

A Team Approach to Instructional Leadership

The team approach focuses on functions, not roles, making effective use of the talents of staff members.

ALLAN A. GLATTHORN AND NORMAN A. NEWBERG

Conventional wisdom suggests that the best way to improve schools is to strengthen the role of the principal as an instructional leader. While that advice seems useful for elementary schools and is generally supported by research (see, for example, Brookover and Lezotte, 1979), we believe that a team approach to instructional leadership is a more realistic method for improving secondary schools.

The Case for a Team Approach at the Secondary Level

Firestone and Herriott's (1982) study and our own research (1983) support other studies that conclude that secondary schools tend to be more loosely coupled than elementary schools. In the typical departmentalized secondary school, three factors result in a pattern of decentralized influence. First, there is less consensus among administrators

and teachers about school goals due to the size of the school faculty and the diversity in academic background. Also, secondary teachers tend to have more influence over the important day-to-day issues of classroom management and curriculum decision making than do principals. The departmental structure and the more specialized nature of the curriculum reinforce the autonomy of the classroom teacher. Finally, the secondary principal, working with teachers who perceive themselves as subject-matter specialists, has less "expert power" than the elementary principal, who

guides the work of classroom teachers who see themselves as generalists. In such loosely coupled organizations composed of several self-directing units, a decentralized team approach to leadership will probably be more effective.

A second argument for a team approach derives from an analysis of how secondary school principals perceive and execute their responsibilities. In his nationwide study of how school principals spend their time, Howell (1981) discovered that while elementary principals devoted approximately 30 percent of their time to instructional leadership, secondary principals spent only 20 percent of their time on such activities. Our own ethnographic study of four principals in urban junior high schools yielded similar findings. The principals in our study were more concerned with classroom discipline, school facilities, office responsibilities, and faculty relations. Although they were seriously con-

Allan Glatthorn is Professor of Education and Norman A. Newberg is Associate Professor of Education, Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.



“Secondary principals, working with teachers who perceive themselves as subject-matter specialists, have less ‘expert power’ than do elementary principals.”

cerned about instruction and had read all the articles about "principal as instructional leader," they simply perceived that there were more pressing demands on their time and had delegated the responsibility for instructional leadership to trusted subordinates.

One principal in our study spent a great deal of time monitoring pupil conduct in the corridors and in the cafeteria, greeting pupils by name, encouraging some with a pat on the back, chiding others who had forgotten a school rule. He observed, "Of course I care about instructional leadership—but if I'm out in the halls setting a good example, then teachers also check conduct, and the whole climate of the school improves. You can't work on curriculum until you have good discipline."

The literature suggests that in this regard the principals we studied are typical of most secondary school principals. We suspect that secondary principals who delegate the responsibility for instructional leadership are responding constructively to their own tacit knowledge that they can serve a more useful role by providing general managerial direction, rather than by trying to impinge directly on curricular and instructional matters. A team approach to leadership enables the principal to do what he or she can do best and carry out the functions that have the highest priority.

The third reason we believe in a team approach to instructional leadership is that it emphasizes the critical leadership functions, rather than focusing on the role. We support the findings of Gersten, Carnine, and Green (1982), who identify four critical functions: giving feedback about instruction; providing incentives for implementing programs; demonstrating a visible commitment to the program; and monitoring the progress of all students through the curriculum. They conclude with this astute observation:

We have identified these four elements as essential *support functions*. It appears that these are crucial activities that need to be performed for increased productivity in schools serving low-income children. It is not important who performs them—the building principals, the local teacher supervisor, curriculum specialists . . . as long as they are performed (p. 18).

One of the most effective instructional leaders in the schools we studied was the reading/language arts chairperson. Because a perceptive principal had rec-

"A team approach to leadership enables principals to do what they can do best and carry out the functions that have the highest priority."

ognized her talents and had legitimized her expertise, she was able almost single-handedly to improve the quality of teaching throughout the school by conducting staff workshops, developing and sharing materials, and encouraging colleagues to believe in the abilities of low-income minority children. In our survey teachers readily acknowledged that she was the school's instructional leader.

The final argument lies in the value of shared leadership. Despite the insistence that schools need charismatic principal-leaders, we must confront the reality that charismatic leaders are in short supply. And even when schools are fortunate enough to find such leaders, they tend not to stay too long in any position. One of the principals in our study was a strong charismatic leader, who almost by sheer force of his referent power had transformed a dying school into a renaissance one. At the conclusion of our study he moved on to a high school principalship. The loss was compounded because his most able vice principal was frequently absent due to illness. Thus when the principal left, a leadership vacuum was created. A team could not be counted on to pick up the leadership tasks. We believe that an organization is best served by leaders who empower others.

Developing and Implementing a Team Approach

We have developed a process for implementing a team approach to instructional leadership that we believe to be effective. Our discussions with experienced administrators suggest that the process can be implemented successfully, and

our exploratory work in schools supports that judgment. The process involves four key stages: *diagnose, allocate, implement, evaluate*.

1. *Diagnose*. We begin by diagnosing the present state of instructional leadership, as perceived by the administrators and teachers. We have developed two instruments that seem to give reliable and valid data about perceptions of leadership.

One instrument, *Principal as Instructional Leader (PAIL)*, yields useful information about the principal's leadership style, both from the principal's and the teacher's point of view. The instrument asks teachers to respond to several Likert-type items that describe a principal's actions. The survey results indicate to what extent the principal exhibits characteristics of the following four styles:

- **Directive**: attempts to provide an active, assertive leadership in curricular and instructional matters.

- **Decentralized**: attempts to locate leadership at the department or team level, giving much authority to team leaders.

- **Teacher-centered**: expects individual teachers to exercise instructional leadership.

- **Monitorial**: is primarily concerned with monitoring teacher adherence to district policies and guidelines.

We share these results with the principal, focusing on the major discrepancies between his or her perceptions and those of the teachers. We stress that there is no "best" style and encourage the principal to consider the appropriateness of his or her style in relation to staff maturity and organizational structure.

The second instrument, *Sources of Instructional Leadership (SOIL)*, provides useful data for determining which individuals, in the perception of respondents, are performing the critical leadership functions. The instrument lists those leadership functions that the literature suggests are important. It also identifies the leadership roles typically found in a school: principal, assistant principal, district supervisor, team leader or department head, classroom teacher. Respondents are then asked to indicate for each role whether that role/incumbent provides leadership or contributes to leadership for each particular function. A factor analysis of the results of this second survey provides us

and the school personnel with a map of how leadership is presently distributed.

The SOIL instrument yielded several interesting findings in our study of urban junior high schools. In one school a dynamic assistant principal was identified as performing most of the instructional leadership functions. In a second school the department head was clearly perceived as the source of most leadership. In two of the schools the teachers did not believe that any individual was providing leadership in the functions identified. Such analyses help the principal understand how teachers perceive the distribution of instructional and curricular influence.

To validate the survey results, we also observe in the school and interview several administrators. These interviews and observations allow us to confirm or raise questions about the quantitative measures. We try not to limit ourselves to a single view of what instructional leadership means in a given school; rather we attempt to derive a composite view from several sources and perspectives, to ensure that our diagnosis is a sound one.

2. *Allocate.* We begin the allocation process by meeting with the principal, since he or she will play a central role in delegating the leadership functions. We review the data from the surveys and from any observations and interviews we have conducted and then through an open discussion help the principal reflect about the following issues:

- Does the leadership style of the principal seem appropriate in relation to the principal's talents, the nature of that organization, and the expectations of the teachers? What specific aspects of behavior might be modified?

- Which critical leadership functions does the principal wish to perform? We review the results from the two surveys, the observations, and the interviews. We help the principal examine his or her talents and analyze perceptions of the principalship in order to determine realistically how he or she can best lead.

- What constraints in the system will limit the extent to which leadership functions can be delegated? We examine district policies, role descriptions, and teacher association contracts to determine the limits of delegation.

- Which individuals should be involved in the next step of the allocation process? Here we assist the principal in

"With a team approach, the critical functions of leadership are assigned to those most capable of performing them, rather than being centralized in the principal's office."

identifying the key members of the leadership team—those individuals who are presently performing or who might well contribute to the leadership functions we have identified.

The principal then convenes a meeting of the leadership team so identified. The survey data are reviewed, preliminary decisions made about the principal's role are discussed, and the group decides which individual should be primarily responsible for each leadership function—and which members can contribute to those functions.

This allocation process accomplishes three important tasks. First, it legitimizes the activities of those who have been providing leadership, acknowledging their contributions. Second, it attempts to bring about a better fit between the individual and the functions he or she is expected to perform, concentrating on individual talents rather than role descriptions. Finally, it enables the team to develop a more systematic plan, which avoids unnecessary duplication and ensures that all critical functions are appropriately assigned.

3. *Implement.* Each member of the leadership team is asked to prioritize the functions assigned and to develop an action plan for carrying them out. Predictably, the members of the team will be busy people with many responsibilities, and will need help in identifying the priority tasks and developing reasonable plans for accomplishing them. These plans are reviewed by the principal to ensure that all the critical functions have been provided for and that the action plans are both feasible and effective.

The faculty is then informed about the significant features of the team ap-

proach: What the critical leadership functions are, and who will be carrying them out. Keeping the faculty fully informed accomplishes two important goals: it helps the faculty know where the leadership resources are, and it establishes a system of professional accountability. If all involved know that the department heads have agreed to monitor lesson planning, then it is more likely that the function will be performed.

4. *Evaluate.* At the end of the school year, the effectiveness of the team plan is evaluated. The faculty are surveyed again, using the SOIL instrument, to determine who (in the teachers' perceptions) actually performed the designated functions. The results are then shared with the team as a basis for developing an improved strategy for the coming year.

With a team approach, the critical functions of curricular and instructional leadership are assigned to those on the staff most capable of performing them, rather than being centralized in the principal's office. The talents of a team are mobilized and a low-key system of professional accountability ensures that all the critical functions are being carried out by someone, rather than simply assuming that those tasks are being done. □

References

- Brookover, W. B., and Lezotte, L. W. *Changes in School Characteristics Coincident With Changes in Student Achievement*. East Lansing, Mich.: Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University, 1979.
- Firestone, William A., and Herriott, Robert E. "Prescriptions for Effective Elementary Schools Don't Fit Secondary Schools." *Educational Leadership* 40 (December 1982): 51-53.
- Gersten, Russell; Carmine, Douglas, and Green, Susan. "Administrative Supervisory Support Functions for the Implementation of Effective Educational Programs for Low Income Students." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, March 1982.
- Howell, Bruce. "Profile of the Principalship." *Educational Leadership* 39 (January 1981): 333-336.
- Newberg, Norman, and Glatthorn, Allan. "Instructional Leadership: Four Ethnographic Studies of Junior High School Principals." Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983.

Copyright © 1984 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.