

# Everyday Acts: How Principals Influence Development of Their Staffs

Effective principals stimulate and reinforce teachers' professional development through informal—but focused—communication and monitoring.

Findings from a five-year study by the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development suggest that principals exercise leadership in subtle ways (Dwyer 1984). Although the study did not specifically look at staff development, I will use data from that inquiry to discuss ways in which principals can, through routine daily actions, influence the professional growth of teachers.

The study compiled more than 10,000 pages of notes collected from 1,100 hours of observations and interviews with teachers, students, and principals. Concentrating on 12 elementary and intermediate principals from a wide range of school settings who had been nominated as effective by their district supervisors, the analysis of the data revealed nine categories of routine behaviors that principals used to manage their schools: (1) goal setting and planning; (2) monitoring; (3) evaluating; (4) communicating; (5) scheduling, allocating resources, and organizing; (6) staffing; (7) modeling; (8) governing; and (9) substituting for staff members.

Data also supported the findings of other researchers: 60 to 70 percent of a principal's daily activities fell under the heading of communicating (Martin and Willower 1981). And principals'

interactions were informal, brief, and fragmented—few of the principals' exchanges were longer than ten minutes. What was particularly appealing about the information obtained by the researchers, however, was the unique opportunity it provided for analyzing not just the duration of principals' conversations but also their content.

## Subtle Techniques for Staff Development

As a result of analyzing hundreds of these recorded conversations, I identified six ways that principals in the study appeared to exercise instructional leadership through staff development. They did so by:

- informing teachers of professional opportunities,
- disseminating professional and curriculum materials,
- focusing staff attention on a specific theme,
- soliciting teachers' opinions,
- encouraging experimentation, and
- recognizing individual teachers' achievements.

Communications about these various areas appeared to occur almost incidentally. When viewed overall, however, they represented a purposeful, potentially effective strategy for promoting staff development. Despite a fragmented manner in which

many of the conversations occurred, such informal exchanges appeared to have great impact. In many instances teachers seemed to appreciate this informal mode of supervision.

Informal supervision appears to have some advantages over more formal teacher evaluation procedures. While some principals complain about time lost to routine activities, principals in the Far West study used those actions to influence subtly the professional development of their teachers. Although principals as well as researchers have criticized the brief, broken, and spontaneous nature of principals' communications, it may well be that those very characteristics make the substance of the conversations more appealing and acceptable to teachers. Quick exchanges that occur in the familiar surroundings of a hallway or lounge may convey a principal's message of concern and support in a less threatening manner than would a formal meeting.

Further elaboration of the six ways in which principals were found to promote staff development, together with some illustrations from the study data, may better demonstrate this argument.

1. *Informing teachers of professional opportunities.* The principals whom Far West studied kept track of profes-

sional activities for teachers, both at the district level and in the community, through newspapers, professional literature, and district announcements. They routinely passed on items they thought were important or that they knew were of interest to their teachers. One teacher gave an example of the principal's passing on information about a mathematics league: "I didn't even know about it, but he put [the brochure] in my box. He's always doing that ... sticking things in my mailbox." In another school, a teacher said,

[The principal] gives us an awful lot of ideas about conferences, seminars, and things like that. She was the one who told me about workshops ... in math ... Basically whenever something comes up, she tries to inform us.

Although they might have announced opportunities to their staffs in general, the principals' personal follow-throughs appeared to make a difference in teachers' responses. For instance, one teacher described himself as "one of the ones that [the principal] took ... to learn about [a reading skills management] program." The teacher reported that, as a result of this occurrence, he had been a leader in establishing the reading program at the school. Another teacher laughed as she described how her principal had enrolled her in an activity: "He just signed me up for something. ... He told me I was going to have a ... swell summer. ... Sure, I'll go. He knows what interests me."

Efforts such as these—providing bits of information about a program or encouraging a teacher's professional interests—are ways in which principals, through relatively small actions, can exert incremental influence on their teachers' development.

2. *Disseminating professional and curriculum materials.* Principals duplicated and distributed articles, handed out curriculum materials, lent books to individual teachers, and set up displays for their faculties in central locations. One principal who had been shown a programmed curriculum he thought worth investigation invited two of his teachers to consider how it could be integrated into the school. During this process, the two teachers caught the attention of others. As a result, seven teachers ended up

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using the curriculum as enrichment material in their classrooms.

Another principal had read articles on allocated time and engaged time in classrooms. On the first day of the school year, she distributed copies of the articles to all the teachers and stressed their importance. During the next few months, the principal casually asked teachers what they thought about the articles. If the teachers had not read them, the principal usually summarized some of the ideas. Some teachers, apparently motivated by the principal's questions, later read the articles and then sought out the principal to give her their opinions.

Once again, personal one-on-one follow-up by the principals seemed to have a positive influence on teachers' responses to the principals' activities. Conversational inquiries soliciting teachers' opinions about a display or an article may have increased the impact of the disseminated materials by promoting teachers' exposure to them.

3. *Focusing staff attention on a specific theme.* The principals in the study tended to select instructional themes or areas of interest on which they tried to focus teachers—and even students—attention. These themes became topics of discussion with individual teachers who, we found, were aware of them because the principals gave them continual visibility. Teachers were repeatedly recorded using the same phrases and terms as their principals. In one school where the principal stressed a need to make good citizens of the students, several

teachers quoted the principal verbatim, saying: "We really work to civilize 'em."

Perhaps the best example of a school theme was found in a setting where the principal had immersed herself in the research literature on effective schools and emphasized high expectations for students. Many teachers at this school described the principal as having high expectations. The point was brought home vividly, though, in one of the study's student interviews. A wide-eyed primary student, questioned about the principal, said: "She has high expectations for us." The student then acknowledged that she did not know what "high expectations" meant, but she added, "It's good."

Visibility was a key in another school where the principal focused on reading skills. Each class in the school was scheduled for two library periods each week, which were essentially additional reading classes. The principal reinforced her plan with a verbal emphasis on reading and library activities. She questioned teachers and students about their activities, what they were reading, or how the students were responding to "pleasure reading." She asked teachers about individual students' progress and often asked students to read to her as part of her classroom visits. She also frequented the library and conversed with students and teachers who were working there. In interviews, every teacher in this school mentioned the emphasis on reading.

Another principal, who also focused on reading, required teachers to implement a reading skills management program. Teachers could use program materials in any way they wished, but the principal kept close track of students' progress by displaying a progress chart in every classroom and maintaining individual student progress files as well as a school-level skills chart in his office. The principal routinely inspected the classroom charts and praised both teachers and students for marked gains.

By focusing on themes, the principals exerted leadership in instructional matters. Moreover, they encouraged their staff members to consider concepts and practices that they otherwise might not have considered.

## One Teacher Grows: A Case in Point

For one second-grade teacher, the school year had an inauspicious beginning. Although she had specifically requested a straight second-grade class, the principal had been forced to assign her a split class of second- and third-graders. The principal apologized for this and for assigning her a particular third-grader who was a discipline problem. The principal assured the teacher of her ability to handle the situation and promised his support.

In walk-throughs of the class and during recess, the principal made a point of chatting with the problem third-grader. He would ask how the student was getting along and tell him he was lucky to have this particular teacher. The principal consulted with the teacher about the situation and asked for ways he could help her. The teacher acknowledged the principal's support: "If you feel a principal doesn't think you are professional, then you're fighting all the time. If he or she is confident, then you have all the freedom to do what you need to do."

As the year progressed, the principal's support became apparent in other ways. He left a pile of catalogs of educational materials in the faculty lounge with an invitation: "Construct a wish list, and I'll see what I can do." The principal suggested to the second-grade teacher that she might enjoy an exhibit of puppets that was on display at a local museum. When he later asked her opinion of the exhibit, the teacher had not yet seen it. A few days later, however, she told him that she had visited the display and had found it quite enjoyable. The principal mentioned that he had seen an old puppet theater in the school basement, and the teacher put several books about puppetry on her "wish list." The principal persuaded the school librarian to process the order right away.

As a result of the principal's gentle suggestions and support, the teacher's class produced two puppet plays, one of which they wrote. As they produced the plays and performed in them, students learned about voice quality, costuming, staging, and props, and were exposed to some fairly advanced processes such as discussing the meaning of a play and recognizing constructive criticism.

The project stimulated other teachers' interest. A second teacher arranged to share the puppet theater, and a third claimed that the theater had been hers and she wanted it back. As a result, a second theater was constructed in an after-school carpentry class.

The first teacher stated unequivocally that she would never have taken on the puppetry project without the principal's support. On the heels of this success, the teacher planned to expand the puppet program the following year using a video recorder, having students write their own material, and taking the show on the road to a local nursery school.

—Barbara McEvoy

4. *Soliciting teachers' opinions.* The practice of soliciting teachers' ideas was closely tied to the ways in which principals disseminated materials and stressed particular themes. The principals sought to locate and solve instructional problems in their schools by questioning teachers about their classroom activities, their feelings concerning school and classroom issues, and their views of certain materials. This process of soliciting information appeared to have multiple advantages—not the least of which was the recognition of teachers as professionals and colleagues.

One teacher described a situation in which she had gone to her principal with a problem:

[The principal] asked me how I felt about the class. You know, I was wanting some feedback from her because I wanted to know how I was doing and she asked me, well, how did I feel about it? It really surprised me. And I guess that was important.

This teacher discussed the various techniques she and the principal eventually worked out to better control her class. The teacher voiced her appreciation that the principal had talked with her as an equal, as someone whose ideas were valid. The teacher reported that after their initial talk she personally placed more value on her own classroom experience.

A five-minute conversation between a principal and a teacher in a hallway further demonstrated the level of such communications. The principal had

observed the teacher's class for a few minutes earlier in the day and began by complimenting the teacher's lesson. She then asked about the students who were part of the English-as-a-second-language program. The teacher explained why she was using a particular technique, and then the teacher and the principal discussed alternatives. The principal asked the teacher to "hypothesize" with her as to how much a particular student had actually learned and how much was "rote repetition." Together they talked about how they could assess what the student was learning.

Another teacher said this about a principal:

She'll ask the staff what we feel that we need ... to make us better teachers or better able to cope with particular problems. We discuss and we talk ... "Hey, look at this." "Well, I went to this workshop ... " or "Wouldn't it be better if we did this?"

By soliciting information from teachers, the principals seemed not only to obtain useful feedback about instructional issues, but also to contribute to the collegiality and professionalism of their staffs.

5. *Encouraging experimentation.* Principals seemed to convey support for their teachers in general attitude as well as in informal conversation. Teachers in turn reported a willingness to experiment with new or innovative techniques because they felt their principals were supportive and would not penalize them for experiments that failed. These were among the teachers' comments:

• Any time you learn anything new and are excited about it, he's really open to hearing about it and trying it out if you want.

• I feel whatever I say, whatever I'm doing in my room, if it's a learning situation, I'm going to get her support.

• Because I know she trusts my judgment, I go to her with ... monumental plans. She says, "When would you like to do this?" and she helps you find a way to do it.

• Anything basically that you can show her that is something you need or something you want to do that is a method or a tool to that end, she will do anything she can to go along with you and help you achieve that.

• He's real positive, and he lets you try new things ... He doesn't say, "Okay, we're using this book, and you're going to use it whether you like it or not."

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The attitude of a principal may be a crucial factor in the willingness of his or her staff to pursue new ideas and programs. Because of their principals' support and encouragement, teachers at these schools appeared to have—and to exercise—opportunities for both personal and professional growth.

6. *Recognizing individual teachers' achievements.* The principals in the study went beyond support and encouragement for teacher experimentation by actually facilitating teacher exchanges and publicly recognizing individual teacher achievements. Principals publicized teachers' successes by talking about them to parents, other teachers, and community members. They also encouraged teachers to seek information or assistance from successful colleagues, which provided opportunities not only for instructional improvement, but also for increased self-esteem for the teachers whose special work was being recognized.

In one example of such recognition, a principal described an innovative math and investments program at a PTA meeting. The teacher responsible for the program heard from others about the principal's report and was pleased at what amounted to a public commendation. In another instance, a teacher said:

I was very into Project Write in the classroom, and the kids had done a lot of really fine work... so [the principal] asked me to put together a workshop so that I could show the other teachers what we were doing.

Teachers reported that having teachers teach their colleagues added a measure of credibility to the content of inservice programs. They also saw those situations as ways to recognize teachers for work well done.

### Making Leadership Routine

Principals often complain that their effectiveness and ability to launch innovative curriculum or major staff development programs are hampered by their daily routine. The research of the Far West study suggests, however, that principals can actually stimulate and reinforce professional growth within their schools—for individual teachers and their staffs as a whole. Principals in the study persuaded teachers to reflect on their teaching processes, attend workshops, take advantage of opportu-

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nities in their communities, experiment with new ideas, and learn from each other. Through their daily interactions, these principals used their brief and fragmented communications to encourage and inspire teachers.

Of course, principals do not need researchers to tell them that they spend the bulk of their days communicating. They know that they talk continually to teachers, parents, and students. Even as they monitor the halls for late arrivals or keep watch during lunch time, principals usually are talking with someone. Particularly noteworthy, however, is the study's finding that the principals' communications had a number of purposes in common.

For some principals, this process of communication and informal supervision seemed intuitive. For others it was very conscious. One principal described the approach as “pulling”: “I’m consciously pulling. [The teachers] have to own what they do, but I’m pulling all the time. ‘Did you think of this?’ ‘Could you do this?’” Another principal’s process was one of “planting seeds.” She said, “They don’t all take, but enough do.” Analysis of their numerous though abbreviated conver-

sations suggests that principals can be quite purposeful and—contrary to what they themselves may believe—*effective* in their communications. Thus, by identifying and focusing on the overarching purposes of their routine, principals, through their daily interactions, were able to exercise instructional leadership and to promote the professional development of their staffs. □

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