

Principal's Research Review

Supporting the Principal's Data-Informed Decisions

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Effective Principals in Action

By **Jody D. Spiro**

Walk into a great school and you'll see the imprint of a great principal.

Here's what you might notice: a colorful banner in the entrance that sums up a vision for the school that all children can succeed. The prominent chart on a wall near the office details student attendance by grade, class, and, in the case of students who haven't missed a day, by name—one small indicator of how the principal uses data.

Throughout the hallways, you'll get hints of the principal's efforts to focus the whole school community on learning: here a bulletin board keeping track of how many books the children have read so far this year in their spare time, there a bulletin board where the parent-teacher group offers tips to parents on homework completion. And then, there's what you'll hear through open classroom doors: engaging lessons, a sign of the first-rate instruction that has emerged from talented teachers working under the guidance of a school leader who observes and coaches them so they get even better.

This is not your 1960's school, and it's not your 1960's principal. Once, principals focused mostly on the "Bs"—buses, boilers, and books—managing the staff, creating rules and procedures, making sure the school was operating smoothly (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). Lip service may have been paid to the principal's role in boost-

ing instruction—"principal" was originally meant to describe the "principal teacher"—but principals were largely removed from the world of the classroom.

Now, educators and policy makers increasingly accept that learning should be at the center of a school leader's job and that a good principal participates in the life of the school, more often than not shaping its course from inside the classroom and outside the office. Yes, good principals are good administrators. But most important, they are instructional leaders, providing staff with guidance and a sense of mission and students with the motivation to succeed.

Evolving Role: Principal as Instructional Leader

The ways schools were managed began to shift in the 1970s, as influential studies showed that effective schools are characterized by a learning-oriented culture. Still, the idea that principals should focus sharply on teaching and learning did not emerge prominently until later, when educators and policy makers became persuaded that school leadership matters to student achievement. Their views were borne out in 2010, in *Learning from Leadership* (Louis et al., 2010), the largest study to date looking at the effect of leadership on student achievement. The report, written by researchers at the Universities

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of Minnesota and Toronto, confirmed that next to classroom instruction, leadership is the most important school-related influence on student learning. “To date,” the report says, “we have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership” (p. 9).

What makes leadership crucial? While most school variables, considered separately, have small effects on learning, good leadership can pull the pieces together. “To obtain large effects, educators need to create synergy across the relevant variables,” the report says. “Among all the parents, teachers, and policy makers who work hard to improve education, educators in leadership positions are uniquely well positioned to ensure the necessary synergy” (p. 9).

In a dozen years of working with states, districts, researchers, and others, the Wallace Foundation (which supported the Minnesota-Toronto study) has tried to identify what makes that synergy possible. A report published in 2012 by Wallace, *The School Principal as Leader*, pinpointed five key practices of effective principals. This article delves into each practice, offering snapshots of dynamic principals, many from districts where Wallace has supported projects, and demonstrating the power and promise of strong school leadership.

#1. Shaping a Vision of Success for All Students

Setting high standards and appropriate, rigorous goals for every student is an essential part of the job of effective school leaders, according to researchers at Vanderbilt University. “The research literature over the last quarter century has consistently supported the notion that having high expectations for all, including clear and public standards, is one key to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students, and for raising the overall academic achievement of all students,” they say (Porter et al., 2008, p. 13).

During his first year as principal of Peachtree Ridge High School in Gwinnett County, GA, outside Atlanta, Kevin Tashlein asked himself what he

needed to do “to learn about, recognize, and support the expertise in our building” toward a big goal: enhancing an already strong school. Tashlein pored over school data. He also sought the views of a range of people—including students, teachers, and parents. “I asked a lot of questions,” he says, “and I talked to a lot of folks.” The result, Tashlein says, was a vision that goes something like this: Peachtree Ridge should “create experiences that generate leadership, engagement, and ownership of the life of our school for both students and staff, maximizing the chances that every student will graduate, have a diploma in hand, and a viable postsecondary plan.” To help promote this idea, Tashlein reached out to a marketing class, which took the school’s motto, The Standard of Excellence, and built a campaign around it, called In Pursuit of The Standard of Excellence, complete with student-created lesson plans, wristbands, and letters of commitment in which students wrote down their academic goals. Tashlein adds that making sure everyone is dedicated to the vision is ongoing work. “Keeping people committed is critically important,” he says.

Getting teachers to embrace the school vision can require sensitivity and finesse, as Mikel Royal learned. One of the first things she set out to do as principal of Samuels Elementary School in Denver, CO, was to have staff coalesce around the idea of all students performing well, in spite of the high-poverty backgrounds

many of them came from. But the way she posed the problem at an early staff meeting—asking why 50 percent of the school’s children were failing—fell flat. “The staff was overwhelmed and felt really bad about their profession and about the job that they were doing,” she recalls. “That, of course, was not the intent and obviously didn’t help get us to our

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goal of setting that vision.”

At the next meeting, Royal took the glass-half-full approach, asking why it was that 50 percent of Samuels Elementary students had managed to succeed, despite the difficulties they face. The energy in the room surged, and teachers began recognizing one another’s work and sharing classroom practices, she recalls. A simple change in wording, Royal said, helped spur the faculty to concentrate on what they needed to do to support the children now collectively referred to as “the other 50 percent.”

#2. Creating a Climate Hospitable to Education

A good principal knows how to shape a culture in which the vision can be achieved. This means instituting the basics of safety and orderliness. It also means fostering a supportive environment for students and a strong sense among teachers that they’re part of a professional community focused on student learning, according to the Vanderbilt researchers (Goldring et al., 2007). Creating such a culture is an art that good principals approach in varied ways. At Paris Elementary School in Paris, KY, Rachelle Schjoll starts every school day with a schoolwide Morning Meeting to recognize students for distinguished work, such as high test scores or homework completion. At Sanders Elementary School in Louisville, KY, Pam Cooper makes sure the school takes public note of students’ academic or social achievements through Principal Passes.

Recipients of these bright orange certificates visit the office for a big “Kentucky yeehaw” from the staff and stop off at the bookstore for a free trinket, autographing the Principal Pass poster along the way. “Students smile from ear to ear,” Cooper says.

Research shows that principals at schools with high teacher ratings for “instructional climate” are also principals who rank highest when it comes to developing an atmosphere of caring and trust (Louis et al., 2010). The message is that good principals

make sure teachers feel safe, valued, and cared for. When Jonathan Foy arrived as principal of Eagle Academy in New York City, he found a “very fractured” school community. To set the school on a new path, he took the entire staff on a two-day retreat that “allow[ed] teachers to publicly acknowledge other teachers for the work they had done” and re-establish ties. “Part of the definition of community is a group of people who trust one another,” says Foy.

Building a hospitable climate also means looking beyond the school’s walls and involving parents and the community at large, as Phillip Carr, principal of Spoto High School (near Tampa, FL) sought to do in making his school “an anchor in the community.” His efforts included the “biggest little parade,” a homecoming celebration designed to resonate not only with students but with parents, many of whom had never participated in traditional

after-school activities because they had been bused long distances to school when they were youngsters. Carr and his staff closed the roadway in front of the school, outfitted students with homecoming gowns, and borrowed Corvettes from local car enthusiasts. “Our students had the opportunity to participate in a traditional homecoming parade, and it has continued to pay dividends,” he says, noting that parents and students alike often tell him how much the event meant to them. Sometimes, Carr adds, “The smallest thing can have the largest impact.”

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#3. Cultivating Leadership in Others

The image of the lonely-at-the-top hero principal is popular, but off the mark. One of the most important things principals can do to improve student achievement is to spread leadership around, according to the Minnesota-Toronto study. “Compared with lower-achieving schools, higher-achieving schools provided all stakeholders with greater influence on decisions,” the report says of the schools it studied. One explanation, according to researchers, is that principals willing to share leadership benefit from the “collec-

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tive knowledge and wisdom” in their school communities (p. 35).

Good principals seem to understand this instinctively. Carr worked to develop his school’s department chairs into a leadership team. Department chairs, he says, “are the experts in their fields,” but typically assisted only with administrative matters, such as managing textbook inventory or arranging for substitute teachers. Carr put them in charge of running their departments, including handling crucial activities like assessment and interpretation of student and teacher data. “I gave them the onus and the responsibility,” he says. “We tried to allow them to take the ownership—and they have blossomed.”

Marie Jackson, at Samuel Chase Elementary in Prince George’s County, MD, outside of Washington, D.C., had a similar experience after she and her staff began to develop a way to monitor student progress. Initially, Jackson led the project. She quickly realized, however, that having a staff member in charge would promote buy-in from others. “Sometimes, teachers work better when they hear from other teachers,” she says.

For Sarah Jacobsen Capps, who recently became principal of Dunbar Elementary Magnet School in Hillsborough County, FL, cultivating leadership can begin with recognizing potential in those who haven’t recognized it in themselves. Capps recalls the emotional scene at her previous principal post, Lanier Elementary School, after she told one 23-year teaching veteran that others looked up to her as a leader. “She started to cry,” Capps says, noting that no one had ever told the teacher she had leadership promise. Capps’ slogan for the school year is: “Lead with me.”

#4. Improving Instruction

Good instruction is the foundation of any successful school. Effective principals boost teaching through everything from keeping track of teachers’ professional development needs to monitoring instruction in the classroom.

University of Washington researchers who observed urban schools that have made some progress in improving student learning noticed that

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leaders there sought “to give substantive feedback to teachers and retain a connection with what was happening in classrooms,” with practices that included “informal classroom observations, targeted learning walks, and leading and participating in professional development during grade-level and content-area meetings, whole staff meetings, or in classrooms with teachers” (Portin et al., 2009, p. 67).

Another way that principals can foster better instruction is to encourage faculty members to collaborate with and learn from one another. “Leadership effects on student achievement occur largely because effective leadership strengthens professional community — a special environment within which teachers work together to improve their practice and improve student learning,” the Minnesota-Toronto study says. “Professional community, in turn, is a strong predictor of instructional practices that are strongly

associated with student achievement” (Louis, 2010, p. 37).

Principals — to say nothing of students — benefit from the ideas that emerge from teacher collaboration. Just ask Erica Zigelman, principal of The Renaissance Leadership Academy (MS 322), a middle school in New York City. When Zigelman’s language learner teachers came to her with a plan for improving instruction by changing the way students were grouped and increasing the time they spent on language acquisition skills, Zigelman gave them the go-ahead—and the results included better student performance on standardized exams. “One thing I’ve learned . . . is to listen to staff, especially if you want to improve the quality of instruction,” she says.

Given the demands on their time, many principals struggle with devoting enough attention to instruction. A study that looked at how 75 principals involved in a project to enable them to devote more time to instruction found that initially these school leaders spent, on average, only about one-third of their working hours on instruction-related tasks (Turnbull et al., 2009). The bulk of the day was occupied in activities ranging from supervising noninstructional staff members to doing cafeteria duty.

Finding time to be fully engaged in instruction isn’t easy, but effective principals manage to do so. At Stewart Middle Magnet School in Hillsborough County, FL, principal Baretta Wilson changed her school’s schedule—and gave up some of her own scheduled meeting time—to ensure that teachers could work together in professional learning communities. She also brought in resources, such as new software, to provide teachers with access to real-time data on student progress. Why do all this? “Ongoing professional development is critical to any organization,” she says.

#5. Managing People, Data, and Processes to Foster School Improvement

Effective principals are good managers. They hire well, recognize strengths in the faculty and staff, and capitalize on those strengths. “I created an open door

policy, which means that [teachers and staff] are free to come and speak with me if they have concerns, if they have ideas of programs they would like to try, if they have ideas about grants they would like to write,” says Debra Scott, principal of Kanoheda Elementary School in Gwinnett County, GA.

Good leaders also acknowledge that sometimes staff changes are necessary. That’s what Michael Alcott, who works with principals in New York City, found when he assisted with the successful turnaround of a failing school in the South Bronx. “What we worked on with them, first, was moving certain people out of the school who were very negative to the school culture,” he says. Other steps included getting school leaders into classrooms frequently to observe teachers and provide them with timely and meaningful feedback, creating hallways that celebrated student achievement, and revamping teacher professional development.

Principals also know how to exploit data for sound decision making. Marie Jackson, the Prince George’s County, MD, principal, holds quarterly meetings in which her teachers analyze data to identify three of their strengths and three of their weaknesses, so they can then form a plan to improve how they work. “The school is run by data,” she says.

Shaping and Supporting Effective Principals

Good school principals, like good teachers, do not walk through the doors of their buildings fully formed. Learning and applying the key practices takes time and guidance, and demands constant adjustment, improvement, and growth. Increasingly, politicians and policy makers are recognizing both the importance of good school principals and what’s needed to shape them. The \$4.35 billion fed-

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eral Race to the Top program, for example, counts “recruiting, developing, rewarding, and retaining effective teachers and principals” as one of its key goals. States are beginning to do their part, too. In 2010, almost half of the nation’s state legislatures passed laws to bolster school leadership, through everything from how principals are certified to how they are mentored (Shelton, 2011). Recent years have also seen the emergence of innovative alternative principal training providers, with programs provided by such groups as the NYC Leadership Academy. Its main goal is to get a first-rate principal into every school—especially schools where students have the greatest needs. [PRR](#)

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