

# Using The Principal Profile to Assess Performance

The Profile, which defines principals' growth in effectiveness along four dimensions, helps administrators link appraisal results to school improvement efforts.

In our recent study of appraisal practices in Ontario, Canada, 50 percent of 800 principals reported that recent appraisals had little or no effect on their performance (Lawton et al. 1986), even though most said they take appraisal results quite seriously. Such lack of impact can probably be traced to an absence of data about matters central to the principal's role in school improvement.

Three features of typical appraisal practices detract from their usefulness in helping principals improve their schools.

1. They are based largely on implicit, unexamined judgments about what contributes to principal effectiveness.

2. They lack detailed performance expectations for the kinds of actions that foster school improvement.

3. They generally lack an explicit conception of growth in principal effectiveness.

However, *The Principal Profile*, which my colleagues and I developed, is a form of assessment that overcomes these three limitations (Leithwood and Montgomery 1986).

## **The Principal Profile**

*The Principal Profile* is a multidimensional, multistaged description of growth in effective elementary and secondary principal practices. It reflects the real life of practicing administrators in part because 24 principals, superintendents, teachers, and department heads worked alongside the researchers in developing the Profile. In creating it, our primary concern was validity and comprehensiveness.

In addition to its use as a framework for the preservice and inservice education of principals, the Profile provides a basis for selecting vice-principals and principals and appraising the performance of those already on the job. It does this in three ways.

First, the Profile describes growth in effectiveness within dimensions identified as productive by substantial research. For example, "use of time" would not be a productive dimension upon which to collect information since research suggests that how principals distribute their time across daily activities varies little between highly effective and less effective principals. On the other hand, a principal's goals have been demonstrated to be a critical dimension of effectiveness; hence its inclusion in the Profile. Only when

**DIMENSIONS OF PRACTICE**

LEVEL	DECISION MAKING	GOALS	FACTORS	STRATEGIES
4 (High) Systematic Problem Solver	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>skilled in the use of multiple forms: matches form to setting and works toward high levels of participation</li> <li>decision processes oriented toward goal of education, based on information from personal, professional, and research sources</li> <li>anticipates, initiates, and monitors decision processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>selected from multiple public sources</li> <li>highly ambitious for all students</li> <li>transformed into short-term goals for planning</li> <li>used to actively increase consistency among staff in directions they pursue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>attempts to influence all factors bearing on achievement</li> <li>expectations derived from research and professional judgment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses a wide variety of strategies</li> <li>criteria for choice include goals, factors, context, and perceived obstacles</li> <li>makes extensive use of factor-specific strategies to achieve goals.</li> </ul>
3 Program Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>skilled in use of several forms: selects form based on urgency and desire to involve staff</li> <li>decision processes oriented toward school's program based on information from personal and professional sources</li> <li>anticipates most decisions and regularly monitors decision process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>selected from several sources, some of which are public</li> <li>particular focus on exceptional students</li> <li>encourages staff to use goals for planning</li> <li>conveys goals when requested or as particular need arises</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>attempts to influence factors bearing on the school program</li> <li>expectations within factors are specific</li> <li>expectations are derived from personal and staff experiences and occasionally from research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>relies on limited number of established, well-tested strategies</li> <li>choice based on student needs, (especially special students), desire to be fair and consistent, concern to manage time effectively</li> <li>uses factor-specific strategies that are derived largely from personal experience and system direction</li> </ul>
2 Humanitarian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses primarily participatory forms of decision making based on a strong motivation to involve staff so they will be happy</li> <li>tends to be proactive concerning decisions affecting school climate but largely reactive in all other areas unless required to act</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>derived from belief in the importance of interpersonal relations to effective school</li> <li>goals may be ambitious but be limited in focus</li> <li>goals not systematically used for planning</li> <li>conveys goals to others if requested</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>attempts to influence factors bearing on interpersonal relations</li> <li>expectations within factors ambitious but vague</li> <li>expectations are mostly derived from personal experiences and beliefs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>chooses strategies that focus on interpersonal relationships</li> <li>choice based on view of good school environment, view of own responsibilities, and desire to make jobs of staff easier</li> <li>makes little use of systematic factor-specific strategies</li> </ul>
1 (Low) Administrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>uses primarily autocratic forms of decision making</li> <li>decision process oriented toward smooth school administration based on personal sources of information</li> <li>decision processes are reactive, inconsistent, and rarely monitored</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>derived from personal needs</li> <li>focus on school administration rather than students</li> <li>pursuit of instructional goals considered to be responsibility of staff not principal</li> <li>conveys goals to others if requested</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>attempts to influence factors bearing on school appearance and day-to-day operations (mostly non-classroom factors)</li> <li>expectations within factors are vague</li> <li>expectations are derived from personal experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>chooses strategies based on personal need to maintain administrative control and remain uninvolved in classroom decisions</li> <li>strategies mostly limited to use of vested authority and assisting staff with routine tasks</li> <li>attempts to factor-specific strategies in a superficial way if requested to do so</li> </ul>

**Fig. 1. Growth in Principal Effectiveness**

criteria selected for attention contribute markedly to productivity in a role can an appraisal increase effectiveness.

Second, the Profile attempts to avoid another limitation of typical appraisal procedures by meticulously analyzing principals' actions and documenting at least some of the internal processes behind them. Such detail provides appraisers—and principals—with a relatively unambiguous frame-

work against which to compare and interpret performance. Descriptions of effective overt action, without an analysis of the thinking behind the action, might lead to an inflexible recipe for school leadership that severely constrains the contextually sensitive judgments of many principals.

Third, the Profile's levels of growth in effectiveness provide well-defined, public standards for evaluating per-

formance equitably and for offering feedback to further increase principals' short- and long-term effectiveness. Based on a recent study of appraisal practices in Oregon, for example, Duke and Stiggins (1985) note that "performance standards are usually assessed in terms of being 'met' or 'not met.' Levels of performance, such as 'outstanding' and 'adequate' are rare." For incremental

changes to occur in the desired direction, manageable approximations to highly effective practices must be made even more explicit than the sophisticated standards advocated by Duke and Stiggins. This explicitness is especially important in appraising experienced principals, who may legitimately view themselves as "successful" (vs. "unsuccessful") and consequently expect to learn little from the typical appraisal.

The Profile does not include detailed instruments for collecting information about a principal's practice. Rather, it assists in the interpretation of data already being collected and in deciding on the nature of feedback to the principal.

### Two Key Assumptions

Two assumptions undergird the portrait of growth in principal effectiveness painted in the Profile. First, the bulk of our formal knowledge about principals defines their effectiveness in terms of a highly restricted set of educational outcomes—for example, basic mathematics and language skills. But descriptions of effectiveness are goal dependent. What it takes to be an effective administrator by increasing students' basic math and language skills is unlikely to encompass the practices necessary to influence their growth in complex inquiry skills, respect for the culture and customs of others, self-esteem, physical fitness, and the like. The Profile assumes that most publicly funded schools include such ambitious intellectual, socioemotional, and vocational goals as part of their mandate; basic math and language skills are instrumental to achieving these broader outcomes. The extent and relative complexity of the Profile's description of effective practice is intended to reflect this ambitious mandate.

A second assumption is that a major characteristic of principal effectiveness is consistency. Direct observations of principals at work reveal a daily pattern of activity that is hectic, distributed across many different tasks, unpre-

dictable, and spontaneous (e.g., Wolcott 1978, Morris et al. 1982, Martin and Willower 1981).

Principals primarily engage in solving problems which, considered individually, seem trivial. Since this description applies to all those in the role, what distinguishes the work of highly effective principals? A crucial part of the answer is consistency, or the ability to accumulate the effects of many seemingly trivial decisions in moving the school in the directions valued by the community, the staff, and themselves.

Principals are effective in improving their schools to the extent that they have a well-defined set of legitimate purposes and the skill and knowledge to use even apparently unrelated opportunities to direct the school toward achieving them. Effective principals

are, in this sense, the glue that holds together the many different parts of the school.

### Dimensions of Practice

Our research identified four key dimensions of principals' practices: goals, factors, strategies, and decision making. Differences among principals in their impact on school improvement seem largely explained by variations in their practices within these four dimensions.

Decision making is a superordinate dimension of a principal's practice. It cannot be separated from the other three since they provide the substance about which decisions are made. Decision making is influenced by principals' perceptions of many influences both inside and outside the school.

Goals incorporate the long- and short-term ends that principals strive to achieve in their schools, and the procedures they use to identify, gain support for, and communicate such ends to others.

Factors are those aspects of the classroom and school environment that impinge directly on students' experiences (e.g., teachers' instructional strategies, the extracurricular program); they account for what students learn. Given a set of goals, principals decide what factors will achieve them and what conditions must prevail within selected factors for desirable levels of such achievement to occur. The Profile identifies 10 classroom and 7 schoolwide factors that have a demonstrated effect on students and that principals can influence.

Having identified factors critical to goal achievement and determined aspirations for conditions within those factors, principals must act overtly to influence the factors. The strategies principals use determine the degree and nature of influence they have on classroom and school factors.

### Levels of Effectiveness

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this development proceeds unevenly for most people, the practices of principals reflect quite closely one of four dominant patterns (Leithwood and Montgomery 1986). Further, these patterns have demonstrably different effects on school improvement; the Profile describes them as constituting increasingly effective levels of practice. (See Fig. 1 for a synopsis of each level.)

The least effective pattern of practice, the administrator, or building manager, is considered acceptable by many school systems. Principals working in this pattern are primarily concerned with “running a smooth ship.” One such principal expressed his orientation to school improvement.

I have a really good staff. They know much more about their subject matter than I do. So, basically, I stay out of their way and let them teach, and spend my time making sure the rest of the school runs smoothly.

School climate, interpersonal harmony, and happiness are the dominant concerns of people working in the humanitarian pattern. As one humanitarian principal said:

My purpose in this school is to have a nice, happy, friendly place that's conducive to learning. . . . Sometimes it's putting my arm around someone to hear their story. Very caring—that's my approach.

Principals whose work pattern is labeled program manager are strongly oriented to their students' needs. They view their role as providing the best possible programs for students. A program manager explains:

I would say the most important things I do relate to programs, both through my planning, inservice with teachers, etc.—making sure programs are being developed and implemented. All the other

things happen to support that or because of the other needs you have to deal with (like busing) that have to be taken care of, otherwise atmosphere and organization isn't there . . . to support the program.

The differences between the program manager pattern and the most effective pattern, systematic problem solver, are more subtle than those at previous levels and appear to be a matter of relative emphasis. Program managers' concern for achieving valued outcomes for students is mediated by their belief that high-quality programs are the solution. This focus drives them to depend substantially on established curriculum guidelines, resources, and the like. In contrast, systematic problem solvers are “bottom-liners” virtually all of the time about the outcomes they value for students. Their focus is less constrained by established practice, which may lead them to invent and deliver whatever legitimate services are likely to assist students. A systematic problem solver expresses his orientation to school improvement.

I want new staff members to feel as though I can be involved with their program. I want them to feel that they could come to me with a problem . . . and it doesn't come back to them. I hope that they would involve me in the organization of their classroom: I would expect them to do that.

### Appraisals and School Improvement

Schools and districts are spending increasing resources on improvement and on appraising administrators. Unfortunately, these two initiatives often remain separate; indeed, some evaluation procedures seriously impede

school improvement largely because of the practices they endorse. Recent substantial increases in our knowledge of effective administrator practices provide a starting point for design of administrator appraisal procedures that contribute to school improvement. Individual school administrators and a growing number of school districts are using *The Principal Profile* to bring coherence and consistency to their selection, appraisal, and professional development practices. □

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