What It Takes To Be an
Instructional

Billy Jenkins

Instructional leadership requires principals to free themselves of bureaucratic tasks and focus their efforts on improving teaching and learning.

The role of instructional leader is a relatively new concept that emerged in the early 1980s, influenced largely by research that found effective schools usually had principals who stressed the importance of leadership in this area (Brookover & Lezotte, 1982). In the first half of the 1990s, attention to instructional leadership seemed to waver, displaced by discussions of school-based management and facilitative leadership (Lashway, 2002). Recently, however, instructional leadership has made a comeback with increasing importance placed on academic standards and the need for schools to be accountable.

Defining Instructional Leadership

While most would agree that instructional leadership is critical in the realization of effective schools, it is seldom prioritized. For example, among the many tasks performed by principals, only one-tenth of their time is devoted to instructional leadership (Stronge, 1988). Among the reasons cited for giving less emphasis to instructional leadership are lack of in-depth training, lack of time, increased paperwork, and the community's perception of the principal's role as that of a manager (Flath, 1989; Fullan, 1991). Today, most school leaders seek a balance in their role as manager-administrator and instructional leader.

Leader

Instructional leadership differs from that of a school administrator or manager in a number of ways. Principals who pride themselves as administrators usually are too preoccupied in dealing with strictly managerial duties, while principals who are instructional leaders involve themselves in setting clear goals, allocating resources to instruction, managing the curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, and evaluating teachers. In short, instructional leadership reflects those actions a principal takes to promote growth in student learning (Flath, 1989). The instructional leader makes instructional quality the top priority of the school and attempts to bring that vision to realization.

More recently, the definition of instructional leadership has been expanded to include deeper involvement in the core business of schooling, which is teaching and learning. As emphasis shifts from teaching to learning, some have proposed the term "learning leader" over "instructional leader" (DuFour, 2002).

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2001) defines instructional leadership as leading learning communities, in which staff members meet on a regular basis to discuss their work, collaborate to solve problems, reflect on their jobs, and take responsibility for what students learn. In a learning community, instructional leaders make adult learning a priority, set high expectations for performance, create a culture of continuous learning for adults, and get the community's support for school success.

Blase and Blase (2000) cite specific behaviors of instructional leadership, such as making suggestions, giving feedback, modeling effective instruction, soliciting opinions, supporting collaboration, providing professional development opportunities, and giving praise for effective teaching.

Knowledge and the Instructional Leader

Inherent in the concept of instructional leadership is the notion that learning should be given top priority while everything else revolves around the enhancement of learning. Instructional leaders need to know what is going on in the classroom. Without this knowledge, they are unable to appreciate some of the problems teachers and students encounter. That is why, on any given day, teachers and students will see me walking the halls, praising student work, and acknowledging what teachers are doing. Instructional leaders need to work closely with students, developing teaching techniques and methods as a means for understanding teacher perspectives and for establishing a base on which to make curricular decisions.

Whitaker (1997) identifies four skills essential for instructional leadership:

"If principals are to take the role of instructional leader seriously, they will have to free themselves from bureaucratic tasks and focus their efforts toward improving teaching and learning."

■ Effective instructional leaders need to be *resource providers*. It is not enough for principals to know the strengths and weaknesses of their faculties; they must also recognize teachers' desires to be acknowledged and appreciated for a job well done. From my experience, teachers seek only tiny morsels of praise and the assurance that I am there to support them as a resource provider.

■ Effective instructional leaders need to be *instructional resources*. Teachers count on their principals as resources of information on current trends and effective instructional practices. Instructional leaders are tuned in to issues relating to curriculum, effective pedagogical strategies, and assessment. For example, teachers come by my office daily to seek suggestions on the best way to reach a child who is not grasping concepts.

■ Effective instructional leaders need to be good *communicators*. They need to communicate essential beliefs regarding learning, such as the conviction that all children can learn.

■ Effective instructional leaders need to create a *visible presence*. This includes focusing on learning objectives, modeling behaviors of learning, and designing programs and activities on instruction. As an administrator, more than half my day is spent focusing on these objectives. For example, I recently implemented a move to small-group

instruction in reading and math by providing the resources, explaining how it works, and serving as a model for those teachers who struggled with the concept.

The instructional leader also needs to have up-to-date knowledge on three areas of education: curriculum, instruction, and assessment (DuFour, 2002).

Curriculum. Principals need to know about the changing conceptions of curriculum, educational philosophies and beliefs, curricular sources and conflict, and curriculum evaluation and improvement.

Instruction. Principals need to know about different models of teaching, the theoretical reasons for adopting a particular teaching model, and the theories underlying the technology-based learning environment.

Assessment. Principals need to know about the principles of student assessment, assessment procedures with emphasis on alternative assessment methods, and assessment that aims to improve student learning.

Underlying these three knowledge areas is a deep understanding of how humans learn. It may not be an overstatement to suggest that a principal is not fully equipped if he or she does not have a deep understanding of human learning (Johnson, 1996). The core business of a school is learning and recent research in cognitive science has produced a wealth of knowledge about human learning. It is crucial that principals know and understand these theories so they may serve as a resource in enhancing instructional effectiveness. For example, if some students are unable to read and write at an appropriate level, the principal as instructional leader should take steps to alleviate the problem by supporting teachers' instructional methods, allocating resources and materials, visiting classrooms frequently, providing feedback on instructional methods and techniques, and using data to focus attention on

improving the curriculum and instruction (Mendez-Morse, 1991).

Skills and the Instructional Leader

The principal must possess certain skills to carry out the tasks of an instructional leader: interpersonal skills; planning skills; instructional observation skills; and research and evaluation skills (Lashway, 2002).

Interpersonal skills maintain trust, spur motivation, give empowerment, and enhance collegiality. Relationships are built on trust, and tasks are accomplished through motivation and empowerment wherein teachers are involved in planning, designing, and evaluating instructional programs. Empowerment leads to ownership and commitment as teachers identify problems and design strategies themselves. Collegiality promotes sharing, cooperation, and collaboration, in which both the principal and teachers talk about teaching and learning (Brewer, 2001).

Planning skills. Planning begins with clear identification of goals or a vision to work toward, as well as to induce commitment and enthusiasm. The next step is to assess what changes need to occur and which may be accomplished by asking the people involved, reading documents, and observing what is going on within a school. My first goal as an administrator was to plan with my faculty and create a sense of oneness with a clearly defined school mission. I must say that it was not easy.

Instructional observation skills. The aim of instructional observation (supervision) is to provide teachers with feedback to consider and reflect upon. Not only can effective instructional leaders help guide classroom instruction through supervision, they can also play a primary role in bettering it. This is one of my favorite tasks because it gives me an opportunity to be further involved in the daily happenings of our school.

Research and evaluation skills are needed to critically question the success of instructional programs, and

one of the most useful of these skills is action research. Through research and program evaluation, effective instructional leaders can be armed with a plethora of information to make informed decisions about increasing learning at their schools. To cite an example, I once had a teacher who wanted to implement a new phonics program in her classroom. I had already researched that program and viewed its implementation at a previous school, so I knew it was not that good. I told her my feelings about the program and asked her to pilot it in her room for six weeks. After the six weeks, she was no longer enthused about the program. Eventually, we found one that both she and I loved.

If principals are to take the role of instructional leader seriously, they will have to free themselves from bureaucratic tasks and focus their efforts toward improving teaching and learning. Instructional improvement is an important goal, a goal worth seeking, and a goal that, when implemented, allows both students and teachers to make a more meaningful learning environment. To achieve this goal takes more than a strong principal with concrete ideas and technical expertise. It requires a redefinition of the role of principals, one that removes the barriers to leadership by eliminating bureaucratic structures and reinventing relationships. ▣

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WEB RESOURCES

e-Lead is a free, online resource that offers states and districts information about how to provide better professional development for principals. In addition to articles on instructional leadership, the site offers resources on leadership assessment, mentoring, and data-driven decision-making. **www.e-lead.org/resources/resources. asp?ResourceID=14**

This Web site features an annotated bibliography of instructional leadership resources.

www.ed.psu.edu/UCEACSLE/instr_ leader_resources.htm