

The Bulletin

Alabama Association of Secondary School Principals

Contents

Some Hard Questions About Minimal Competency Testing	4
What Can The Secondary School Principal Do To Meet The Needs of Beginning Teachers?	12
Jimmy L. McCarty	
A Fable For Our Time	16
J. D. Prince	
Several Heads Are Better Than One: The Delphi Technique	18
Bill Ernest	
Vocational Education in Alabama's Secondary Schools	29
Douglas Patterson	
✓ Organization for Administration in the Large Secondary School: Some Reflective Comments for Consideration	40
John Masterson J. Foster Watkins	
Research Summaries	45
Richard Brown, Jr., Editor	
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Organization For Administration In The Large Secondary School: Some Reflective Comments For Consideration

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Attention will be focused in this article upon the organization for administration concept. The proposition is advanced initially that less than adequate attention is being devoted to the most crucial decisions which are made in this organizational area in a number of secondary schools in Alabama and across the nation. Interest in this topic was triggered by recent Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation and other field activities in several schools in which necessary considerations seemingly had not been given to organization for administration concerns. The additional proposition is advanced that the principalship of a large secondary school in the latter quarter of the Twentieth Century is an unmanageable role in the absence of serious attention to the needs in this area.

The organizational and administrative philosophy which supports the positions taken in this article reflects a "participative management" point of departure as discussed by Halpin, McGregor, Likert and other recent writers in the organizational theory area. Such an approach calls for the professional involvement of personnel at all levels of the organization in its normal operations with such involvement based upon the appropriate recognition of knowledge, skills and abilities wherever they exist within the organization. Thus, faculty and staff members are expected to exhibit self-directional, responsibility-assuming, decision-making roles in the same manner that this type behavior is desired and encouraged from students.

In moving to implement a participative management approach, a series of overlapping subunits within the school should be established which incorporate Likert's "linking pin" concept for the purposes of internal communication, planning, coordination, decision-making and evaluation with appropriate feedback into an open organizational system. These subunits link the administrative team, consisting of the principal and his key assistants, at the apex of the organization through a program improvement committee to the division/department level and, finally, to the teachers and/or teaching teams within or across the several departments.

The J. O. Johnson High School Experience

Leadership personnel who were involved in the developmental planning and initial operations of J. O. Johnson High School in Huntsville in 1971-72, endeavored to move from such a participative management perspective. The preliminary planning for Johnson High School, including the design of the physical plant and the initial curriculum developments, involved a wide spectrum of administrators, teachers and lay people so that the continuation of a broadly based, participative management approach flowed rather naturally into the operational stage. Other references will be made to the Johnson experience in subsequent sections of this article for illustrative purposes.

In the Johnson illustration, the principal and his three assistants comprise the administrative team at the apex of the organization. Each of the three assistants has primary role responsibilities, but an effort is made under the overall coordination and leadership of the principal to have this group function on a flexible team basis. The primary roles of the assistants identifies one as the curriculum director, the second functions basically as a pupil personnel administrator, and the third functions as an administrator of support services with backup responsibilities for curriculum and program leadership in the vocational-technical areas. This group attempts to meet on a weekly basis. The group, however, has found it difficult to systematically find the time to function effectively as a group for overall school coordination and leadership purposes — an absolute must if a participative management approach is to prove successful.

The decisions made relative to the assignment of administrative responsibilities at Johnson basically followed the widely used functional approach with focused responsibilities distributed among the three assistants. While possibly quite effective and functional in the short run, this strategy seems to be increasingly questionable when the assistant principalship is viewed as a career development step toward the global responsibilities of the principal.

A number of schools are moving toward school-within-a-school, grade levels, total building or a combination of these categories in assigning assistant principals the total responsibility for administering their segment of the school. In a recent organizational study in one urban system in Georgia, consideration was given to a process model for developing and updating position guides for the several members of the administrative team on at least an annual basis. Such a developmental approach, under the leadership of the principal, could recognize on a continuing basis the unique organizational variables and the specialized strengths and interests of individuals in assigning primary and supporting responsibilities. Additionally, membership on the school-level administrative team in that system is frequently expanded to include such key personnel as the Guidance Director, the Librarian/Media Specialists and the Athletic Director. Caution should be used, however, to ensure that this group does not become so large that size becomes a limiting factor in the development of the collegial relationships so crucial to its success.

The second important group in the organizational structure is the "program improvement or steering committee" which, at Johnson High School, developed as a natural extension of the preplanning team. Normally the members of the administrative team, the department heads and the coordinators of the support areas comprise this group. Additional faculty members, parents, and students should certainly be involved when programmatic discussions for which they have primary responsibility or involve them directly are being aired. Care should be exercised that agenda items be of such importance to warrant committee consideration. Such efforts have been hindered when the agenda constantly became cluttered with routine administrative matters which should be handled by the administration directly. Faculty members should also participate as representatives of their respective areas in the absence of their regular committee representatives. Such participation over the course of a year by regular faculty members, when used, has been effective in removing the air of mystery which exists relative to "those meetings which occur down in the conference room."

At Johnson, the steering/program improvement committee meets regularly under the leadership of the curriculum director with the primary direction of its discussions being one of a programmatic nature. Such groups in other schools elect their leadership from among the group membership. An open agenda approach is encouraged with the several members of the committee serving communication and linking pin functions between the committee and the department or support services they represent.

This group reported a degree of success in maintaining a regular meeting schedule, but the sessions were hampered by inconsistent attendance by some of the members. The developing nature of Johnson prevented the regular attendance of all members of the administrative team which tended to limit the committee's overall effectiveness. Minutes of the meetings were regularly distributed to the total faculty as a valued internal communications strategy. The flexible nature of the Johnson schedule and the teaming approaches within the several disciplines allowed members of the steering committee to be released for meeting purposes during the regular instructional day. It was felt that this commitment was a significant factor contributing to the success of this subunit in the organizational structure.

Experiences at Johnson have shown also that periodically a longer period of time is needed for this coordinating group to meaningfully consider and reach planning closure on topics. About every six weeks a longer work session is scheduled. Normally an evening covered dish meeting in the home of one of the members is scheduled to meet this need.

Moving from the program improvement committee, the next operational subunits in most secondary schools are the departments, normally organized by discipline lines, and the support services. There is an identifiable trend to group common disciplines in a divisional arrangement which has curriculum coordination as well as financial implications. As noted earlier, the department chairpersons and the leadership personnel responsible for the support areas at Johnson serve a linking pin role between their respective groups and the program improvement committee.

Organizational Considerations for Secondary Schools

Reflections on the experiences at Johnson and in several other similarly situated secondary schools support the following organizational considerations:

1. Every effort should be made to provide released time to department/division chairpersons in recognition of their leadership, coordination and development responsibilities. If an additional period for this role is not budgetarily feasible, consideration as a minimum should be given to a reduction in time-consuming extra duty assignments for persons performing in these positions.
2. Common planning periods for departments and teaching teams enhance the level of professional interaction and continuous planning and development.

3. Common planning areas for departments or divisions and teams have a tendency over time to contribute to the development of "self-contained" subunits which might be dysfunctional.
 4. Interdepartmental and interteam visitations should be encouraged to take advantage of the activities across group lines as one means of counteracting the concern raised above.
 5. Additionally, total faculty interaction could be enhanced by the utilization of social gatherings of the faculty periodically during the school year.
 6. General faculty meetings which tend to present problems in large secondary schools should be used sparingly. Smaller meetings with groups during their planning periods might be considered as an alternative which would also assist in combating the development of "self-contained" subunits.
- Experiences at Johnson with such a small group approach for faculty meetings was exceptionally well-received. The meetings were scheduled in a manner which allowed for the participation of every faculty member at least once each week with at least two members of the administrative team being in attendance at each of these sessions. The arrangement resulted in better communication among the professional staff and tended to insure that the administrative team was more aware of problems and considerations at the operational level.

Concluding Thoughts

Reflecting upon the several organizational levels, units and processes implied in the discussion to this point, it seems superfluous to add the following concluding proposition. Success in implementing an organization for administration configuration as described calls for a time commitment by principals who possess the interpersonal and group process skills necessary to provide the leadership and coordination to such a participative organizational effort. It also seems unnecessary to add that those of us in administrator preparation programs have some unmet challenges if we are to assist the practicing and future principal of Alabama to provide such leadership.