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ABSTRACT

The role of the school principal in a community of learners is discussed. A "community of learners" refers to a group of individuals with common interests who share ideals and learn from each other. The principal must work with teachers, providing support and receiving support in helping students achieve optimal results. A community of learners may be formed of principals in a given area or school district. Sharing ideas and exchanging information in the community of learners strengthens the role of the principal. Ideas to be exchanged should be expressed clearly, with attention to grammar, and meetings of the community should be planned. To improve instruction, the community of learners must read, study, and research on different curriculum areas. Some suggestions are given for curriculum study related to reading comprehension, social studies, science, and mathematics. Principals would benefit from the study of standards, both those from national organizations and those provided by the state. Continuous discussion and the assessment of each new plan are musts in developing a curriculum of relevance, significance, and vitality. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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Assessing School Principals in a Community of Learners

Marlow Ediger

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ASSESSING SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

School principals need to be leaders of their respective schools. Leadership roles can be quite demanding. There is knowledge which school principals need to possess in the decision making process. Higher levels of cognition then need to be in the offing. Social skills, too, need to be emphasized when working with school personnel and support workers in the educational setting. A people centered principal is to be desired. He/she is able to work with school personnel to assist students to achieve optimally. Also, the principal needs to possess quality attitudes to develop a spirit of optimism in moving from where the school is to where it should be in terms of an ideal.

A Community of Learners

Too frequently, school principals work by themselves in a school setting without the assistance of other principals providing

- 1. encouragement to persevere and achieve at higher levels of accomplishment.**
- 2. help to identify and solve curricular problems.**
- 3. a listening ear to vent frustrations and dilemmas.**
- 4. a time for socializing and visiting.**
- 5. opportunities for meeting belonging and esteem needs (See Ediger, 2001, 25-30).**

A school principal should listen to the problems of teachers and help in providing possible solutions or provide feelings of care. These problems include health, marital, relations with another in the family, as well as problematic situations in the community. School principals, too, should have someone to talk to and confide in, as friends to offer/receive consolation and emotional support. Problems in life hardly escape anyone and the principal also may need help in accepting misfortunes which occur. He/she too should have opportunities to share the good things in life. Times of happiness deserve a listening ear as well as recognition provided for having rewards and awards recognized. The principal certainly needs to have esteem needs met!

A community of learners generally refers to a group of individuals with common interests who share ideals and learn from each other. There is a strong feeling here of camaraderie and like mindedness. There are definite visions here for improving what is to what should be. New approaches in teaching and sharing ideas are key concepts to emphasize within a community of learners. There are no absolutes, but continuous growth and development. The school principal realizes that knowledge, skills, and attitudes are not final, nor fixed, but subject to change and further achievement. The vision to be achieved then is

ongoing in modification. As new knowledge, skills, and attitudes are acquired, the principal looks for further refinement and challenge. Challenges need to be perceived as opportunities in life. An opportunity may be unique in that it comes only once and then it is gone. The opportunity need to be used as possibilities to grow, develop, and mature, not as being stumbling blocks with unsolvable problems. To be sure, selected challenges may appear to be overwhelming, With a problem solving attitude, the challenge may be analyzed in terms of identifying the specific dilemma. Clarity of the dilemma becomes a problem to be solved. A clearly stated problem then may be attacked in terms of finding a solution. A long term problem to be solved provides time for determining a solution. Thus, information may be gathered from a variety of sources including the community of learners involving school principals in a given area or district. The information obtained needs to be analyzed through critical thinking. Relevant information is used to solve the problem identified. An hypothesis may well result. The hypothesis is not an absolute, but is tentative and subject to change since it must be tried out in the school or classroom setting. By observing the effects of trying out the hypothesis, the school principal may decide its quality in offering possible solutions. A team approach may be used to enlarge the community of learners, at this point, by involving classroom teachers and support personnel. Feedback is then obtained as to the quality of the possible solution. New hypotheses may arise and also be tested in a lifelike situation in school. Then too, additional problems might well arise which need further solutions (See Dewey, 1916). The community of learners may well become not only a place to identify and solve problems but also a sounding board for ideas tried out in the school setting. The school principals as a community of learners are a vital element in solving problems in the educational arena.

Goals of the Community of Learners

Principals involved in the community of learners need to have definite goals to further growth of the organization. These goals are vital to pursue in working toward an effective community of learners and might well include the following:

1. being a cohesive unit. The community of learners need to possess a closeness which makes it possible to identify and solve curricular problems.
2. meeting needs within the group. Here, the participants must respect each other's thinking, be considerate and caring, and help to foster a committee/group concept conducive to working together on problems in the curriculum.
3. having quality group dynamics in the problem solving arena.

Good group dynamics provides motivation for the community of learners to move forward, grow, and achieve vital objectives to improve the curriculum.

4. emphasizing appropriate linguistic styles which make effective communication possible. Being able to engage in oral communication is important in the community of learners. Ineffective communication skills too frequently hinder progress in the community and can make for gross misunderstandings. Proper stress, pitch, and juncture are essential elements in facilitating oral communication skills among participants

5. implementing good listening habits. Being able to listen well is necessary to foster growth in the community of learners. Misunderstandings occur due to poor listening habits. It is never too late in life to become an effective listener. Sequential achievement in quality listening is vital for participants in the community of learners. Thus, for example, a principal must listen carefully to complaints and suggestions in a parent/teacher conference in order to receive feedback to improve the curriculum.

6. incorporating the sharing of ideas concept within the community of learners. By sharing ideas, participants learn about new research and methodologies of instruction in teaching students in the classroom. The principal has always been the instructional leader in the school setting. Ideas shared may then be brought into the school curriculum.

7. using correct grammar and punctuation when writing. Notices sent to the community of learners, parents, teachers, and support personnel, among others, must stress proper grammar and usage. School principals will be assessed, in part, in models they present to others in the writing arena. School principals need to improve their writing skills to include

a) agreement of subject and predicate. Sentence fragments and a lack of agreement between subject and predicate reflect upon what principals value. If students in school are to become good writers, then principals must reveal a model to follow.

b) properly placed modifiers. Adjectives and adverbs must be placed properly within the written product, otherwise misinterpretation of content may well occur.

c) correct use of verbals. Dangling participles, inappropriate use of gerunds, and incorrect sequence in the use of infinitives need to be remedied.

d) end punctuation marks used effectively. Thus, declarative, interrogative, imperative, and exclamatory sentences require their respective, proper end punctuation marks.

e) commas used properly such as words in a series, in direct address, and after an introductory subordinate clause. The principal is not a grammarian, per se, but does need to become proficient in using proper grammar when ideas are communicated in writing. Written

communication cannot be changed in the final product after it has been sent by letter or by e-mail. Oral communication can be changed when expressing ideas to others. Thus, the principal may say in context, "That is not what meant, but the following says it more accurately..." (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Nine).

8. possessing quality interactions among the community of learners. Ideas should circulate among the community in committee and group meetings. To have ideas expressed go back and forth between two member is not adequate. Ideas then need to flow among all members of the community of learners. Each person needs to contribute optimally. Community members individually possess much worth and have valuable ideas to contribute in order to improve the school curriculum. Feelings of belonging to the group is vital for significant interactions to occur. Video taping of the community of learners at work may help each participant to become a better member. In analyzing the video tape contents, participants may observe to diagnose and remedy the following:

- a) individuals who interrupt others continuously in oral communication.
- b) disrespect shown toward another person or persons.
- c) lack of clarity in ideas presented.
- d) excessive participation by selected persons in the community of learners.
- e) participants who dominate the discussion.
- f) straying from the topic being discussed (Ediger, 2000, 29-34).

9. having an agenda for meetings. The agenda provides a guideline as to what will be discussed. However, the agenda should be open ended to add additional items as participants deem them to be relevant. Each item to be considered by the community of learners needs to be salient, vital, and significant.

10. discussing ideas in depth, not survey procedures, to truly reach consensus.

Each of the above criteria provides standards against which the participants may assess their very own and the group's progress in being a closely knit community. Diagnosis and remediation are important in moving away from a collection of individuals to a true community of learners. The community of school principals must be a caring and sharing committee of individuals dedicated to improving the curriculum for students.

Discussing Trends in the Curriculum

To improve instruction, the community of learners must read, study, and engage in doing research on diverse curriculum areas. When doing

a depth study on curriculum improvement, the community of learners needs to assess recommended trends in teaching and learning. Each academic area has selected recommendations as to what should be in the curriculum. In the reading/language arts curriculum, adequate emphasis needs to be placed on students achieving diverse word recognition techniques. These include using phonics, syllabication, picture clues, context clues, structural analysis, and configuration clues.

Comprehension in reading needs to stress

- 1. critical and creature reading, as well as reading to solve problems.**
- 2. cause and effect, reading to achieve sequential ideas, acquiring facts, concepts, main ideas, and generalizations.**
- 3. comprehension of narrative selections whereby the content read is written in a certain order; comprehension of subject matter in which the academic content needs to be read in terms of major ideas, subordinate ideas, and details; as well as comprehension of creative ideas such as in poetry, plays, and novels.**
- 4. written work. Here, students may relate reading and writing to write articles, business and friendly letters, essays, verse rhymed and unrhymed, summaries, outlines, reports, and scholarly work in general. The mechanics of writing such as correct spelling of words, legibility, and punctuation, among others, is salient.**
- 5. a variety of purposes including reading to follow directions, to make announcements, to give a talk, to discuss ideas with peers/committees, to define a problem and secure related information, to inform others, to enjoy the world of literature, and to engage in for its own sake (Ediger, 2000, 210-211).**

The social studies needs to stress key ideas from history, political science, geography, anthropology/sociology, and economics. Depth learning needs to be placed upon developing vital map and globe skills, content area reading skills, inductive learning and learning by discovery abilities, structural ideas in the different social science disciplines, and skill to learn from a multi-media approach. The following are also highly salient in a good social studies curriculum:

- 1. a carefully designed current events program.**
- 2. an integrated social studies curriculum emphasizing problem solving.**
- 3. cooperative learning endeavors stressing proper criteria for implementation.**
- 4. use of computers and other technology to enhance learning in the social studies.**
- 5. multiple procedures used to assess student achievement (Ediger, 1999, Chapter Seven).**

The science curriculum needs to stress, among other things, the following:

1. learning from a hands on approach to achieve major concepts and generalizations in science. Science experiments and demonstrations should be at the heart of the science curriculum
2. using technology to achieve vital objectives of instruction.
3. using science equipment properly and responsibly.
4. reading content with meaning from the basal text, library books, pamphlets, science encyclopedias, and other literature directly related to ongoing lessons and units of study in science.
5. thinking reflectively with the use of higher levels of cognition such as applying and using ideas acquired, analyzing and synthesizing ideas obtained, and assessing the worth of these ideas.
6. emphasizing balance in the curriculum among the different science academic disciplines such as earth science, life sciences, and the physical sciences. Stressing one of these area only makes for a narrowing of the scope of the science curriculum whereby a proper balance is not in evidence.
7. correlating the language arts areas of reading, writing, speaking, and listening with ongoing science lessons/units.
8. communicating ideas clearly and accurately with and to others.
9. being able to predict, infer, and measure accurately in the scientific world.
10. thinking scientifically and possessing the appropriate attitudes toward science (See National Science Education Standards,1996).

Mathematics, as a curriculum area, stresses the following as being vital for student achievement:

1. computing accurately in meaningful, contextual situations.
2. perceiving patterns in mathematics and in mathematical computations.
3. understanding inverse operations of subtraction and division.
4. using set concepts and theory to perform operations on number, such as the commutative, associative, and distributive properties, as well as using identity elements, and the property of closure.
5. emphasizing logical thinking and drawing of analogies when solving problems.
6. Implementing balance among the academic disciplines including arithmetic, algebra, statistics, geometry, and calculus, in the mathematics curriculum.
7. helping students achieve as optimally as possible in ongoing mathematics lessons and units of study.
8. stressing practical applications of mathematics in social situations.
9. assisting students to perceive underlying assumptions in a

mathematical operation. Depth learning, not survey approaches, are recommended.

10. using diverse and multiple procedures to assess student achievement and progress (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Eight).

Each of the above named standards may be assessed by using a five point Likert scale. The results of the survey may be discussed within the principal's community of learners.

Principals in a community of learners then need to study and assess if the above named criteria for reading and the language arts, social studies, science, and mathematics are inherent in the curriculum. Through a study of research and standards developed by each academic discipline, may the curriculum be updated and modified. For example, the National Council for the Social Studies (quoted in the Middle School Council for the Social Studies Yearbook, 1996) lists Expectations of Excellence for teachers to use in teaching students. Ten themes are listed and each of the ten are elaborated upon in terms of objectives for student attainment. These themes are the following with the author listing a brief interpretation after each theme:

1. culture -- stressing anthropology and sociology standards.
2. time, continuity, and change -- emphasizing history.
3. people, places, and environments -- stressing geography in the social studies.
4. power, governance, and authority -- advocating the study of political science.
5. production, distribution, and consumption -- having and incorporating economics into the social studies.
6. individual development and identity -- indicating how institutions in society assist in forming the self/person/
7. individuals, groups, and institutions -- identifying psychological/sociological factors influencing human development.
8. science, technology, and society -- integrating science and technology use into the study of the social studies.
9. global connections -- integrating how nations interconnect in world trade, tourism, treaties, and power structures.
10. civic ideals and practices -- implementing a study of ideals of a democracy and their implementation.

A study of standards of excellence provided by the National Council for the Social Studies (1996), the National Science Teachers Association (1996), The International Reading Association/The National Council Teachers of English (1996), and the National Council for the Teachers of Mathematics (1989) provide the principals' community of learners excellent, additional goals to study for possible implementation in the school setting. Each goal, after depth discussion, may be rated

on a five point Likert scale. A needs assessment study may also be made of patrons in a school district to ascertain what is desired in the school curriculum for each subject matter area.

In Closing

There are a plethora of variables which need close examination by school principals in order to improve the curriculum for learners in the school setting. A good setting for developing these studies might be the principals' community of learners. State standards and mandates for each state also need depth discussion with ways emphasized in implementing quality in the school curriculum. Continuous discussion and assessment of each new plan are musts in developing a curriculum of relevance, significance, and vitality.

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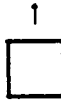


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