

Principal as Instructional Leader: Did the States Lose Sight of the Dream?

Vance Cortez-Rucker, PhD

Lamar University
Beaumont, Texas
4461 quail valley rd
Kountze, tx. 77625, USA

Nancy Adams, Edd

Sandy cortez-rucker, med

Abstract

The idea of the principal as the effective instructional leader has now been with us for approximately 40 years. This article will briefly review the concept and development of effective leaders and then will review the latest research to answer the question: Have we succeeded by placing the principal in this exhausted state?

Keywords: principal, instructional leader, effective school research, effective school correlates

A Historical Review

A paper by Ruth Ash and Maurice Persall (2004), both professors at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, discussed the idea that the modern principal is the chief learning officer. The two professors stressed the importance of the new direction of the local school principal and suggested that, in this new era of education, the building principal, rather than edicts or directives, will enhance the quality of thinking of those within the organization. This will create learning opportunities that will enable the staff and faculty to become leaders themselves. The authors then say that the adage of “Doing things right” rather than “Doing the right thing” will be more highly valued. They stress, however, that at the present time, most of our modern schools were designed instructionally and managerially in the nineteenth century: “The schools of yesterday and today are not the kind of schools we need for tomorrow” (p. 2).

In a slight twist to the Deming direction of management, Ash and Persall listed the following as essential functions of an effective principal for the new schools of tomorrow:

- Create team learning, productive thinking, and collaborative problem solving.
- View teachers as leaders and school principals as leaders of leaders.
- Allow trust to drive working relationships, with the job of the leader to drive out fear.
- Move from demanding conformity and compliance to encouraging and supporting innovation and creativity.
- Focus on people and processes, and be customer-focused and servant-based.
- Create networks that foster two-way communication.
- Be sure of proximity, visibility, and being close to the customer.
- Empower the people within the school to do the work without interference.
- Don't fear to operate in an environment of uncertainty, constantly learning how to exploit systemic change, rather than maintaining the status quo.

Later in the article, they quoted Stanley Davis from his book 2001 Management. This quote is particularly valuable as we review the effective school principal:

Many years ago I asked an executive responsible for the future development of a very large corporation, ‘What do you worry about most on your job?’ His answer was startling, ‘I worry most about what my people do not know they do not know. What they know they don't know they're able to work on and find the answer to. But they can't do that if they don't know they don't know. ‘The authors went on to express their view that the principal of the future will need to be able to approach the future by understanding predictions and scenario planning.

The effective instructional leader will need to be aware of emerging trends in society in order to structure curricular and instructional strategies that will properly prepare students. The key to school improvement is school leadership. Battlefield commander, small business executive, and front-line managers are all titles that could be held by school leadership, according to Hess and Kelly (2007). Michael Fullan (2002) expressed the view that “Characterizing instructional leadership as the principal’s central role has been a valuable first step in increasing student learning” (p. 17). However, he stressed that we have not gone far enough.

He says that our effective leaders must be able to change the learning cultures of schools and transform the teaching profession itself. He accepts that the best examples of success are represented by the accomplishments at the effective level—high performance standards, with corresponding results. But he said they do not go deep enough and that only lasting reforms implemented by the executive leaders will create enduring greatness. He suggests that creating and sharing knowledge is central to effective leadership, but says that, within the cultures of change, the leader must be committed to develop and share that knowledge: “An organization cannot flourish—at least, not for long—on the actions of the top leader alone. Schools and districts need many leaders at many levels” (p. 19).”

Authors such as Freiberg (1998) and Lezotte and Pepperi (1990) all wrote that the principal in an effective school will persistently communicate the mission to parents, staff, and students. They also said that application of the characteristics of instructional effectiveness and management of instructional programs will also be observable. Larry Lashway (2000), in a review of articles about effective principals, said that principals traditionally have been accountable for doing their jobs well. He went on to suggest that, in the past, principals were responsible for treating teachers fairly, listening to parents, exercising instructional leadership, and staying within the budget. Today’s demands include not only the above, but also high student achievement.

Lashway further contended that the new principals will need to balance autonomy and central authority issues, and their new direction will need to be facilitative rather than directive. The instructional leader will also need to understand the two environments in which student performance thrives: classroom environment (student–teacher interaction) and successful instructional strategies (organization). The principal as the instructional leader will need to allow the teacher the flexibility to interact with students and establish unique teaching atmospheres while at the same time guiding the instructional direction of the school.

In another study, Lashway found that the principal will need to model leadership that embodies an explicit attempt to overcome the isolation of teachers by encouraging teachers’ direct involvement in the life of the school. He suggested that in today’s atmosphere, the principal must carve out a leadership style: “The principal can also provide a strong leadership role by acting as the conscience of the school” (p. 11). He explained that to do this, the principal will have to bring into account all the particular nuances of his/her school and to blend history, personalities, community contexts, and organizational cultures to make all of the above successful.

Owings and Kaplan (2000) suggested that a major responsibility of the principal as instructional leader is to increase students’ ownership and investment in their schoolwork.

Hill and Crevola (1999) explain that this is done by teachers using research-supported instructional best practices that actively engage all students in the learning process. Darling-Hammond (1999) and Wasley (1999) referred to the teachers’ repertoire of teaching techniques: ongoing instructionally-focused professional development activities, frequent classroom observations, and teacher conferences. Richard DuFour (2002) stated that “Educators are gradually redefining the role of the principal from instructional leaders with a focus on teaching to the leader of a professional community with a focus on learning” (p. 15). He stressed that the instructional leader of the past concentrated on learning and its inputs on the process itself. He said the new leader focuses on school community and outcomes, and that principals should be leaders who promote student and teacher learning.

The Instructional Leader Today

A recent study by the George W. Bush Institute (2013) examined the importance of understanding the role of the principal as it is perceived across the nation. The research gave confusing parodies of the way states viewed the principalship: “The research is clear; principals are critical to school improvement and student achievement (p.7).” The study explains that without a high quality principal, students are unlikely to have successive years of effective teaching. The research concludes that strong teachers leave a school if they do not feel the principal supports them and the overall educational environment.

It seems clear that after more than 30 years of effective school research, modeling, national discussion, and implementation, the very nature of the principal remains in disarray nationally. Research by Briggs et al. (2013) shows the lack of cohesiveness and the ineffectiveness of states to carry through with the original conceptual framework of the Effective Schools research. The data showed that of the 50 states reviewed, 19 states were unable to report how many students graduate from state-approved principal preparation programs. Seven states could not identify their newly prepared and licensed principals; 28 states did not require collection of any outcome data on principal preparation programs; 39 states did not have principal job retention data; and 37 states did not have data on principal job effectiveness as measured by student achievement.

The basic result of the research was disheartening: “In many cases, states are not effectively using their authority to improve the supply of high-quality school leaders, and in general, states lack key data on the supply and quality of school leaders (p.7).” The principal as an effective leader has been a bedrock of the Effective School Movement for approximately 40 years. As of now, that bedrock is not identifiable, quantifiable, or able to be evaluated by most of the states of the United States (Briggs et al., 2013). The Wallace Foundation (2011), which is supporting numerous research projects, states that a noteworthy finding reinforces the concept that school leadership and improved student achievement go together. If so, with empirical data clear on this subject, why have the states missed the opportunity to identify, quantify, and evaluate their own principals’ leadership?

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