Districts with excellent student achievement have superintendents who are personally involved in supervision and evaluation of principals.

Much progress has been made in upgrading the quality of teacher supervision and evaluation over the last ten years in both the procedures used in supervision and the substance of the evaluation process. Improvements in procedures have been fostered by research on effective change and implementation strategies (Fullan, 1982). Many substantive improvements in teacher evaluation techniques are directly attributable to research on teacher effectiveness (McGreal, 1983; Medley and others, 1984).

While teacher evaluation is evolving from a perfunctory or ceremonial process to an in-depth, meaningful vehicle for instructional improvement, principal evaluation remains substantially unchanged. It is today more primitive than teacher evaluation was before the advent of teacher effectiveness research for two reasons. First, whether useful or not, most teachers received at least some form of regular evaluation for some "symbolic" purpose. Many principals, on the other hand, are neither supervised nor evaluated on a regular basis. Second, although teachers may have been masters of their own classrooms, it was likely that they would have some on-the-job visits from the principal. Again, this is often not the case for principals, most of whom are geographically separated from central office personnel.

Studies on the work activities of principals and superintendents (Hannaway and Sproull, 1979), research on central office coordination and control of schools and principals (Peterson, 1983), and our own experiences in schools and districts suggest that principals are infrequently supervised or even contacted. This infrequent contact has become an important issue as a result of increased attention to the role of the district office in promoting school improvement (Cuban, 1984; Farrar and others, 1983). Principals are expected to become the linchpin in these efforts to improve curricular and instructional leaders in districts where maintenance of the status quo had previously been the norm (Hallinger and Murphy, 1982). Yet there is a lack of agreement as to which methods are the most appropriate for organizing district-level improvement efforts (Cuban, 1984) and insufficient evidence to determine which perspective—top-down or bottom-up—is correct, or under what school or district conditions. We need to examine more closely the interactions between district office administrators and principals, particularly with respect to the supervision and evaluation of principals in successful change efforts.

As part of a recent study we examined the supervision and evaluation of principals in effective school districts in California. Our interest in these effective districts was threefold: (1) to search for characteristics or factors related to district effectiveness, (2) to examine the leadership activities of superintendents, and (3) to determine the way district offices attempt to coordinate the work activities of principals. Related to supervision and evaluation of principals, we wanted to review and catalogue supervision and evaluation procedures, describe the role of superintendents in these two processes, and examine how the two functions might work to build linkages between the central office and individual school sites and principals.

Given the concern for educational effectiveness, it is surprising how little attention has been devoted to district-level processes generally and to the role of the superintendent specifically in promoting effectiveness (see Bridges, 1982; Rowan, 1983). One of our goals, therefore, was to develop a better understanding of the district role in effective education. We also wanted to expand our knowledge of the ways districts coordinate and control principals. To accomplish both objectives we combined empirical and conceptual descriptions of effective schools and districts (Murphy and others, 1984, 1985) with the work of...
Each of the sample districts had well-established procedures and clearly defined criteria for assessing principal performance.

We derived the content for each function from the effectiveness and control literature. In this article we report on two of the key functions—the supervision and evaluation of principals.

Twelve districts participated in the study—four unified, three high school, and five elementary districts—selected from over 1,000 California school districts on the basis of consistent excellence on student achievement scores. Our first step was to conduct interviews with the superintendents of these districts.

Supervision of Principals in Effective Districts

In all but the two largest districts the superintendent was personally responsible for supervising and evaluating principals. All 12 superintendents were very active in visiting schools. The range of visits was from a low of 45 to a high of 875 visits per year across all schools in a district. Superintendents on average reported spending 21 full (eight-hour) days per year, or approximately ten percent of the total work year, on school campuses. It is important to note that both the number of visits made and the amount of time spent on-site by these superintendents were substantially greater than those found in a random sample of elementary school districts in one state (Peterson, 1983). While superintendents relied on both planned and impromptu visits, they reported that, more often than not, site personnel did not know when they would be visited.

As part of the supervision process, superintendents met regularly with individual principals, usually between three and six times per year. Additional meetings between the superintendent and principals to discuss specific problems or review the superintendent’s observations after site-level visits were also frequent. For example, seven of the superintendents reported meeting individually with each principal in the district more than 25 times each year. They also relied on group meetings of principals to control principal activities, check progress on school and district goals, and communicate important norms and expectations.

How important were their visits in the supervision of principals? Ten of the 12 superintendents rated the visits as very important and one as fairly important. Visits are a critical component of the supervision and evaluation of principals, and the two functions are key components in the coordination and control of schools and principals by superintendents. We believe it is significant that superintendents in these effective districts generally took direct charge of these functions.

The supervision process was almost totally oral and visual. Superintendents did not use standard forms to record impressions and judgments, and only a few reported that they wrote notes to principals following supervisory visits.

Superintendents performed three different sets of activities as they visited schools. First, the superintendents engaged in review activities, such as:

- Review of curriculum and instruction: A number of superintendents reported checking to see if teachers were instructing to district-approved objectives. Six reported that curriculum and instruction review was the primary purpose of their visits. Four of them said it was a critical activity. This factor is important because other studies of superintendents and districts have found only minimal coordination of curriculum and instruction by the district office (see especially Hannaway and Sproull, 1979).

- Facilities review: Superintendents devoted much attention to inspecting the condition of school facilities; for example, the functioning of the plant, condition of the grounds, and degree of student care of the plant.

- Perception checking: Superintendents tended to receive considerable information about the operation of district programs and school site activities. Because much of this data was "soft," qualitative, and usually non-quantifiable (a report from a parent about a school condition), superintendents regularly used site visits for verification.

A second set of activities we label culture-building, including:

- Communication: Generally superintendents tried to be available to speak with staff members during their visits and sought out particular members to provide recognition for successes or to follow up on specific problems.

- Team building: Superintendents appear to be key agents in linking school and district offices, a linkage not commonly reported in other studies.
Objectives were an important part of the key factor in evaluating principals. Progress on yearly objectives was a type of formative evaluation.

- **Problem resolution.** As the person at the top of the organization, the superintendent is often able to cut through red tape and secure rapid solutions to problems.

- **Knowledge building.** All superintendents reported that staying on top of current information was critical to their roles. Site visits were viewed as an important avenue for collecting and testing such information and developing a personal understanding of district problems and successes.

The superintendents also engaged in two types of supervisory activities:

- **Role modeling.** By this method superintendents communicated directly to principals what they believed were the important aspects of school district management. Three important behaviors modeled by superintendents were (1) administrative interest in classroom activities, (2) high-visibility leadership, and (3) knowledge of and interest in curriculum and instruction.

- **Direct supervision.** Through this process superintendents communicat their view of the principals’ effectiveness. Information gleaned through visits was used to assess the quality of a principal’s performance. In actuality, direct supervision in these districts was a type of formative evaluation.

**Evaluation of Principals in Effective Districts**

Principal evaluation processes were characterized by a high degree of “rationality.” In many districts principal evaluations are either nonexistent or perfunctory, episodic, and nonsubstantive. However, each of the sample districts had well-established procedures and clearly defined criteria for assessing principal performance. The evaluation content generally focused on yearly school or principal objectives. Progress on yearly objectives was the key factor in evaluating principals in seven of the districts. For principals in the remaining five districts, yearly objectives were an important part of the evaluation process and were used in conjunction with expectations written in final evaluation forms and job descriptions.

Evaluation procedures included:

1. A formal, beginning-of-the-year conference to select objectives and set specific performance indicators or criteria.
2. A variety of mechanisms to monitor progress on school objectives specifically and principal performance in general. These included school visits by the superintendent and other district office personnel, midyear review meetings, quarterly reporting conferences, and public reports to the board of education. Not all mechanisms were used in all districts.
3. An end-of-the-year evaluation conference. Principals in all the districts received formal, written evaluations, which were reviewed in this conference.

One of the most important features of the control systems seemed to be the degree to which all of the superintendents shaped the yearly objectives of principals, primarily by requiring school objectives to be coordinated with board or superintendent goals. In most of the districts principals were required to develop a corresponding objective for each district goal. Superintendents in the remaining districts were required to connect roughly half of their objectives to district goals and to develop an equal number of school-specific objectives.

Superintendents also used test results to control their principals’ work agenda. Eight of the districts either formally (six) or informally (two) used student test score results to evaluate principals. Often, targets for student achievement were set in the initial evaluation conference. Principals were then held accountable for the success of the students in reaching those targets. The use of student test scores in the evaluation of principals in these districts is an important pattern because prior research has found that districts do not generally rely on this type of outcome measure (Peterson, 1983). Additionally, test scores controlled the objective development process for principals because results were generally aggregated to the district level and used as the basis for selecting many district goals. The district goals in turn formed the basis for establishing school objectives.

Superintendents used other mechanisms to control the content of principal evaluations including districtwide student learning objectives and “jaw-boning” techniques during evaluation conferences. Districtwide student learning expectancies controlled the selection of objectives because they often became performance indicators in school goals. Also, because five districts retained students who did not pass tests based on curriculum objectives, principals were under pressure to develop objectives indicating that high percentages of students would master core expectancies. Finally, superintendents influenced directly the content of the evaluation process during the evaluation conferences. They tended to have high expectations for student performance and were quick to point out when they thought principal performance objectives were either insufficient in scope or depth or when target levels were too low.

How accountable were the principals in these districts for their performance? Direct accountability was evidenced in a number of the written principal evaluations, which made regular references to progress on objectives. It was not uncommon in final evaluations for superintendents to indicate areas they expected to become performance objectives during the following year’s evaluation cycle. Three superintendents indicated that they had placed principals in an “improvement mode,” meaning that improvement was expected or the principal in question would be reassigned or terminated. During the last five years in these 12 districts, 20 principals had been reassigned to the classroom, forced to resign or retire early, transferred laterally, or demoted. Of these, 17 were for job-related causes, such as inadequate performance. Although we are unable to find comparable statistics for turnover in average districts, our experience leads us to believe that...
a turnover in principals of approximately 15 percent due to poor performance is probably higher than in average districts and is evidence of principal accountability in the evaluation process.

Although they used a variety of sources, superintendents tended to rely most often on quantifiable data and their own observations. They were receptive to information from any source that showed them how principals were progressing on their yearly objectives.

Conclusion
Although we believe this information can be useful to school administrators, it would be inappropriate to conclude that districts can improve simply by tightening the supervision and evaluation of principals. The paths to district effectiveness are probably multiple. We found several other controls that appear to be related to district effectiveness. Some—for instance, district goals—may be prerequisites for effective supervision and evaluation of principals. It is also possible that when other control mechanisms (such as socialization) are in place, supervision and evaluation of principals need not be as important as they appear to be in these districts. Finally, it is also likely that factors other than the ten we examined contribute to district effectiveness, for example, professionalism among administrators or a strong district culture. It is too early to assume that the supervision and evaluation of principals is the only way to accomplish district improvement.

Nevertheless, several characteristics of the principal supervision and evaluation processes are noteworthy in these effective school districts:

1. The overall pattern of supervision and evaluation differs from that found in many other districts. Procedures are clear and evaluation criteria well defined. A high degree of rationality is inherent in these systems—attributes sorely lacking in many districts.

2. There is clear, consistent evidence that the supervision and evaluation functions are used as key mechanisms to link school and district offices. This direct coordination and control of principals is conspicuous by its absence in many districts.

3. Supervision and evaluation act not only as linkage mechanisms in their own right, but provide a strong base for the development of other potential linkage functions, especially goal setting and curriculum alignment. That is, these other functions may gain greater potency as coordinating mechanisms when channeled through the supervision and evaluation functions.

4. Given the rather low level of district management of instruction and curriculum reported in other studies, we were surprised to find that the supervision and evaluation of principals in these districts focused on these core activities rather than on the host of peripheral activities often reported in principal evaluations.

5. Principal evaluation in these districts appears to rely heavily on outcome controls, especially the evaluation of student achievement.

6. The superintendents are actively involved in the supervision and evaluation process in 11 of the effective districts and function as the primary supervisor in 10 of those 11. They act as highly visible leaders on school campuses, are intensely interested in curriculum and instructional matters, and spend a good deal of time supervising principals. They appear to be key agents in linking schools and district offices, a linkage not commonly reported in other studies.

Supervision and evaluation of principals are perfunctory activities in many districts. Our findings suggest that many successful school districts promote tighter coordination between district and site administrative staff. Future research should examine this interaction from the perspective of the principal. We believe that the results from this preliminary study on the supervision and evaluation of principals in effective school districts point the way toward improving these two important functions.

The ten control functions are selection, supervision, evaluation, staff development, rewarding and sanctioning of principals, goals, technological specifications, resource allocation, monitoring, and socialization.

References


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