allowing the expenses to be defrayed over time.

He avoided staff demands for sterner reprimands and more frequent student suspensions. Instead, risking staff displeasure, he visited classrooms and talked to children about their work. He led reading classes in the lower grades. At recess or lunch, he was more likely to pitch softballs to youngsters than police their activities. His presence was established throughout the school. He believed that these activities were signals to the students that both he and the school were interested in them and prepared to help them grow and achieve.

After student deportment improved, this principal turned his attention to the instructional organization. He had already taught some lower level reading classes. Next he identified teachers who personified his beliefs about instruction and provided time for other teachers to observe them in action. He provided inservice programs, particularly in the area of reading. He observed his teachers and praised their efforts to adopt his methods. He used faculty meetings, PTA meetings, even informal conversations with visitors to compliment the efforts of his staff whenever and wherever he perceived excellence.

The school's instructional program was structured so that math, reading, and language development received particular focus in the primary grades. Other subject matter gained prominence from year to year. Starting in the 6th grade, students moved between four subject matter specialists each day as part of their preparation for junior high.

This principal emphasized again and again the importance of the teaching staff to any instructional program. Consequently, he planned extensively for the effective utilization of his staff and carefully attended to matters of recruitment and hiring. He identified the indi-

vidual strengths of his teachers and assigned them to grade levels where students would gain most from those strengths. Where he found weaknesses, he attempted to remediate teachers by arranging inservice programs, by freeing them to observe strong teachers, and by visiting classrooms frequently to offer suggestions and supportive observations. In one instance when his subtle approach failed, a teacher returned to the school from summer vacation to find a wall removed between her classroom and the next. The adjoining classroom, of course, was led by one of the principal's most favored teachers.

He watched for signs of fatigue and burnout. Strong teachers who seemed to falter were counseled to change grade levels, even schools, to provide them with new environments and challenges. If he decided an individual was incompetent or insensitive to children, he engaged in the necessary steps for that person's removal. When openings occurred, he exercised control over the assignment of teachers to his school through an impressive array of strategies. Undesirable appointees, for example, might have their responsibilities described in such a way that they would decline the position—posthaste.

In addition, he closely monitored individual students. In regularly held conferences, staff would inform him of the progress of students who demonstrated serious learning problems. Monthly strategies were formulated, implemented, re-examined in light of student outcomes, and refined. Although record keeping was not this principal's forte, he produced a file of notes from previous meetings at each session. All of these activities helped shape the programmatic realities that students experienced at school, and lent substance to the expectations encouraged by the enhanced climate.

This lengthy example illustrates one principal working through climate and instructional organization to shape a more effective school. We emphasize, however, that his style, actions, and strategies were shaped by his specific context and his perceptions of what behaviors would be effective in his particular school. Although all of our principals worked to improve climate and instructional organization in their schools, their specific activities and strategies differed.

Commonalities

Beyond their many differences, we were able to discern commonalities among the principals we studied. We joked about needing track shoes to keep up with them: even when they were not on the scene, students and staff expected them at any minute. Teachers believed that these principals knew everything that went on in their classrooms even when logic dictated that they could not. This perception of pervasiveness was the result of the principals' visibility in and around the schools, of their availability when crises occurred.

Another fundamental characteristic of these principals was the routine nature of their actions. Instead of leaders of large-scale or dramatic innovation, we found men and women who shared a meticulous attention to detail. We observed an attention to the physical and emotional elements of the school environment, school-community relations, the teaching staff, schoolwide student achievement, and individual student progress. Their most essential activities included forms of monitoring, information control and exchange, planning, direct interaction with students, hiring and staff development, and overseeing building maintenance.

Predictability appeared in annual and daily cycles. Teacher hiring, staff development, curriculum planning, and building maintenance projects, for example, were closely tied to the institutional context. Such aspects as funding cycles, reporting requirements, or the district-controlled school calendar accounted for the annual rhythm of their activities.

Daily cycles began with principals roaming their buildings and greeting children and staff. As classes began, they would return to their offices for short planning meetings with assistants or to resolve the first round of student problems, which, early in the day, were frequently related to problems in the home. Typically, this hour of office work would be followed by movement through the building as recess began. They would monitor, communicate, and resolve problems as they went. The period between recess and lunch provided opportunity to observe classrooms and talk with teachers and students. Lunch hours and much of the afternoon frequently required attention to discipline, and their time was consumed with student conferences and phone

calls to parents. The end of the student day would again bring these principals to the hallways where they would admonish or praise, prompt or prohibit in rapid-fire encounters. The ensuing calm permitted time for reflection and follow-up, parent conferences, teacher conferences, and staff or committee meetings.

This predictable daily cycle of principal activities serves a maintenance and development function within the school. Routine and practical acts enable principals to assess the working status of their organizations and the progress of their schools relative to long-term goals. These are the acts that allow principals to alter the course of events in midstream: to return aberrant student behavior to acceptable norms; to suggest changes in teaching style; to develop student, teacher, or community support for programs already under way; and to develop awareness of changes in the organization that must be made in the future.

We speculate that the effects of these routine acts on the quality of instruction and student experience in schools can be substantial. As such, this perspective on instructional leadership provides the overworked, out-of-time principal with a manageable alternative to grandiose programs of school reform.

Outcomes

Perhaps the most important lesson from our work with principals has been the recognition of the diversity of approaches to successful instructional management.¹ This may be comforting to principals who fear what they perceive to be overly mechanized approaches to effective school leadership. This same conclusion may be disturbing to those who hope that research develops the best system, the easy recipe, the quick fix for ailing schools or school districts. Neither group should despair.

Principals do play an important part in shaping effective instructional organizations. In doing so, they interpret a host of information from many sources. They hold tightly to their own experiences as educators and their beliefs about important outcomes for their students. They find meaning in the sometimes paradoxical demands placed on them, and they maneuver within their constraints to move their organizations closer to their goals—not overnight, but

in small steps that build upon each other. Their actions must be contingent on their changing scenes, on new demands, and on new situations.

Although we found no simple formula for success, the model illustrated in Figure 1 is a useful heuristic for principals wanting a clearer understanding of their instructional systems as a first step to school improvement. Whenever we introduce this model to groups of principals, we see smiles and nods of agreement as examples from the case studies parallel their own actions and thoughts.

This introduction prepares each participant to consider his or her own individual school and instructional system. In small-group settings, they are encouraged to provide content for each category of the model, starting with student outcomes and ending with community, institutional, and personal factors. At this point, they have developed their own unique models of instructional management. Identifying the information that belongs in each category reveals conflicts and hurdles that must be overcome. Such an analysis also reveals sources of strength in a program, foundations on which to build.

After this first round of assessment, the would-be instructional leader must ask difficult and searching questions about personal effectiveness: What are the immediate and far-reaching consequences of my actions? How can I improve? Risking still more, the next step is to involve other staff members in the process. What are the perceptions of others? Where do they agree? Where do they differ?

Implementation of the plan requires principals to carefully watch and listen for the consequences of their actions, to adjust their assessments of the organization, and to modify strategies and activities appropriately. The process is cyclical and ongoing in the constantly shifting context of schooling. But it spirals purposefully toward the realization of effective instructional programs. □

¹Five different approaches are described fully in our publication, *Five Principals in Action: Perspectives on Instructional Management* (Dwyer, Lee, Rowan, and Bossert, 1983), available through the Instructional Management Program at the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development.

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