

Helping Principals Overcome On-the-Job Obstacles to Learning

They have little time for reflection, but principals in California are learning to turn constraints into opportunities.

Maria Escobar is in her second year as principal of East Middle School. Her colleagues think she is "assertive and innovative." Her superiors view her as "a bright young principal who is able to get things done." These are not the ways she views herself, though. She feels far from confident as an instructional leader and has come to the painful realization that her training and experience did not prepare her for the realities of her job.

As a principal, Escobar feels increasingly helpless and overwhelmed by the multitudinous and sometimes conflicting demands of her job. She believes that problem solving is her first priority, yet she rarely gets a chance to think things through. She has few opportunities to share ideas with colleagues and frequently competes with them for the district's resources. She wants to talk more with staff members, but never seems to find the time. The little direct feedback she gets from her superiors is general and not particularly helpful. Also, she sees a gap between what they say and what they do, between asking principals to be instructional leaders and demanding action in noninstructional areas.

She is always running, running, running. Most of her time is spent han-

dling small crises and responding to the needs of others. Worst of all, she doesn't know how to learn to handle the realities of a principal's job.

Work Realities

Maria Escobar is fictitious, but her story is similar to the experiences researchers find characteristic of the

realities of principals' work (Barth 1980; Manasse 1985; Peterson 1982, 1983, 1985, 1986; Pitner 1982). Principals report that their preservice education did not prepare them for their positions and that most of their "real learning" occurs on the job (Pitner 1982).

However, as Peterson (1985) points out, this learning is painful and inef-



Principals' work is often characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation. Those who want to be successful must capitalize on this reality, not fight it.

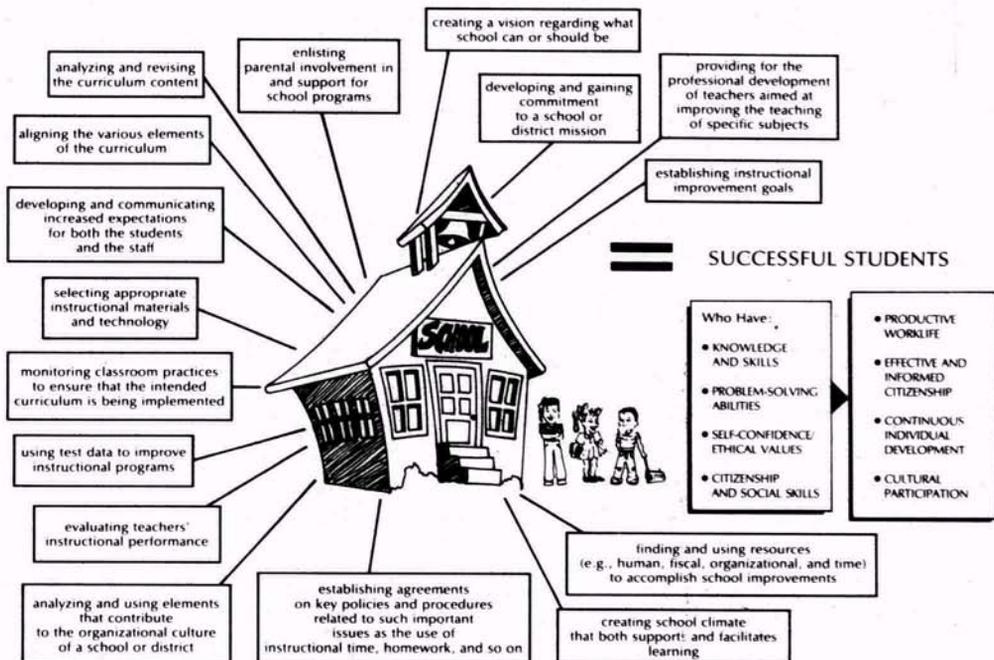


Fig. 1. Points of Leverage Administrators Can Use to Improve Student Learning

fective. He notes six factors that hinder on-the-job learning.

1. Brevity, variety, and fragmentation of daily tasks make it difficult to see patterns and make sense of them.

2. Principals' preference for action in solving problems works against reflective self-assessment and learning.

3. Infrequent formal opportunities to share experiences with colleagues inhibit peer learning and prevent principals from capitalizing on a storehouse of experience.

4. Professional growth and measurement of progress are hindered by feedback from superiors that is non-specific and abstract.

5. Increasingly diverse demands from others lead principals to take a reactive, rather than proactive, stance and stress short-term results over long-term learning.

6. Contextual characteristics of school districts do not motivate principals to take professional risks and try new ideas.

What emerges from practice and

research is paradoxical: principals' most valuable source for learning is their on-the-job experience, yet the reality of that experience is seriously limited as a vehicle for learning. Clearly, principals need systematic strategies for learning from their on-the-job reality by recognizing and overcoming its constraints. They need to see how constraints may be converted into opportunities for leadership.

From Constraints to Opportunities

The California School Leadership Academy attempts to tackle this challenge. Mandated by California's Educational Reform Act of 1983 (SB 813), the program was created and nurtured by State Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig. In its first full year, the Academy is helping approximately 2,000 instructional leaders become more effective. Participants spend a minimum of 315 hours over three years in workshops that focus on work realities and on strategies for using

those realities to accomplish instructional improvement.

Workshops emphasize 16 existing organizational systems or processes that administrators can use to become more effective (see fig. 1). The program's guiding principle is helping instructional leaders "work smarter, not harder" by using available resources.

Underlying the workshop content is the assumption that regardless of how well principals manage their time, their work will always include activities characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation. The strength of this reality is powerful. Those who want to be successful must capitalize on it, not fight it. For this reason, we emphasize the importance of using "symbolic leadership strategies" to accomplish desired reforms. Symbolic leadership is behavior that communicates to others what is important and what the principal expects from them. We derived the conceptual framework for this emphasis from the work of Bennis and Nanus (1985), Peters (1978), Pe-

ters and Austin (1985), Deal (1985), and Sergiovanni (1984).

The workshops capture yet another aspect of principals' work reality—their preference for action in problem solving. Embedded in the workshops are "real life" problems that require instructional leadership in the principals' responses. For example, simulations ask principals to make curriculum decisions after analyzing student performance data; to decide whether or not to fire someone after reviewing a performance history; to devise ways to improve school climate after reviewing a school profile; and to determine staff development after examining detailed information about individual teachers' professional growth needs, interests, and learning styles in relation to the school's mission. While recognizing the importance of judgment and decisiveness in problem solving, workshop activities help participants creatively analyze issues to generate alternative solutions rather than "right answers."

One of the factors Peterson (1985) reports that seriously hinders principals from learning from experience is that they have few formal opportunities to share with colleagues. To help overcome this, we incorporate activities into the program that promote collegiality. For example, we have participants work in trios to share anticipated obstacles to transforming their personal visions of instructional excellence into reality. They then help each other to clarify their thinking and to devise alternative strategies to eliminate or reduce the negative impact of those obstacles.

Peterson also says that principals rarely reflect on their actions. To establish norms of reflection we ask them to consider how organizational culture may have contributed to a past failure. We frequently ask participants to record their reflections in journals and to share entries from time to time to gain the perspectives of their colleagues.

Activities like these help establish norms of reflection and collegiality that foster application of workshop learnings.

"Academy staff members are trained to provide follow-through support and feedback to principals after they return to their schools. . . . [and] collegial support groups established throughout the state facilitate the sharing of experiences and insights."

Incorporating New Learnings

While the content and processes of the workshops are extremely important, the California School Leadership Academy's prime focus is to help principals incorporate new learnings into their instructional leadership repertoires. The real test of the program's effectiveness is whether participants are able to implement their new strategies.

Built into the program are critical variables that facilitate transfer. For example, in the "Next Steps" phase, participants make personal commitments to apply elements learned in workshops. Academy staff members are trained to provide follow-through support and feedback to principals after they return to their schools. In addition, collegial support groups established throughout the state facilitate the sharing of experiences and insights.

The program also promotes transfer by positively influencing the organizational context to which principals re-

turn. Recognizing that little behavioral change will occur if it is incongruent with organizational values (Perry 1980), and that top management plays an important role in setting and communicating those values (Peterson 1986), we require the superintendent or designee and at least one school board member from each participating district to attend two-and-a-half days of training during each of the program's three years. They spend one-half day each year becoming acquainted with what principals will be learning during the year. The other two days are spent examining and generating strategies that the superintendents and board members can use to support the instructional leadership efforts of both their district's participants and other administrators at home.

The experience has been an eye-opener for many district decision makers. As one school board president exclaimed, "You mean we have to do more than let them go to training?" In another case, the superintendent of a large, urban district visited a high school to ask a participating principal how he could support the latter's instructional leadership efforts. The principal reported, "For the first time I felt that the superintendent cared about what I was doing at this school. I finally feel that I have his support!"

Throughout the workshops, we encourage principals to determine which ideas and strategies are appropriate for them because "some things work some times in some places" (Berman 1986). Participants have many opportunities to forecast the implications of strategies to decide whether to pursue them. We encourage participants to select, adapt, or reject ideas and strategies to suit their needs.

The California School Leadership Academy is one attempt to help school administrators strengthen their instructional leadership. As the program's Executive Director Robert F. Alioto has noted:

We've learned a lot from our mistakes, but we're on the right track now that we're dealing directly with the work realities of

school administrators. When we started, there weren't many large-scale training programs focusing on instructional leadership to use as models. Hopefully, what we're doing will assist others to improve the quality of their administrative staff development programs. □

References

- Barth, Roland S. "Reflections on the Principals' Thrust for Educational Leadership." *Thrust for Educational Leadership* (May 1980): 4-7.
- Bennis, Warren, and Burt Nanus. *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985.
- Berman, Paul. "From Compliance to Learning: Implementing Legally Induced Reform." In *School Days, Rule Days—The Legalization and Regulation of Education*, edited by David L. Karp and Donald N. Jensen. Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 1986.
- Deal, Terrence E. "The Symbolism of Effective Schools." *The Elementary School Journal* (May 1985): 601-619.
- Manasse, A. Lori. "Improving Conditions for Principal Effectiveness: Policy Implications of Research." *The Elementary School Journal* (January 1985): 138-162.
- Perry, Roger H. "The Organizational/Environmental Variables in Staff Development." *Theory Into Practice* XIX, 4 (1980): 256-261.
- Peters, Thomas J. "Symbols, Patterns, and Settings: An Optimistic Case for Getting Things Done." *Organizational Dynamics* (Autumn 1978): 3-23.
- Peters, Thomas J., and Nancy Austin. *A Passion for Excellence: The Leadership Difference*. New York: Random House, 1985.
- Peterson, Kent D. "Administrative Control and Instructional Leadership." In *Instructional Leadership*, edited by W. Greenfield. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1986.
- Peterson, Kent D. "Making Sense of Principals' Work." *The Australian Administrator* (February 1982): 1-4.
- Peterson, Kent D. "Obstacles to Learning from Experience and Principal Training." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, 1985.
- Peterson, Kent D. "Principals' Work, Socialization, and Training: Developing More Effective Leaders." *Theory into Practice* XXV, 3 (1986): 151-155.
- Peterson, Kent D., and Robert K. Wimpelberg. "Dual Imperatives in Principals' Work." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, 1983.
- Pitner, Nancy J. *Training of the School Administrator: State of the Art*. Report prepared for the Center for Educational Policy and Management, University of Oregon, Eugene, 1982.
- Sergiovanni, Thomas J. "Leadership and Excellence in Schooling." *Educational Leadership* (February 1984): 4-13.

Stanley A. Schainker is Deputy Director, and **Laraine M. Roberts** is Director, Project LEAD, both at the California School Leadership Academy, 313 W. Winton Ave., Suite 463-A, Hayward, CA 94544.



From our readers:

- "best OVERALL journal for anyone working in schools" (Tempe, AZ)
- "a leading, prestigious journal" (University, AL)
- "a great tradition of scholarship and service" (Austin, TX)
- "newest thinking" (Lexington, KY)

HERE'S A TIP!

Educators are finding the thematic-format of *Theory Into Practice* (TIP) invaluable for breadth and depth of understanding of important educational topics. Of particular interest is our recent issue, dated Winter 1987 (Vol. 26, No. 1), on the topic

UNDERSTANDING INSTRUCTION

Other recent TIP issues include:

- Sex Equity and Education, 25(4)
- Building Literacy, 25(2)
- Developing Administrative Leadership, 25(3)
- Beyond the Measured Curriculum, 25(1)

Please send me _____ copy(ies) of the TIP issue on _____ (title), Vol. _____.

No. _____ at \$5.00 each; (50 or more copies at \$4.00 each.)

Send to:

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Please make checks payable to the College of Education, The Ohio State University. Payment must accompany orders under \$16.

- Bill me
 Payment Enclosed

Clip and mail to: *Theory Into Practice*, 174 Arps Hall, 1945 N. High St., Columbus, OH 43210

Copyright © 1987 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.