Improving Instruction Through Focused Team Supervision

A team approach lets supervisors zero in on priority areas and strengthens their relationships with teachers.

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Increasingly tight budgets and demands for instructional improvement are forcing districts to re-examine the effectiveness of instructional supervision. One response to these issues is for supervisors to work from broad long-range instructional objectives, rather than short-term daily crises (Harris, 1977; Sullivan, 1982; Unruh, 1977). Another is for districts to develop supervisory teams who can concentrate their efforts and take advantage of their individual skills (Harris, 1976).

Focused team supervision is developing as part of Pittsburgh's School Improvement Program (SIP), now in its third year of operation in seven elementary schools. The SIP staff consists of a project director, a select teacher, one special education supervisor, and two regular education supervisors. Research on this supervisory approach is being carried out as part of a larger effort of the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh, which is seeking to learn more about how to improve evaluation processes in school districts.

What is Focused Team Supervision?

Using focused team supervision, instructional supervisors and principals plan and work together, on a targeted set of instructional needs within a school. This approach differs from the ways supervisors have traditionally worked in Pittsburgh and elsewhere (see Figure 1). Focused team supervision in the SIP schools has five basic features:

1. *Data-Based Instructional Planning.* The commitment of the SIP staff to the use of data for instructional planning is the first feature. Figure 2 lists the wide array of sources that SIP principals and supervisors regularly review. Information from these sources provides a comprehensive and systematic way to identify needs, clarify problems, and set priorities that determine how supervisors and principals use time in each school.

Traditionally, a supervisor's priorities are determined in two ways. The first involves negotiating activities in a school on a daily basis with the principal and teachers. Their immediate needs, plus those observed by the supervisor, form the focus of that day's work. The second may involve responding to crisis calls for supervisory service that can disrupt any daily plans (for example, supplying a desk or books for a new student or attending a parent conference called by the principal).

The systematic use of a wide variety of data to structure the SIP supervisors' time makes planning more rational and consistent and provides a broader perspective for instructional decision making. It also leads to the development of the second basic feature of this approach—focusing on areas of greatest need.

2. *Focused Attention and Time.* There are often more problems in a

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Figure 1. Approaches to Instructional Supervision

Focused Team Supervision	Traditional Supervision
Data-based instructional planning	Short-term, crisis planning
Focused attention and time	"Democratic," fragmented service delivery
Team planning and working	Isolation from colleagues
Regular/special education program collaboration	Regular/special education program separation
Collaborative supervisor/principal relationship	Non-coordinated supervisor/principal relationship

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Figure 2. Sources of Data for Principals and Supervisors in the Pittsburgh SIP Schools

1. California Achievement Test (CAT) results—grade level, classroom, individual student data
2. Monitoring Achievement in Pittsburgh (MAP) test results—grade level, classroom, individual student data
3. Observational data produced by the LRDC documentation team
4. Pittsburgh Research-Based Instructional Supervisory Model (PRISM)—classroom teacher observations and conference performed by principals and supervisors
5. School steering committee work—identification of school-level needs
6. SIP basic skills monitoring system—grade level, classroom, individual student data
7. Student staffing process—individual student data
8. Teacher plans and objectives

school than administrators, supervisors, or other support personnel can adequately handle. A traditional response by supervisors to this dilemma can be called a "democratic" model of service delivery. Expected to meet all the needs of all the teachers and students in their assigned set of schools, supervisors often circulate to each classroom and give everyone a small but fairly equal share of their time and attention. This emphasis on being visible to teachers and administrators places supervisors in the position of trying to do too much for too many people and not feeling very effective with anyone.

In contrast, focused team supervision allows supervisors to concentrate their time and attention on priority areas determined by their data reviews. It is an explicit recognition that all needs within a school are not equally important and that choices must be made when educational resources are limited. This focused approach leads to the development of yearly long-range goals for each school. From these goals, short-term action plans are written every two weeks with specific objectives and time lines that guide the supervisors' daily activities. The SIP supervisors have used this approach during the course of the program to focus on individual students and teachers, on grade levels within schools, on subject areas within and across schools (such as reading instruction), on instructional elements for an entire school (such as lesson design, motivation, and directed teaching), and on projectwide programs (such as Early Learning Skills and full-day kindergarten). By using data to focus their work, supervisors feel they can achieve maximum results for the time they spend.

3. *Team Planning and Working*. Time must be allotted to the development of a successful team effort, and the SIP staff holds weekly staff meetings for this purpose. The meetings provide an open forum in which supervisors can discuss issues and problems, review data, and exchange ideas for solutions. Their discussions have identified common needs within the seven SIP schools, and appropriate personnel have been assigned to meet those needs.

This opportunity to meet and plan regularly with peers contrasts sharply with the isolation in which a supervisor traditionally works. Typically, supervisors are assigned individually to a set of schools and have little time to meet with colleagues working in other schools. Although general supervisory meetings are sometimes conducted by the central district administration, these meetings tend to be devoted more often to announcing new district policies than to systematic discussions among peers about common concerns and fresh ideas.

In addition to weekly staff meetings, SIP supervisors have biweekly planning sessions with each of the principals with whom they work. During these meetings, the supervisors, the SIP Director, and the principals examine recent school data, review the events of the past two weeks, and write an action plan for the next two weeks. Together with the staff meetings, these sessions permit the development of team planning, both across and within the SIP schools.

The supervisors also use a team approach to implement their plans. Teaming occurs chiefly when the time requirements or the size of the task demand it (for instance, reorganizing reading instruction in the 2nd and 3rd grades at one of the schools). The supervisors have teamed with their peers, with the select teacher, with the principals, and with the project director in an effort to do the job efficiently and with an appropriate level of support.

4. *Regular/Special Education Program Collaboration*. Teaming, especially at the program level, leads to the fourth feature of this supervisory approach—the collaboration of regular education and special education supervisors. This is in marked contrast to the traditional separation of these two groups. The staff meetings and planning sessions permit them to communicate about each other's programs on a regular basis.

In addition, the regular education and special education supervisors participate in a student staff process at each school, which brings together every professional with knowledge of a student. This process enables all three of the SIP supervisors to suggest mainstream instructional modifications for children who might otherwise have been in line for special education placement. These staffing meetings also give the special education supervisor a rare chance for contact with the referring regular education teachers.

5. *A Collaborative Supervisor/Principal Relationship*. The SIP supervisors feel that a cooperative, coordinated relationship between the instructional supervisor and principal is vital to the success of their work for two reasons: (1) the principal's role of authority can support supervisors' work with teachers, and (2) a cooperative effort between supervisors and principals provides a continuity of service usually not available from an itinerant resource. Focused team supervision is helping to develop this kind of relationship.

The SIP supervisors have identified two prerequisites to the success of such a relationship. The first is to build a common set of perceptions and goals to guide the work in each school. The use of a common data base and the development of joint action plans promotes a coordinated viewpoint.

The second prerequisite is the development of a set of compatible instructional skills. Both supervisors and principals must be able to effectively implement the action plans for each school. Traditionally, many principals have lacked detailed knowledge about instructional methods or materials because they were appointed to their positions for a variety of other reasons (such as effective discipline procedures, good community relations, and management abilities). The planning sessions permit the SIP staff to actually teach and model some of the instructional skills that principals need.

Focused team supervision promotes the systematic use of data to provide appropriate, continuous levels of support to priority instructional areas that enable supervisors and principals to efficiently meet the needs of each school. The SIP supervisors are enthusiastic about the improvement of their morale, the increased number of ideas available to them, and the broadened perspective they can bring to their work using this approach. In addition, the supervisors' focused, in-depth involvement in their schools has helped them to be perceived more as members of each school's staff than as itinerant outsiders, and has strengthened their relationships with the teachers with whom they work.□

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