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If instruction is to improve in American schools, the principal's role must change.

The Principal as an Instructional Leader: Myth or Reality?

by William Georgiades

American school systems have been the recipient of both considerable praise and criticism by their publics. Forty years ago, as the United States emerged as a prime victor in World War II, the success of the American society was strongly attributed to the influence and contribution of its school systems. However, the "Toynbee-like" rise and fall of civilizations seems also to be characteristic of the popularity, and lack of popularity, which American school systems experience. Today, instead of finding themselves in the role of T.S. Eliot's aristocratic "Bustopher Jones," most American school systems find themselves in the role of the impoverished "Gus." The gap between glory and honor, disdain and poverty, is indeed a short one.

There is a plethora of information which supports the argument that students fail in school primarily for reasons that have little to do with what happens in schools. Coleman's work, and that of others, have supported this position. In some cases, such conclusions naturally result from an improper interpretation of studies on school populations. In other cases, such conclusions may be a direct expression of the researcher's biases or assumptions. For many years our teachers have been taught that certain children are deprived of "culture," and consequently are unable to profit from school experiences for which "culture" is a prerequisite. The research by H. Ginsberg in **The Myth of the Deprived Child: Poor Children's Intellect and Education,** discusses this position. Other researchers, such as A. Jensen in **Bias and Mental Testing,** have concluded that failing learners are intellectually deficient. And still others have argued that a learner's low socioeconomic level explains a low school achievement level.

Obviously, "culture," "intellect," and "socioeconomic status," are factors that do intervene in the school learning process. They are global, pervasive, stable, contextual, for genetic factors, and do influence what the student learns in school. However, the position that educators can do little to adopt the school to address such variables is increasingly challenged.

In recent years, the work of Edmonds, Lezotte, Brookover and others have shown that schools can alter the product outcomes of their students by introducing significantly different variables within the school climate. Currently, the mainstream of educational interests and activities among researchers and policy-makers seems to concentrate on analyzing schools that have failed, and in particular, those that have been successful. It has taken the educational profession a number of years to look at significant examples of high student achievement in schools where such achievement would not ordinarily be expected.

In the Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study (BTES), initiated at the request of the California Teacher Preparation and Licensing Committee, and conducted first by the Educational Testing Service, and later by the Far West Regional Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, "successful" schools were compared to "unsuccessful" schools. This data has been further elaborated on by the work of Jane Stallings and others. Among the findings which have emerged impacting directly on the role of the principal, is that faculty and principals in productive schools believe all students are capable of mastering basic skills objectives. A second significant summation from the research is that in productive schools, the principal acts as an instructional leader, is assertive, is a disciplinarian, and assumes responsibility for the evaluation of achievement.

The historical position maintained by J. Lloyd Trump throughout his illustrious career that the principal makes the difference and must be the instructional leader of the school is a hypothesis which is now being validated by the preceding thinking and research.

The Principal Makes the Difference

Changing educational practice is much too complex for simplistic explanations, yet one thing seems clear. Schools must opt for significant and meaningful change during the remaining 15 years of this century, or schools as we know them today will lose their impact in the education of American children and youth. When a school implements a new program, or changes an existing one, the principal is the key to the success or failure of that effort. As an instructional leader, the principal's job is to help the people in the school make educational programs work. There is no program that a school can buy or create that will increase achievement in a school unless the people who work there want to make the program work. Improving achievement often requires different instructional methods or new materials. Changing educational practice is intrinsically disruptive. Change threatens people; it upsets established routines; it takes extra energy and time; it challenges the status quo.

How do successful principals become curriculum specialists and provide significant leadership for change in their schools? What leadership styles do they employ? What roles do they play? What administrative behaviors work best? Obviously, there is no one answer to these questions. However, three things are crucial for principals.

First, the principal is the person who must be the school's instructional leader and provide leadership for school improvement. If the principal fails to recognize that a problem exists, and that instructional improvement is necessary, little is likely to happen.

Second, the principal must recognize that he or she will be most effective when leadership behaviors match staff expectations. In fact, the principal's ability as an instructional leader to selectively use a variety of leadership

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styles to match the situation, the task, and the expectations of subordinates is a key to success. Determining the type of curriculum leadership that is appropriate for any given situation is a skill. It involves recognizing the conditions inherent in varying situations and consciously deciding how goals might be best achieved in those circumstances. In order to do this, curriculum-oriented principals must recognize available options, and apply them to varying circumstances.

Third, the principal must play a variety of roles and realize that those roles will change as the process of improving a program evolves. In studying principals who successfully implemented new programs in their schools, one group of researchers found that the successful principal was many things:

> . . . he or she was a *believer*, feeling a genuine commitment to the project; an *advocate* who promoted and defended the project before a variety of audiences; a *linker* who connected the project with other parts of the system; a *resources acquirer* who obtained and allocated tangible and intangible resources for the project; an *employer* who hired project staff or assigned teachers to it; a *manager* who provided problem-solving assistance and support; a *delegator* who "moved backstage" when teachers assumed leadership; a *supporter* with words of encouragement and acts of assistance; and an *information source* who gave feedback to teachers and project staff.[1]

A Matter of Style

When a principal chooses a leadership style, there is always the question of how much authority and responsibility he or she will give to others. Tannenbaum and Schmidt suggest that there are six leadership styles that fall on a continuum from high authority and responsibility vested in the principal to high authority and responsiblity vested in the staff, as shown in Figure 1.[2]

When *telling*, the principal chooses a course of action and tells the staff what they are expected to do. The staff does not participate in decisions. When *selling*, the principals usually makes a decision and then attempts to persuade the staff to accept it. When *testing*, the principal proposes a solution and asks the staff to react to it. When *consulting*, the principal gives the staff a chance to influence a decision from the beginning. The principal may present the problem and related information, but the staff is asked to offer solutions. The principal then select the solution he or she believes will be most effective. When *delegating*, the principal gives the decision-making responsibility to the staff with or without reserving veto power or modification rights. When *joining*, the principal is an equal participant in the decision-making process, and has no more or no less power than other members of the staff.

Figure 1. Continuum of Authority and Responsibility Vested in the Principal and the Staff

Principal maximum		Staff maximum
Staff minimum		Principal minimum
Telling	Selling Testing Consulting Delegating Joining	

Each of these leadership styles can be effective, and there are other models that provide sound conceptualizations of behaviors to guide administrative action. Two points in particular should be kept in mind. Effective administrators acknowledge their limitations and recognize the roles they do not perform well. Also, it is not a principal's intention that determines whether a particular style will be effective; it is how that style affects other people. In other words, the staff's response and reaction to a principal's actions determines whether the choice of a particular style was a wise one.

The Context

Improvements in educational practice occur in the context of a school setting. That context always has two dimensions—the job to be done, the *task*, and the people involved, the *process*. Both of these dimensions require the principal's attention. Successful principals understand the difference between the two and use appropriate administrative behaviors in both dimensions.

In dealing with the task of improving curricular programs, the most important responsibilities of the principal are: (1) to understand what is being done; (2) to demonstrate commitment to the project and visualize its intended outcomes; (3) to negotiate competing pressures within and outside the school; and (4) to allocate and use resources effectively.

A principal's knowledge of a project is critical to the staff's feeling that they can depend on administrative understanding and support for their work. The principal is not necessarily expected to know everything about the project, or to be an "expert" on every school task. But the staff expects the principal to have sufficient understanding to work effectively with them and to communicate the school's efforts eloquently. When teachers are doing something new, they are taking more risks than they normally would. They expect the principal to understand the demands placed on them, to value their mistakes as well as their failures, and to communicate to others what they are attempting and why they are attempting it.

Principals must demonstrate a strong commitment to curriculum programs in their schools. Nothing kills an improvement effort faster than a staff who believes the principal does not care about the project. Thus, the principal's visible commitment is critical to success. Teachers are quick to recognize superficial commitment. Principals must "practice what they preach." They cannot expect teachers to change if they are unwilling to accommodate needed changes in their own roles.

Schools are political. Competition for resources is keen and special interests vie constantly for control. The political implications of any effort to change the school must be understood by the principal, who must competently explain, defend, protect, and run interference for the project. Often, only the principal is in a position to negotiate competing pressures. There are criticisms and misunderstandings whenever a school changes unless the principal provides effective liaison and communication linkages within the school district and into the community.

Resources are the ingredients that improve curricular programs. They are tangible and intangible; they include money, people, materials, equipment, and influence. The principal is expected to acquire resources and allocate them in ways that assure success. Resource needs for successful curriculum implementation may be as diverse as an "opening" in the school schedule, space in the building, or the use of influence and leadership to obtain regulatory waivers or community and school volunteers.

The other dimension of the school setting that con-

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cerns principals is the people who bring about the improvements. The principal who works effectively with people in the school and community employs behaviors that: (1) clarify roles to be performed; (2) encourage involvement and participation; (3) communicate support and personal commitment; and (4) provide staff with feedback that facilitates growth in skills and confidence.

Managing the task (job to be done) and managing the process (dealing with the people involved) simultaneously may seem dichotomous. The principal may feel caught between the management demands of both dimensions. Yet, knowing when to handle the people problems and when to attend to task concerns is one of the most important skills an administrator can develop.

Change threatens some people. In fact, having to depart from established routines and ways of thinking and doing things can create serious psychological trauma. Hall and others found that teachers go through predictable stages of concern in their efforts to create new programs.[3] Initially, teachers may have little concern about becoming involved in a new program, but they begin to seek more information as their awareness of an innovation increases. Personal concerns mount as teachers realize they may become personally involved with an innovation. Questions regarding professional and personal adequacy to meet new demands surface, and status issues emerge. At the point of initial program implementation, teachers' concerns about day-to-day processes and tasks increase. This stage, called management concerns, continues until teachers develop a smooth and routine procedure. In the next stage, teachers' concerns are likely to shift to program consequences for students. Finally, teachers may also experience concerns about collaborating with others and about exploring ways to modify the innovation to increase student achievement.

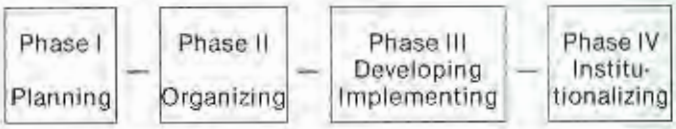
Hall and his colleagues also found that as people change from one set of educational practices to another, they experience predictable difficulties. Normally, teachers go through several levels of use as an innovation is implemented. From a state of non-use, teachers begin to learn more about a new program and enter an orientation stage and a preparation stage. At the point that implementation begins, teachers are mechanical users; that is, they direct their efforts primarily to managing the day-to-day, short-term demands a new program usually presents. As routine patterns for using the innovation develop, teachers' usage patterns stabilize. Changes in program use proceed from formal or informal evaluation data, rather than from attempts to overcome difficulties. Finally, teachers reach the refinement level when program modifications affect both short- and long-term consequences for students.

Knowledge of an individual staff member's "stages of concern" and "levels of use" allows the principal to provide assistance and support when needed. For example, a teacher who is experiencing frustration and difficulties getting something new to work in the classroom does not need a sermon on the long-term benefits of the new program. What that teacher needs is someone to illustrate how to make the program work in the classroom.

The Principal's Role in Managing Programs to Improve Curriculum

Most programs for educational improvement go through similar cycles or stages in their development. Each cycle requires the principal to play a somewhat different role and to choose administrative behaviors appropriate for varying situations. A simple way of thinking about project cycles is to consider the major phases of a program's growth, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Phases of Program Growth



Phase I: Planning

The major activities associated with Phase I, planning, involve (1) developing awareness that change is needed; (2) defining the problem to be solved; (3) assessing the school's readiness for change; (4) identifying and evaluating alternative solutions; and (5) deciding on a course of action.

The principal's commitment is absolutely essential to launching and planning an effort to improve curriculum programs. He or she is usually in the best position to recognize that change is needed. The principal has access to a wide range of information including student achievement records, observations, and reactions from staff and parents. He or she can also underscore the importance of responding affirmatively to existing needs. It is most appropriate, therefore, that the principal present information about the problem and possible procedures for solving it after gathering faculty ideas. Diagnostic and consulting leadership styles are likely to be effective for this phase.

As awareness of a need for change in the school is established, the principal must involve faculty in deciding what course of action to follow. Those who are expected to implement the change should join the program planning effort as early as possible. Without joint planning, problems may arise later in operating the program according to original intentions. People also like to participate in making decisions that affect them; it generates a feeling of control and contributes to a sense of trust in collaborative relationships.

Schools, like people, vary in their capacity to accommodate change. It is important that the principal take time to assess the school's readiness for change, which can be done by studying existing conditions and asking the following questions:

1. How strongly is the staff committed to the need for curriculum improvement? Do they believe achievement can be strengthened?
2. How stable is the staff? Will those who plan new curricular directions implement them?
3. Does the faculty work collaboratively? Do they need to develop new collaborative skills?
4. What technical skills will be needed to implement the new program? Does the faculty have those skills? Can they be developed quickly through in-service programs or other means?
5. Does the school climate encourage cooperation and collaborative efforts?
6. Is the faculty willing to take risks? Will they try something new? How do they handle frustration and failure?

During another important aspect of the planning phase, the planners analyze proposed program alternatives to determine their likelihood of success. Each option has a

potential impact on the school and its personnel. It is necessary to recognize and understand this impact at the outset. Some programs require major changes in role and teaching behaviors and some are harder to implement successfully than others. Some programs necessitate expensive equipment acquisition or facility modifications. Further, a school can become overloaded with new programs and innovations. As a result, the faculty may be unable to adjust to the many new demands placed on them. When this occurs, efforts to improve education are usually aborted.

During the planning phase of the program, the principal's major roles are as a *leader,* providing the initiative and motivation for addressing the problems; as an *information source,* assisting in the delineation of the problem's parameters and in the identification of possible acceptable solutions; as an *advocate,* expressing commitment to the appropriate solution; and as a *linker,* uniting the school, the central administration, and the community to ensure support and needed resources.

Phase II: Organizing

In the second phase of the program, organizing, the people and resources needed to implement the program are acquired and organized. Effective leadership styles for this phase involve selling, testing, consulting, and delegating.

Personnel to operate the program will most likely be obtained in one of two ways: if resources are available, new personnel might be hired; otherwise existing staff roles will need to be redefined. When selecting personnel, the principal should seek individuals who have needed technical skills and who display an ability to work effectively with others. They should be highly motivated and committed to the project. In some cases, special interests may need to be protected and represented. Such factors as grade level, department representation, and sex and ethnic differences may need to be considered.

In some schools, it may be difficult to "bring everybody along" in a new effort to improve curriculum. However, it is important that *all* faculty know what is being proposed and how the new program might affect them. While some faculty may never choose to join the new program, they should be encouraged to remain neutral and not actively resist program efforts.

After staff selection and program organization, the principal's key role is to *delegate* appropriate responsibility and authority for program implementation. This may be especially difficult for some principals, particularly if they are authoritative in style or if they had great personal involvement in the program's design. Delegating is not abdicating, however, and the principal should remember that ultimate responsibility and accountability will remain in his or her office. The principal should also carefully examine program management responsibility and consciously decide how much authority to share with the program staff.

Effective delegation of responsibility gives the staff a clear charge. This charge communicates expectations and achieves agreement on roles and outcomes. The principal's charge to the staff states in detail the task to be accomplished, sets deadlines, identifies constraints and nonnegotiables (such as policies, regulations, and the like), establishes limits of authority, and announces the principal's personal preferences for program operation. During this phase, the principal's chief roles are as *employer,* selecting and assigning staff; and as *delegator,* setting forth the task to be accomplished.

Phase III: Developing and Implementing

During Phase III, developing and implementing the program, the principal's role usually shifts from leader to manager. Principals generally assume a much less directive role and use more relationship-oriented administrative behaviors. Appropriate leadership styles include delegating and joining.

During this phase, instructional materials are acquired or developed, new teaching methods are tried, staff training is provided, and the program is put "on line." This is the most likely time for unanticipated problems to arise. Procedures won't work as planned, or resources are inadequate, or the program generates critical reactions from parents, students, or the school board. This phase can be especially frustrating for the principal for he or she must patiently allow the staff sufficient latitude to do the job. "Patiently" means taking a back seat even when the "I-can-do-it-better-by-myself" urge becomes strong.

Effective principals remember that their ultimate goal is to remove themselves from the program; that is, to have the staff so fully committed and competent in operating the program that they forget the principal was ever substantially involved in providing initiative and leadership for the effort.

Formal program evaluation should begin during this phase. Information about student achievement and student-teacher satisfaction with the program should be gathered. The principal also should constantly seek information on program staff morale and student and community attitudes toward the new instructional program. Is it receiving "bouquets or brickbats" from the central administration and the community? It is especially important that those who are not directly involved with the program perceive that they are getting their fair share of the principal's attention and the school's resources. The perception that the program provides "special favors" to a select few should be especially avoided.

It is crucial that the principal provide a high degree of support to staff during this phase. Recognizing achievement, working collaboratively to resolve problems, listening, extending empathy, expressing thanks, providing feedback, offering assistance, checking with staff to find out how they are doing and what they are feeling, going to inservice meetings, and attending program staff conferences are ways a principal says, "I care; we can make it together for it is important to our school and our students."

During Phase III, the principal's major roles are as *advocate,* selling, protecting and defending the program; as *linker,* connecting the project to other parts of the school system and the community; and as *resource acquirer,* using skill and influence to obtain and to allocate needed resources.

Phase IV: Institutionalizing

In the final phase of the program cycle, overall success is judged, and decisions on continuation are made. If deemed worthy, the program moves from an experimental form into an institutionalized routine. During this time, the principal assumes consulting, evaluative, and selling styles of leadership.

If accurate data on program outcomes have been systematically collected, and if the principal has taken the temperature of the faculty and students along the way, it would seem fairly simple to determine whether the program merits continuation. It is important, however, that principals in-

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clude the faculty in deciding whether to retain an experimental program. Two advantages accrue from faculty collaboration: key program modifications may be suggested that could salvage a potentially sound program from the scrap heap; and the staff will likely maintain or even increase their commitment to the program.

If a program merits continuation, it probably has been cost effective. However, resource availability on a long-term basis is an important issue in institutionalization.

During this final phase, the principal's roles are as an *information source*, providing data for continuation decisions; as a *leader*, providing direction for future efforts; as an *advocate*, selling the program if results merit continuation; and as a *resource acquirer*, obtaining long-term commitments for institutionalization.

What of Tomorrow?

The preceding discussion may be perceived to be complex beyond the resources of the typical secondary and elementary school principal. Indeed, there is little question that the single most complex position in the spectrum of responsibility in American education is probably that of the principalship. This individual is expected to provide leadership in an institution which has become all things to all people. The principal is perceived as a curriculum specialist, a manager of monies, a placater of diverse community points of view, a counselor to competent and incompetent students, a balanced, "Rotarian" type citizen. Principals do have a significant and irreversible role to exercise in bringing about the instructional improvement of schools.

More pointedly, leadership at the local building level is a key factor in the improvement of the quality of instruction. A school is but a reflection of its principal. As I discussed earlier, if instruction is to improve in American schools, the principal's role must change. Unfortunately, preparation programs for most administrators have emphasized school law, schoolhouse planning,, school finance, etc. While some knowledge of these is essential for functioning and survival, it is far more significant that the principal focus on program, curriculum and evaluation. The basic commitment of the principal must be to the teaching staff and students. The fundamental responsibility of the principal is not just to maintain programs, but to insure that the process of education in the school goes forward positively and appropriately. The principal must delegate routine matters in order to preserve energies and talents for his primary responsibility—instructional leadership. The findings of the Ford Foundation in its report, **A Foundation Goes to School,** are paralleled by the findings of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) in the Model Schools Project, supported by the Danforth Foundation, published under the title, **How Good is Your School?** (Georgiades, 1978). One of the key findings of the Model Schools Project was that the most significant person in the change process is the building principal. While collective district efforts may assist in support, instructional improvement is still basically a process to be undertaken by a local faculty, its school management team, its pupils and its supporting community.

Throughout this great nation, there are many principals and teachers who have sought to improve instruction. Their efforts have not always been neat and orderly, and cannot always be made so. But idealism and concern run strong among principals whose dedication has led to improved instruction and achievement. There are an increasing number of principals today who wish not only to fit in with the future, but also to participate in the choosing of it.

We will continue to see many starts and stops as principals assume increased responsibility as instructional leaders. We have emerged from an era, where principals were perceived primarily as managers, bookkeepers, custodians, into an era where the principal is seen increasingly as an instructional leader. The tasks which such new responsibility and such new perceptions impose are complex. The growth which is essential, if experienced principals are to assume such increased responsibility will not come easily. Many university programs will become increasingly ineffective, for they will not adjust to a new reality. Many persons, and many school systems, that do not possess the stamina of the high altitude porter, will not climb this emerging "Mount Everest" of education. Such persons will continue to argue that the principal need not be an instructional leader. They will become critics of a process which they are unable to master. Their intellectual stamina will falter, and they will write popular books criticizing schools and the leadership of the principal.

Nevertheless, the direction for the future is clear. Gradually, but inevitably, with determination, strong principals in strong schools with strong public support will move toward an increasingly significant role as instructional leaders. The results of such quality leadership will be improved instruction, a society in which larger numbers of schools will produce higher levels of achievement, a society in which the principalship will receive more of its well-deserved recognition and status. Principals as day-to-day managers will continue to exist, but in fewer numbers, and will receive little recognition. But principals as instructional leaders will become increasingly the focal point of both controversy and praise as American schools achieve new levels of excellence.

Notes

1. Spencer H. Wyant, **Of Projects and Principals** (Reston, Va.: Association of Teacher Educators, 1980).
2. Robert Tannenbaum and Warren H. Schmidt, "How to Choose a Leadership Pattern," Harvard Business Review 51 (May-June 1973).
3. G.E. Hall and S.F. Loucks, "Teacher Concerns as a Basis for Facilitating and Personalizing Staff Development," **Teacher College Record** 80 (1978): 36-53.