

Strengthening the Principal's Toolbox: Strategies to Boost Learning

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Abstract

The role of the principal has changed over time from a hierarchical, bureaucratic image to one of devolved decision making and school self-determination. Principals foster a school's improvement, enhance its overall effectiveness, and promote student learning and success by developing the capacity of staff to function as a professional learning community. Developing and maintaining a positive school culture cultivates a professional learning community, the learning and success of all students, and the professional growth of faculty. The instructional leadership of the principal is a critical factor in the success of a school's improvement initiatives and the overall effectiveness of the school. The principal's primary responsibility is to promote the learning and success of *all* students.

Demands for greater accountability, especially appeals for the use of more outcome-based measures, require the principal to be instruction oriented. Are the students learning? If the students are not learning, what are we going to do about it? The focus on results, the focus on student achievement, the focus on students learning at high levels can happen only if teaching and learning become the central focus of the school and the central focus of the principal (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010).

How can principals help teachers to clarify instructional goals and work collaboratively to improve teaching and learning to meet those goals? Principals need to help teachers shift their focus from what they are teaching to what students are learning (Bartalo, 2012). We cannot continue to accept the teachers' premise that I taught it; they just didn't learn it. The role of instructional leader helps the principal to maintain a focus on why the school exists, and that is to help all students learn (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Shifting the focus of instruction from teaching to learning, forming collaborative structures and processes for faculty to work together to improve instruction, and ensuring that professional development is ongoing and focused toward school goals are among the key tasks that principals must perform to be effective instructional leaders (Jones, 2012; Zepeda, 2012). This effort will require districtwide leadership, focused directly on learning. School principals can accomplish this goal by (a) developing a vision, (b) focusing on learning, (c) encouraging

collaboration, (d) analyzing results, (e) providing support, and (f) aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Taken together, these six dimensions provide a compelling framework for accomplishing sustained districtwide success for all children (Marzano & Waters, 2010).

Developing a Vision

A vision is an attempt to describe the school that faculty members are hoping to create. It's a picture of what the school is about: What the school looks like; how the pieces fit together; and how the people fit in where the school is trying to go—not just where it is now; not just a particular goal for the future, but here is how the school looks now; here are the people; here are the systems; here are the students; here are the community issues; here is the budget. Now where does the faculty want all of this to come out five years from now?

In an exemplary school, students (a) accept responsibility for their learning, decisions, and actions; (b) develop skills to become more self-directed learners as they progress through the grades; and (c) actively engage in and give effort to academic and extracurricular pursuits (DuFour et al., 2010).

Here are some tips for developing a vision for your school that professional learning community advocates recommend (Caine & Caine, 2010; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2010; Easton, 2011; Graham & Ferriter, 2009; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Wiseman, Arroyo, & Richter, 2012). Engage the faculty in a general agreement about what they hope their school will become. Enlist a faculty task force to identify the major findings of research studies on school improvement. Share the research findings with the faculty. Conduct small-group discussion sessions that enable the faculty to review the research and discuss their hopes for the future of the school. Discussions should also include criticisms of the traditional structure and culture of schools.

A traditional obstacle to schools moving forward is the inherent tradition of teacher isolation in schools. This must be addressed and overcome in order for a school to become a professional learning community. At all levels of the system, isolation is seen as the enemy of school improvement. Thus, most day-to-day activities in the school need to be specifically designed to connect teachers, principals, and district administrators with one another and with outside experts in regard to school improvement. Another tradition is that schools are very often run as top-down hierarchies, where faculty are not given a voice in decision making (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012). Faculty need to address these structural and cultural traditions in schools that present obstacles and barriers to substantive improvements.

Using this formula, gradually the faculty should be able to identify commonalities, a school all stakeholders can endorse. With the vision statement, with the ability to describe the school all participants are trying to create, the principal then needs to work with students, teachers, parents, and others to discover or invent the structures, policies, and processes that will enable the school to move in that direction (DuFour & DuFour, 2012).

It should be noted that although the principal remains a valued participant in the development of a vision, “vision is embodied by the process rather than by individuals” (Lunenburg & Irby, 2006, p. 8). Principals must help to keep their colleagues from narrowing this vision and assist the school to maintain “a broader perspective.” Excellence is a moving target; therefore, the vision should be revisited periodically to ensure that the vision remains relevant. Principals, in a sense, are keepers of the vision. The principal’s modeling and reinforcing of vision-related behaviors appear critical to the success of the professional learning community.

Focusing on Learning

Principals can help shift the focus from teaching to learning if they insist that certain critical questions are being considered in that school, and principals are in a key position to pose those questions. What do we want our students to know and be able to do? The focus in a professional learning community is not: Are you teaching? But: Are the students learning? How will you know if the students are learning? And that question points to student progress. How will we respond when students do not learn? What criteria will we use to evaluate student progress? How can we more effectively use the time and resources available to help students learn? How can we engage parents in helping our students learn? Have we established systemic collaboration as the norm in our school (DuFour et al., 2010)?

The school district and the administrators and teachers who work in it are accountable for student learning. This assertion has strong economic, political, and social appeal; its logic is clear. What teachers teach and students learn is a matter of public inspection and subject to direct measurement (Hess & McShane, 2013). Superintendents need to develop a practical rationale for school improvement. Clearly and jointly held purposes help give teachers and principals an increased sense of certainty, security, coherence, and accountability (Kowalski, 2013). Purposes cannot remain static for all time, however. They must be constantly adapted to changing circumstances and the needs of the system. Few really successful schools lack purpose.

Encouraging Collaboration

A key task for principals is to create a collective expectation among teachers concerning student performance. That is, principals need to raise the collective sense of teachers about student learning. Then principals must work to ensure that teacher expectations are aligned with the school’s instructional goals. Furthermore, principals need to eliminate teacher isolation so that discussions about student learning become a collective mission of the school.

Principals must develop and sustain school structures and cultures that foster individual and group learning. That is, principals must stimulate an environment in which new information and practices are eagerly incorporated into the system. Teachers are more likely to pursue their group and individual learning when the school provides supportive conditions, such are

particularly effective leadership (Northouse, 2013). Schools where teachers collaborate in discussing issues related to student learning are more likely to be able to take advantage of internally and externally generated information. Teachers can become willing recipients of research information if they are embedded in a setting where meaningful and sustained interaction with researchers occurs in an egalitarian context (Sagor, 2010).

One popular collaboration structure is teacher teams. Schools are recognizing that teachers should be working together in teams as opposed to working individually in isolation in their classrooms. High-performing teams will accomplish four different things (Erkens et al. 2008; Marzano & Pickering, 2011): (1) They will clarify exactly what students should know and be able to do as a result of each unit instruction. We know that if teachers are clear on the intended results of instruction, they will be more effective. (2) They will then design curriculum and share instructional strategies to achieve those outcomes. (3) They will develop valid assessment strategies that measure how well students are performing. (4) Then they will analyze those results and work together to come up with new ideas for improving those results.

Analyzing Results

How can schools gauge their progress in achieving student learning? Three factors can increase a school's progress in achieving learning for all students (Popham, 2011). The primary factor is the availability of performance data connected to each student. Performance data need to be broken down by specific objectives and target levels in the school curriculum. Then the school is able to connect what is taught to what is learned. The curriculum goals should be clear enough to specify what each teacher should teach. And an assessment measure, aligned with the curriculum, will indicate what students have learned. Also, teachers need access to longitudinal data on each student in their classroom. With such data, teachers are able to develop individual and small-group education plans to ensure mastery of areas of weakness from previous years while also moving students forward in the school curriculum.

The second factor is the public nature of the assessment system. Annually, the school district should publish a matrix of schools and honor those schools that have performed at high levels. This activity provides role models for other schools to emulate. At the school and classroom levels, it provides a blueprint of those areas where teachers should focus their individual education plans (IEPs) and where grade levels or schools should focus the school's professional development plans. The public nature of the data from the accountability system makes clear where schools are. Data should be disaggregated by race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English language proficiency, and disability. Performance of each subgroup of students on assessment measures makes the school community aware of which students are well served and which students are not well served by the school's curriculum and instruction.

The third factor in gauging progress toward achieving student learning is the specifically targeted assistance provided to schools that are performing at low levels. Before the advent of accountability systems, it was not evident which schools and students needed help. The first step is to target the schools in need of help based on student performance data. Each targeted school

is paired with a team of principals, curriculum specialists/instructional coaches, and researchers to observe current practices, discuss student performance data with staff, and assist in the development and implementation of an improvement plan. The targeted schools learn how to align their program of professional development with the weakness identified by the data. They learn how to develop an improvement plan to guide their activities and monitor the outcomes of the activities, all of which are designed to raise student performance levels.

Next, once a team of teachers has worked together and identified students who are having difficulty, the school faces the challenge of how the teachers are going to respond to the students who are not learning. The challenge is not simply re-teaching in the same way that the teachers taught before, but in providing support for teachers to expand their repertoire of skills and providing support and time for students to get additional assistance they need in order to master those skills. When students are not learning, principals must ensure not only that professional development programs are in place to give additional support to teachers but also that intervention strategies are in place to give additional support to students.

Providing Support

Teachers need to be provided with the training, teaching tools, and support they need to help all students reach high performance levels (Sullivan & Glanz, 2013). Specifically, teachers need access to curriculum guides, textbooks, or specific training connected to the school curriculum. They need access to lessons or teaching units that match curriculum goals. They need training on using assessment results to diagnose learning gaps. Teachers must know how each student performed on every multiple-choice item and other questions in the assessment measure. And training must be in the teachers' subject areas. Only then can teachers be prepared to help students achieve at high levels. In addition to professional development for teachers, all schools need an intervention and support system for students who lag behind in learning the curriculum. Schools need to provide additional help—either in school, after school, on weekends, or during the summer—to students who lag behind in core subjects. Boards of education and school superintendents need to supply the financial resources to fulfill this mandate. This involves acquiring materials, information, or technology; manipulating schedules or release time to create opportunities for teachers to learn; facilitating professional networks; and creating an environment that supports school improvement efforts (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012).

A focus on student learning usually means changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment—that is, changes in teaching. The history of school reform indicates that innovations in teaching and learning seldom penetrate more than a few schools and seldom endure when they do (Cuban, 2003; Evans, 2011; Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011; Nehring, 2010). Innovations frequently fail because the individuals who make it happen—those closest to the firing line, the classroom teachers—may not be committed to the effort or may not have the skills to grapple with the basic challenge being posed (Fullan, 2013). Principals need to ensure that teachers have the skills to help all students perform at high levels.

Aligning Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

Principals need to ensure that assessment of student learning is aligned with both the school's curriculum and the teacher's instruction (English & Steffy, 2001; Houff, 2012). When they are well constructed and implemented, assessments can change the nature of teaching and learning. They can lead to a richer, more challenging curriculum; foster discussion and collaboration among teachers within and across schools; create more productive conversations among teachers and parents; and focus stakeholders' attention on increasing student achievement (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2012).

For curriculum goals to have an impact on what happens in classrooms, they must be clear. When school districts, administrators, and students are held accountable for results, more specificity is needed in implementing the curriculum (Oliva & Gorton, 2012). In a high-stakes accountability environment, teachers require that the curriculum contain enough detail and precision to allow them to know what the students need to learn.

Professional learning communities attempt to align their assessment measures with their curriculum. Lunenburg and Ornstein (2012) encourage schools to consider three principles in this endeavor. First, assessments not based on the curriculum are neither fair nor helpful to parents or students. Schools that have developed their own assessment measures have done a good job of ensuring that the content of the assessment can be found in the curriculum. That is, children will not be assessed on knowledge and skills they have not been taught. This is what Fenwick English and Betty Steffy (2001) refer to as "the doctrine of no surprises." However, the same is not true when schools use generic, off-the-shelf standardized tests. Such tests cannot measure the breadth and depth of the school's curriculum. Second, when the curriculum is rich and rigorous, the assessments must be as well. Assessments must tap both the breadth and depth of the content and skills in the curriculum. Third, assessments must become more challenging in each successive grade. The solid foundation of knowledge and skills developed in the early grades should evolve into more complex skills in the later grades.

If one accepts the premise that assessment drives curriculum and instruction, perhaps the easiest way to improve instruction and increase student achievement is to construct better assessments (Popham, 2010; Yeh, 2001, 2006). According to Yeh (2001), it is possible to design force-choice items (multiple-choice items) that test reasoning and critical thinking. Such assessments could require students to use facts, rather than recall them. And questions could elicit content knowledge that is worth learning. To prepare students to think critically, teachers could teach children to identify what is significant. Teachers could model the critical thinking process in the classroom, during instruction, through assignments, in preparing for assessments, and in the content of the assessment itself. By aligning content with worthwhile questions in core subject areas, it may be possible to rescue assessment and instruction for the current focus on the recall of trivial factual knowledge. Assessment items could be created for a range of subjects and levels of difficulty. Then there would be little incentive for teachers to drill students on factual knowledge.

Conclusion

The role of the principal has changed over time from a hierarchical, bureaucratic image to one of devolved decision making and school self-determination. Principals foster a school's improvement, enhance its overall effectiveness, and promote student learning and success by developing the capacity of staff to function as a professional learning community. Developing and maintaining a positive school culture cultivates a professional learning community, the learning and success of all students, and the professional growth of faculty. The instructional leadership of the principal is a critical factor in the success of a school's improvement initiatives and the overall effectiveness of the school. The principal's primary responsibility is to promote the learning and success of *all* students.

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