

Changing Role of School Leadership

Principals shape the environment for teaching and learning. The most effective principals create vibrant learning communities where faculty and staff collaborate to help every student fulfill his or her potential.

—NEA President Dennis Van Roekel

Improving public schools means addressing a broad set of issues, and educators, policymakers, and researchers are all searching for ways to address these issues that will raise student achievement and help create great public schools for all students. School reform efforts are well underway all across the country, and they run the gamut from raising standards to reducing class sizes, from using new assessment tools to providing school staff with flexibility to pursue innovative learning models. But, as the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) points out, “only one area of policy focus—strengthening school leadership—can exert control over all of these challenges simultaneously. Instructional leaders shape the environment in which teachers and students succeed or fail. Even if by some magic we could immediately do what it takes to give all teachers the time and opportunity to upgrade their skills and knowledge, we would still require skillful leadership to ensure that teachers can operate in an environment that values and takes advantage of what they know.”¹

The leadership role played by the school principal is critical. Principals wear many different hats during the school day, but the most effective school principals are not only managers and disciplinarians but also instructional leaders for the school. Successful principals provide a common vision of what good instruction looks like, support teachers with the help and resources they need to be effective in their classrooms, and monitor the performance of teachers and students, with an eye always on the overall goal—to create school cultures or environments in which all children can achieve to their full potentials.

Every day, principals juggle their various roles—administrator, business manager, school safety expert, discipli-

narian, and more—in order to meet what one noted educational researcher refers to as “...the often conflicting needs and interests of many stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, district office officials, unions, state and federal agencies,” noting that “Principals are expected to be educational visionaries, instructional and curriculum leaders, assessment experts, disciplinarians, community builders, public relations/communications experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special programs administrators, as well as guardians of various legal, contractual, and policy mandates and initiatives.”²

While education researchers have documented the importance of instructional leadership, the consensus in the literature is that this important role is seldom practiced.³ One study found that 62 percent of the elementary principal’s time is focused on school management issues, whereas only 6 percent of the time is focused on program or instructional issues. Another study concluded that “if schools are to progress, the principal cannot allow daily duties to interfere with the leadership role in curriculum.”⁴ While many principals agree that they need to transition from their roles as building managers and education reformers to instructional leaders, they also acknowledge that this paradigm shift is often difficult because they are already overwhelmed by the sheer number of managerial and administrative tasks that consume their time and attention.

Better training needed for principals?

What is causing this apparent gap between what principals do and what the research says they should be doing? Many believe the lack of in-depth and appropriate training in the role of instructional leader is a key issue.⁵ Even though 48 states require principals to be certified in educational administration, the quality and content of the certification programs vary greatly

from state to state. Even where principals have access to specialized administrative training, they don't necessarily say the programs equip them for these new leadership roles.

According to a 2003 Public Agenda report, for example, 96 percent of practicing principals said their colleagues were more helpful than their graduate studies in preparing them for the job. And two-thirds of those polled reported that leadership programs in graduate schools of education are "out of touch" with what principals need to know.⁶ Further, the lack of long-term, high quality professional development for principals also seems to be hindering their effectiveness in raising student achievement, supporting reflective practice for teachers in their schools, and providing opportunities to work, discuss, and solve problems with peers.⁷

According to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), a program of the Council of Chief State School Officers, school principals need quality professional development that:⁸

- Validates teaching and learning as the central activities of the school;
- Engages all school leaders in well-planned, integrated, career-long learning to improve student achievement;
- Promotes collaboration to achieve organizational goals while meeting individual needs;
- Models effective learning processes;
- Incorporates measures of accountability that direct attention to valued learning outcomes.

ESEA/NCLB puts leadership in the spotlight

Closing achievement gaps and raising achievement for all students—the stated goals of No Child Left Behind—have become the key educational challenges of the 21st century. While the federal law did not initially point to school leadership as a major factor in achieving these goals, the issue of leadership has gained considerable attention over the past six years of implementation. Principals whose schools do not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) requirements are now held accountable under the law. Under Title I, principals whose students do not perform as required are subject to a series of increasingly greater sanctions, from diminished control over school management to dismissal to dissolution of the entire school. Stepped-up requirements for parental notification under NCLB also have increased public scru-

tiny of principal performance in many low-performing schools, leading to pressure from school boards, community leaders, and parents to produce results fast.

The requirements of NCLB have not only put the spotlight on principals' instructional leadership skills but also make the point evident: academic achievement and instructional leadership are clearly and definitely linked.

A 2006 Wallace Foundation report also highlighted this essential connection between achievement and instructional leadership:

*...behind excellent teaching and excellent schools is excellent leadership—the kind that ensures that effective teaching practices don't remain isolated and unshared in single classrooms...with our national commitment to make every single child a successful learner, the importance of having such a high-quality leader in every school is greater than ever.*⁹

Identifying standards for effective practice

Now that there is widespread agreement that principals must become more focused on their role as instructional leaders, it's important to ask exactly what the standards for effective practice would be. ISLLC has identified a set of standards:¹⁰

- Facilitate the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community;
- Advocate, nurture, and sustain a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth;
- Ensure management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment;
- Collaborate with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs and mobilizing community resources;
- Act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner;
- Understand, respond to, and influence the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

Effective leadership: part of teachers' working conditions

Many management and leadership consultants often say, "People don't quit companies. They quit managers."

It is certainly true that the conditions under which employees work do have a great impact on their satisfaction and productivity, and schools are no different. Today's teachers are seeking school environments that support their work, places where they can have a voice and be recognized for their efforts. How the principal carries out his or her job does have an effect on how the school is organized and on teachers' job satisfaction.

Today, more than ever, recruiting and retaining quality educators is critical to school improvement, so understanding what makes teachers choose to leave a particular school—or to leave the profession entirely, for that matter—is important to know.

According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, close to 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession during the first five years of teaching; annually about 16 percent of teachers leave the schools in which they work.¹¹ Additionally, teachers are almost twice as likely to leave high-poverty as low-poverty schools. This high rate of turnover does not serve the neediest schools because often the departing teachers are replaced with uncertified or less experienced teachers.

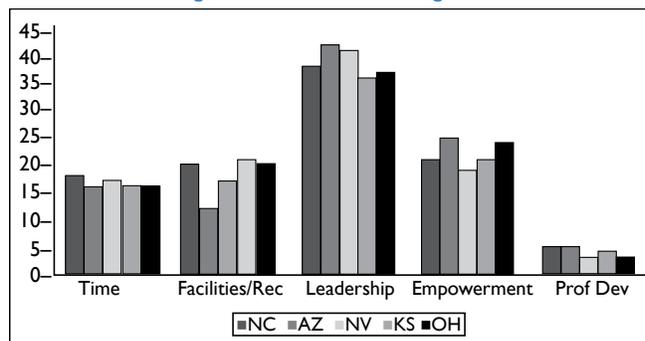
NEA partners with New Teacher Center on working conditions survey

NEA is collaborating with the New Teacher Center (NTC), University of California Santa Cruz, on a working conditions survey of districts and schools. The survey, undertaken by a number of states, offers insights into teachers' perspectives on working conditions, and policymakers and others are using the data to address the unique concerns of the state or district's own teaching force.

The NTC survey results confirm that school working conditions—issues such as time, teacher empowerment, professional development, leadership, and facilities and resources—are critical to both increasing student achievement and retaining teachers.¹² One key finding to date: there is no one factor more important for attracting and retaining teachers and improving schools than a skilled and knowledgeable leader who is responsive to the needs of all teachers and students.

In those states that have conducted a teacher working conditions survey, educators consistently rank leadership as the most important factor affecting their willingness to remain teaching at their schools (Table 1).¹³

Table 1: Teachers selecting working condition that most affects their willingness to remain teaching at their school



Taking this research into account, NEA believes that in addition to performing their everyday, routine tasks, principals also need a clear understanding of the following:

- Developing new skills and learning innovative ways of doing things is essential so that school environments will be safe, flexible, challenging, and responsive to the needs of multicultural populations.
- Successful principals need to develop a comprehensive understanding of school and classroom practices that contribute to high student achievement in order to influence the work of teachers.
- Teachers' working conditions are linked to students' learning conditions, so schools must provide optimal conditions that will benefit both students and staff. These include safe and modern school facilities, fair compensation and benefits for personnel, adequate and sustained funding, sufficient time for planning, community support, and effective and sufficient instructional materials.
- Using student achievement data to guide improvements is critical to managing the curriculum in ways that promote student learning.
- The school work day and work year must be designed to provide teachers with time for collaboration as well as time for professional development that is tied to the teaching and learning process.
- Principals must share authority and responsibility and learn to empower and support teachers.

NEA agrees with policymakers and education reformers that strengthening the skills and knowledge of the nation's 100,000 principals can have more immediate payoff in raising student performance than any other area of school improvement. Effective school leadership is central to raising standards, improving teacher quality, and holding schools accountable for results.

NEA also believes that we need to continue the research on the impact of instructional leadership on working

conditions, so that we can continue addressing issues regarding the connections between what the research says, what educators are doing in practice, and what approaches might be most appropriate for schools.

References

- ¹ National Staff Development Council. *Learning To Lead, Leading To Learn: Improving School Quality Through Principal Professional Development*. Oxford, OH, 2008, www.nsd.org/library/leaders/leader_report.cfm.
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- ³ Brookover, W. B., and L. Lezotte, *Creating Effective Schools*. Holmes Beach, FL: Learning Publication, 1982; Edmonds, R. *Effective Schools for the Urban Poor. Educational Leadership*, 37(1), 15-18, 20-24, 1979; and Flath, B. The Principal as Instructional Leader. *ATA Magazines*, 69(3), 19-22, 47-49, 1989.
- ⁴ Berlin, B., J. Kavanagh, and K. Jensen, The Principal as Curriculum Leader: Expectations vs. Performance. *NASSP Bulletin*, 72(509), 43-49, 1988.
- ⁵ Flath, B. The Principal as Instructional Leader. *ATA Magazines*, 69(3), 19-22, 47-49, 1989.
- ⁶ Farkas, S., J. Johnson, and A. Duffett, Rolling Up Their Sleeves.

Resources

Teacher Working Conditions Surveys: North Carolina: www.northcarolinatwc.org; Kansas: www.kansastwc.org; Arizona: www.aztwc.org; Clark County, Nevada: www.nvtlc.org; Ohio: www.ohiotlc.org; Mississippi: www.projectclearvoice.org.

Surveys coordinated and supported by the New Teacher Center, www.newteachercenter.org

The American Association of School Administrators' Center for System Leadership develops and supports school system leaders who seek to lead the transformation of public education. www.aasa.org/leadership/index.cfm#A

"*Principals: Leaders & Learners*" series, developed by the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the Cerebellum Corporation, is based on the nationally acclaimed book, *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*. www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1240

Principal Leadership magazine, published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, focuses on school leaders' real needs, offering them practical, hands-on strategies for improving their schools. www.nassp.org

Education Leadership: A Bridge to School Reform – this special report on the Wallace Foundation's October 2007 national education conference emphasizes the critical importance of school leadership, and how states and districts are improving it. www.wallacefoundation.org/NR/rdonlyres/256743EA-A2D0-43C4-A8BA-1AF9C2D2635C/0/ABridgetoSchoolReformfinalPDF.pdf

Superintendents and Principals Talk About What's Needed to Fix Public Schools. *Public Agenda*, New York, 2003. www.publicagenda.org/research/pdfs/rolling_up_their_sleeves.pdf.

⁷ Educational Research Service. *Professional Development For School Principals. The Informed Educator Series (WS-0350)*, 1999.

⁸ Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium. *Proposition for Quality Professional Development of School Leaders*. Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2000.

⁹ The Wallace Foundation, *Leadership for Learning: Making the Connections Among State, District and School Policies and Practices*. New York, NY: Wallace Foundation, 2006, www.wallacefoundation.org

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¹¹ Ingersoll, R.M., Teacher Turnover and Teacher Shortages: An Organizational Analysis, *American Educational Research Journal* 38, no. 3, 499-534, 2001.

¹² Hirsch, E., K. Church, and E. Fuller, *Cultivate Learning Environments to Accelerate Recruitment and Retention*. Hillsborough, N.C.: Center for Teaching Quality. July 2007, www.teachingquality.org/pdfs/MS%20Interim_DRAFT_20070716.pdf.

¹³ Hirsch, E., S. Emerick, K. Church, C. Reeves, and E. Fuller, *Creating Conditions for Student and Teacher Success: A Report on the 2006 Kansas Teacher Working Conditions Survey*, Hillsborough, N.C.: Center for Teaching Quality. December 2006, www.kansastwc.org.