A New Look at Instructional Leadership*

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Abstract

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is the federal government's most recent effort to influence curriculum in America's classrooms. Its requirements for high-stakes testing and Adequate Yearly Progress have put pressure on teachers and administrators to improve student achievement. Principals whose administrative training was grounded in a managerial model are struggling to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to become instructional leaders. State boards of education are insisting that post-secondary administrative preparation programs teach school leaders how to help teachers to improve student achievement. Alabama's governor created a task force of educators, civic leaders, and business people to develop a shared vision of effective school leadership, which was published as a standards-based curriculum. Instructional Leadership faculty at the University of South Alabama spent two years designing what the state superintendent of education described as a national model for principal preparation programs. This publication aligns with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) Standard 1: "An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders."

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1 Introduction

Demands for increased student achievement in schools and a national interest in competing in a global marketplace have rekindled our nation's interest in curriculum reform and instructional leadership. The

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No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 with its provisions for high-stakes testing and sanctions for poor academic performance is the federal government's current initiative to influence the rigor of school curriculums and the quality of America's workforce.

Complying with NCLB's requirements for inclusive classrooms and closing achievement gaps in student performance is changing the ways in which children are taught. A teacher's role in student achievement is generally understood, but NCLB principals have a new set of responsibilities: disaggregating data, meeting with teachers about student learning, and providing leadership to create a professional learning community. Sergiovanni (2009) emphasized those functions by suggested that, "When principals emphasize the building of effective learning and caring communities for teachers within the school, teacher learning improves, and student achievement benefits as a result" (p. 57).

2 Principal as Manager

NCLB is not the federal government's first effort to reform curriculum. In fact, public education has been an integral part of America's political and social agendas since colonial times. The principal's responsibilities, however, have evolved slowly and have emphasized management duties rather than leadership skills. Drake and Roe (2003) noted that "one is somewhat surprised that the principal has had a role conflict because of the emphasis on management. In earlier days, the principal in most cases was selected on the basis of scholarship and recognized teaching ability" (p. 23).

The principal-as-manager role became popular after World War II when an influx of service members returned home from overseas duty. The number of school-aged children increased and building new schools, hiring more teachers, and managing students became administrative pre-occupations. Communities unwittingly endorsed managerial leadership over instructional acumen by dealing with the principal on logistical issues and with teachers on instructional matters.

Administrator preparation programs during the early 1950s emphasized management skills because those were the traits that boards of education valued and efficiency in managing school district growth was important. The managerial model prevailed until the former Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957.

Believing national security to be at risk, the federal government urged states to create more rigorous curriculums and gave them funds to accomplish that goal. Congress was convinced that Soviet superiority in space was the result of its educational system, particularly in mathematics and science, and that America needed a new generation of mathematicians and scientists to deter foreign aggression.

The federal reform strategy entailed creating a series of instructional packages that were tamper-proof to support the popular view that many teachers lacked sufficient knowledge of the subjects they taught. Fundamental changes, such as hiring better-trained teachers and developing subject-centered curricula, were considered difficult and too time consuming. Marsh and Willis (2007) observed that, "America was facing a crisis of confidence in its views and its abilities to act on them. . . national trends in education in general and curriculum in particular reflected this ebbing national confidence" (p. 56).

Geo-political events in the early 1990s held curriculum reform at the vanguard of public interest. The Soviet Union's demise, new economic alliances in the European Community, and the availability of inexpensive labor from South and Central America were among the reasons that then-President George H. Bush formed a bi-partisan National Education Goals Panel in 1990 to address children's readiness for school, high school graduation rates, and competency testing in the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades in English, mathematics, science, history, and geography. The Panel agreed that by 2000 America's students should rank first in the world in science and mathematics achievement; that every adult American should be literate and able to participate in a global economy, and that all schools should be free from drugs and violence.

With federal funds for schools now linked to testing, states adopted a variety of programs to meet the Panel's goals, only to discover that a shortage of local financial resources hampered their progress. Early childhood development offerings and after-school initiatives were added to budgets already constrained by existing requirements. Further, the impact of The Americans with Disabilities Act in 1992, with a provision to include disabled students in regular classrooms, increased the competition among programs for funds in state education budgets.

The press for curriculum reform reached its zenith with NCLB's passage. Marsh and Willis (2007) described the statute as a "movement toward curriculum alignment, high-stakes testing, and accountability" (p. 62), but warned that, "NCLB is based on assumptions that allege an educational crisis that can be cured by emphasizing a few basic academic subjects, spend more time on task teaching them, test students more, and measure results more frequently" (p. 62). NCLB requires all students to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) by 2014 in reading, mathematics, science, and social studies. Early results, however, were disappointing. Guilfoyle (2006) reported that, "over 19,000 schools nationwide failed to make AYP in 2002-2003; more than 11,000 were identified as being in need of improvement" (p. 10).

The pressure on schools to make AYP is tremendous. Test preparation receives so much emphasis that teachers have reduced or eliminated instruction in subjects other than those to be tested. Abrams & Madaus (2003) discovered that "in some states, 80% of the elementary schools spend 20% of their instructional time preparing for the end-of-grade tests" (p. 32). Klein (2005) noted that students "are coached on how to take standardized tests, subjected to pep rallies to get them revved up to do their best on high-stakes tests, treated to breakfast at school on the day of testing, given sugar snacks just before testing, and presented with gift certificates to stores in the local mall when they do well on the state tests" (pp. 51-52).

3 Principal as Instructional Leader

An unintended consequence of NCLB is its de facto redefinition of the principal's role as an instructional leader. Decisions about improving student achievement are made by teachers and principals working in concert, a unique requirement for administrators who were trained as managers, not as instructional leaders.

Recognizing that teachers alone were unable to create the conditions needed to attain AYP, state boards of education investigated discrepancies between the principal's responsibilities as building manager and instructional leader. They concluded that many administrators did not have the knowledge or skills to make decisions that would improve instruction, in part because the administration programs that prepared them were grounded in the wrong model.

Changing an obsolete principal-preparation model begins with developing a shared vision of the knowledge and abilities instructional leaders should have. Jazzar and Algozzine (2006) concede that "it is difficult to define the role of a principal as the instructional leader" (p. 106), but "the educational reform movement of the last two decades has focused a great deal of attention on that role" (p. 104).

A task force of teachers, civic leaders, and community representatives in Alabama was asked by the state's governor to create a vision of effective school leadership. The state department of education published the group's findings as standards with accompanying descriptions of what principals should know and be able to do to satisfy a prescriptive curriculum's requirements.

Program reform begins with a memorandum of agreement (MOA) between a college of education and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) that is signed by the college dean and superintendents to affix responsibilities for planning, implementing, and evaluating the program and its students. Important MOA provisions include a superintendent's willingness to pay substitute teachers' salaries while residents practice their craft during a residency, joint selection of applicants, and formative and summative evaluations of residents during clinical experiences.

Procedures for admitting applicants to the program should be considered next. Many states report a glut of educational administration degree holders who have no intention of becoming instructional leaders. Consequently, prospective principals should submit a portfolio containing a statement of purpose, letters of recommendation, norm-referenced test results that emphasize writing skills, and a copy of a recent formative evaluation of the applicant's teaching performance. Program faculty and LEA representatives should hold joint interviews to evaluate applicants' communication skills, interpersonal relationship abilities, and leadership potential.

Assigning standards and their accompanying knowledge and ability descriptions to new courses is another step in program redesign and is the appropriate time to address the curriculum's scope and sequence. NCLB "puts special emphasis on determining what education programs and practices have been proven effective through rigorous research" (Jazzar and Algozzine, p.103). As an example, a course devoted to teaching

school leaders how to analyze and correlate multiple sources of data to make instructional decisions is an appropriate consideration.

Additionally, all courses should contain clinical experiences. Principal-candidates should be in schools often to interview and observe faculty, staff, and administrators, and to record their reflections in journals for discussion during campus-based seminars. Detailed requirements for clinical experiences and a semester-long residency in schools should be included in a standards-based handbook that will give residents opportunities to observe, to participate, and, finally, to lead faculty and staff.

New programs are designed to give aspiring school leaders the knowledge and skills they need to improve student learning, but discussions about their curriculum content continue. Drake & Roe (2003) noted that, "A nontraditional program at Carnegie-Mellon University rejected the idea that principals are super-teachers trained in curriculum and instruction; rather, the program stresses business acumen, interpersonal skills and leadership talent. Others call for a problem-solving approach. . .like the programs preparing individuals for the medical or legal profession" (p. 30).

Sergiovanni suggests that dispositions, or the attitudes and beliefs that principals display during interactions with others and toward their job, either unite an organization or cause it to languish. Appropriate dispositions encourage an organization's members to "transcend ordinary competence for extraordinary commitment. . .and require that people be transformed from subordinates to followers, which requires a different kind of theory and practice" (p. 89).

If Sergiovanni is correct, a curriculum that embodies different theory and practice must offer opportunities for students to hone leadership dispositions. Instructional Leadership faculty at the University of South Alabama will use The Leadership Practices Inventory, a 30-trait assessment instrument consisting of a self-appraisal and evaluations from a principal-mentor and five colleague-observers who have agreed to offer feedback to residents about their leadership dispositions.

School districts in every state are beginning to recognize the connection between instructional leadership and student achievement. NCLB, a national trend toward standards-based curriculums, and pressure from state and local boards of education for improved student learning are moving those responsible for preparing instructional leaders to refine their efforts. Principal-preparation programs unable or unwilling to reform their curriculums are likely to fall by the wayside. Resnick (2002) emphatically noted that, "it is reasonable to expect principals to learn. . .instructional leadership competencies" (p. 2).

NCLB's high-stakes testing and sanctions may have contributed to fewer subjects being taught in school curriculums and more time being devoted to preparing for examinations, but instructional leaders in the future will be expected to have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will help them to lead students to greater achievement in our nation's classrooms.

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