

Illinois Assistant Principals: Instructional Leaders or Disciplinarians

Vicki L. VanTuyle

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

The purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which assistant principals perceive themselves to be instructional leaders and the degree to which they respond to their job responsibilities as instructional leaders or as disciplinarians. Data were collected from Illinois assistant principals invited to complete the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) (Hallinger, 1982, 1990) and from assistant principals who volunteered to be interviewed and to be observed at work for a day. Analyses of PIMRS responses yielded the highest means in Supervise and Evaluate Instruction and Protect Instructional Time. Findings from interviews and observations supported the survey results with a majority of principals engaged in supervision and evaluation of instruction. However, few assistant principals who handled discipline issues expressed or exhibited protection of instructional time.

Contextual Framework

Heyde (2013) noted that in 2010, Illinois lawmakers signed legislation that reformed teacher and principal evaluation through the Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA) (Milanowski, et al., n.d.). PERA required districts to establish evaluation systems that assessed teacher and principal performance measured by student growth. This wave of reform was focused on the provision of exemplary instruction in the classroom and ensuring that principals were knowledgeable and trained in evaluating teachers' classroom instruction, both of which would lead to higher levels of student achievement in Illinois schools. Implementation of PERA substantially increased principal and assistant principal duties and responsibilities in Illinois schools.

Since August 2010, the researcher and author of this paper has been teaching in the Educational Leadership Department at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville (SIUE) and has spent significant time in the principal preparation program redesign, the redesigned program's implementation, and in the continuous improvement and evaluation of the program. In the role as an instructor in principal preparation courses, the author has heard from students how principals and assistant principals spend their time. An introductory activity in the entry course to the principal preparation program asks students to submit a list of the three most typical reasons students are sent from a classroom to be seen by the principal or assistant principal in their school building. Generally, the students identify these reasons as discipline issues. Typical lists might include: not doing work, not prepared for class, dress code violation, and cell phone usage. When lists are aggregated, discussed, and analyzed, the students are quick to see dress code violation and cell phone usage related to school policies, procedures, and practices—both of which seem to be poor reasons for a student to be sent to the office and to miss classroom instruction. In addition, the students are quick to assert that sending students to the office for not doing work and not being prepared for class may not be a matter of discipline issues but instructional issues instead. The students suggest that a lack of engagement in class work may be the result of academic deficiencies or social-emotional conflicts. Students may also be ill-prepared due to the lack of home and family resources. The class suggests that these students may not feel as though they are a part of the school community and that these students perhaps would rather not be in class. How an assistant principal views or understands the reason a student is sent from the classroom to the office--either as a student's discipline issue or as a teacher's instructional improvement issue--may be the tipping point between an assistant principal assuming the role of disciplinarian or the role of instructional leader.

In an article about assistant principals from several decades ago, Collins (1976), presented the notion that assistant principals were always antagonists when receiving students sent to the office for discipline referrals, despite the fact the teachers who sent the students to the office may have been the first antagonists with the students. The author asserted, "One area which merits some consideration is the role of the teacher in causing some discipline situations" (p. 65). Collins recommended in-service training for teachers to learn to monitor their verbal interactions with students, moving away from teacher-centered statements toward more student-centered statements. Once teachers had mastered positive student-centered conversations, the author contended that classroom instruction would follow in the same student-centered approach, which would in turn, diminish the discipline referrals.

A few years later, in an article about the work of secondary assistant principals, Reed and Himmler (1985) asserted that the position of assistant principal represented the status of a school with regard to wealth, size, and complexity. The authors added, "...the position of assistant principal stands as a public testimony that a school is having problems serious enough to warrant a full-time administrator who serves as school disciplinarian" (p. 59). Their research concluded the assistant principal's responsibility was to maintain organizational stability through the control of students not the improvement of instruction. The authors described the practices of these assistant principals for maintaining organizational stability, in three areas, monitoring, support, and remediation. All three areas focused solely on conforming student actions and behaviors to school rules, while ignoring any need to monitor school processes, implementation of policies, instruction in classrooms, academic, social, and emotional engagement of students, or to remediate any teacher's instructional practices. The evaluation of teachers was noted as "not central to the assistant principals' daily work" (p. 79).

With these references as a backdrop, the study explored three questions. First, to what extent do assistant principals perceive themselves to be instructional leaders or the disciplinarian? Next, to what degree do assistant principals act as instructional leaders compared to acting as managers of student discipline or as managers of adherence to policies, practices, and procedures? Finally, to what degree do assistant principals perceive themselves to be instructional leaders who can influence what happens in the school or in a classroom as opposed to acting on or dealing with what has happened in the school or in a classroom?

Review of Relevant Literature

According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (1970), the assistant principal position came into being in the late 1800s when urban school enrollments were growing. As enrollments increased, so did the number of managerial duties of the typical school's head master or principal. The assistant to the principal was created to assume many of these duties to support the principal or to substitute for the principal in his absence. One of the first studies delving into who assistant principals were and what they did was for a master's thesis by Schroeder (1925). She summarized her research in a journal article, making a point that remains relevant today. One of her research questions asked, "Is the assistant principal really an assistant primarily or is he or she virtually an assistant to the principal?" (p. 396). Her research described the assistant principal duties as managerial, clerical, or "easily delegated" (p. 395), clearly indicating that the assistant principal was an assistant to the principal. In the conclusion to her article, Schroeder proposed, "The position of the assistant principal should be rendered truly professional. The necessary qualifications and the duties assigned should be of such character as to dignify the office" (p. 399).

It was not until 1970 that the role and responsibilities of the assistant principal assumed national attention with the publication of *The Assistant Principals in Public Elementary Schools—1969: A Research Study*, published by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP, 1970), then, an affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA). This national study was comprehensive in reporting characteristics, experience, preparation, working conditions, functions and financial status of assistant principals. The study delved into four specialty areas of assistant principal work: pupil

personnel (which included student discipline and student guidance), supervision, curriculum development, and public relations. Assistant principals were asked where among these areas they had major responsibilities and where they preferred to work. Nearly two-thirds of respondents cited major responsibilities in the pupil personnel area while only 24% cited major responsibilities in supervision of instruction. When asked in which responsibility area they preferred to specialize, 48% preferred specialization in supervision of instruction, while slightly less than one-fifth preferred pupil personnel (pp. 53-54).

There has been an increase of interest in the role and responsibilities of assistant principals in the 21st century. In a study of the socialization of new vice-principals, Armstrong (2010) reported a disturbing finding, "The pervasive pressure of these socialization tactics forced them to comply with normative expectations of the vice-principalship as a custodial disciplinary role and violated their professional rights" (p. 685). Many comments from vice-principals who participated in this study supported the notion of being trapped in the role of disciplinarian. While some vice-principals desired to step out of the role of disciplinarian into a role of instructional leader, they were discouraged. One vice-principal said, "People who raise questions and challenge the system are more likely to be seen as misfits than as potential leaders" (p. 691). Another vice-principal suggested he was forced "to conform to traditional expectations of vice-principals as 'enforcers,' 'firefighters,' and 'problem-solvers'" (p. 702). Predominantly, vice-principals felt they were not considered worthy of being in the classroom but were relegated to the lunchroom, hallways, and office. Sadly, another vice-principal concluded, "What I am finding is that the talents that were being underutilized were not necessarily appropriate to the job, so I've had to mourn the loss" (p. 706).

From Armstrong's (2009) extensive research into the professional passage from teacher to assistant principal came several recommendations which must come from "procedural and policy changes which reconfigure the assistant principalship as a substantive leadership role and connect it to school improvement and organizational change" (p. 126). As early as 1929, Professor Barr of the Department of Education, University of Wisconsin, skillfully set forth the idea that supervision of instruction for school supervisors meant "the direct improvement of instruction"..., "...a matter of diagnosing teaching situations and the planning of remedial programs..." and "...the direct improvement of teachers..." (pp. 142-143). This early definition appears to have endured the test of time.

Since the late 1970s, instructional leaders and instructional leadership have been terms associated with the principals. The importance of principals as instructional leaders was supported by Edmonds' (1979) research in Detroit's urban schools in the late 1970s. The term instructional leadership had early mention in research conducted by Brookover and Lezotte (1979), who found that improving elementary schools overcame their students' achievement deficits through having beliefs in their students' ability to achieve. In the improving schools, the principal's instructional leadership was key to this success. This research led to the creation of Lezotte's (2009), *Correlates of Effective Schools* which identified Instructional Leadership as the first correlate.

Instructional leadership became a desirable competency for principals and assistant principals following effective schools research. Shifting the focus for assistant principals from discipline to instructional practices was recommended by Greenfield (1985). The set of interventions mentioned had these expected outcomes:

to develop and institutionalize a school-based capacity for work-centered problem-solving activities that are pursued cooperatively and collaboratively by teachers and administrators, that reflect a continuous and action-oriented concern by school participants regarding how to improve instructional practices and learning outcomes, and that provides an ongoing cycle of renewal and development for individuals, instructional programs, and more broadly, the school as an educative community. (p. 87)

Despite the research touting the importance of instructional leadership, few assistant principals throughout the decade of the 1980s acted as instructional leaders. Pellicer, Anderson, Keefe, Kelley, and McCleary (1990) published a report about high school principals. In this study competent principals were identified. Their schools were visited, and interviews and observations were conducted among the faculty and administrators at these schools. One of three primary research questions in this study concerned the administrative team's definition of instructional leadership and how it was operationalized. During their observation, the authors identified an important characteristic of instructional leadership in improving schools, where instructional leadership was a shared responsibility. Researchers noted department chairpersons carried the mantle of instructional leadership with principals only stepping in when there were instructional problems. And finally, while assistant principals were mentioned throughout as members of the administrative team who were assumed to share responsibility in instructional leadership, they often were delegated authority in a specific area, for instance text selection.

While national organizations for principals recommended a role change for assistant principals, there were also pleas for change from aspiring assistant principals and assistant principals in the field. In an *Education Week* commentary, titled "A Wasted Reform Resource: The Assistant Principal" (Hassenpflug, 1990), who had interviewed for an assistant principal position, asserted that her graduate preparation in theories, research, instruction, supervision, data analysis, program development, and evaluation would go to waste as her responsibilities included discipline and numerous mundane duties. She suggested "the assistant principal's job should be made more intellectually challenging"... "one that contributes directly to school improvement and increased student achievement" (p. 23).

Likewise, in an article about effective assistant principals, Calabrese (1991) made a bold argument for assistant principals to become activists to establish a role change from disciplinarian to instructional leader. He related a personal story about his experience as an assistant principal, where he posited that regardless of what skills he demonstrated as an instructional leader, he continued to be regarded as the school disciplinarian. Most valuable in this particular article was Calabrese's summation of the role he contended assistant principals should realize every day, "...there is nothing that the assistant principal does that is unrelated to the school's educational mission" (p. 56). He painted a picture of the assistant principal as instructional leader with these words: "Effective assistant principals recognize that instructional leadership is involved in discipline, staff development, supervision, student activity programs, community relations, or curriculum development" (p. 54).

Kaplan and Owings (1999) made the case for shared instructional leadership in schools which would require principals to accept redefining the role of the assistant principal. The authors suggested that assistant principals must be involved in stewarding the vision of the school, coaching and evaluating teachers, scheduling, developing, and managing instruction. The authors concluded their article with these statements, "Many

assistant principals have the interest and the capacity to promote positive student achievement in their schools. Assistant principals can become key instructional leaders able to substantially help principals increase student achievement” (p. 92).

The new accountability measures, new definitions of instructional leadership, and new standards for the preparation of and for the evaluation of school leaders had an impact on the preparation of principals and assistant principals throughout the nation in the late 2000s, presumably changing from a managerial focus to an instructional leadership focus. For example, Searby, Browne-Ferrigno, and Wang (2016) conducted a recent study of assistant principals’ readiness as instructional leaders in Alabama schools and found that 60% of respondents indicated being ‘ready’ or ‘very ready’ for the 50% or more of their time spent on instructional leadership. Surprisingly, more than 60% of the respondents reported not knowing the impact of instructional leadership performance on their evaluations.

As the preparation of school leaders has moved from management toward instructional leadership, research reflects enduring challenges that limit assistant principals in their ability to be instructional leaders. Little has changed in the last 30 years to promote and sustain assistant principals as instructional leaders.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which assistant principals perceive themselves to be instructional leaders and the degree to which they respond to their job responsibilities as instructional leaders or as disciplinarians. The study utilized mixed-methods, which included a web-based assessment of assistant principals’ perceptions of instructional management, interviews with assistant principals and observations of assistant principals in the field.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument used in this study was created by Hallinger (1982, 1990), the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS). The PIMRS was chosen because it has been used in numerous research studies and dissertations in the last three decades and has been proven as a reliable and valid data collection tool. The PIMRS assesses ten categories of Job Functions. Each category has a set of items introduced with the stem “To what extent do you....”. Respondents select one of the following responses with corresponding point value: Almost Always, 5; Frequently, 4; Sometimes, 3; Seldom, 2; and Almost Never, 1. The categories of Job Functions are aggregated into three dimensions of instructional management: Defining the School Mission, Managing the Instructional Program, and Developing the School Learning Climate Program. The survey’s reliability was established by Hallinger (Hallinger, 2010, p. 8) through internal consistency of 10 function sets in the three subscales of the instrument with Cronbach’s alphas ranging from .78 to .90 among the items. The following table represents the conceptual framework of the PIMRS (Hallinger & Wang, 2015, p. 28).

Table 1
PIMRS Conceptual Framework

| Dimensions | <i>Defining the School Mission</i> | <i>Managing the Instructional Program</i> | <i>Developing the School Climate Program</i> |
|------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Instructional Leadership Functions | I. Frame the school Goals II. Communicate the school goals | III. Supervise & evaluate instruction IV. Coordinate the curriculum V. Monitor student progress | VI. Protect instructional time VII. Maintain high visibility VIII. Provide incentives for teachers IX. Promote professional development X. Provide incentives for learning |

Mention should be made of Hallinger’s use of the term instructional management. Hallinger (2010), credited Bossert and colleagues (1982) with defining instructional management, the term Hallinger used in the PIMRS and continues to use in the PIMRS. Hallinger noted that the term instructional leadership has become a more acceptable term in the field of educational leadership. Hallinger described the difference between the terms as such:

...the formal distinction between these conceptual terms lies in the sources of power and means proposed to achieve results. Instructional *leadership* became the preferred term because of the recognition that principals who operate from this frame of reference rely more on expertise and influence than on formal authority and power to achieve a positive and lasting impact on staff motivation and behavior and student learning. (Hallinger, 2010, pp. 275-276)

An interview protocol was developed to delve deeper into respondents’ self-assessment of instructional management behaviors as reported by the PIMRS instrument. Some interview questions were based upon statements used in a questionnaire found in an article by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) titled “Role Conflict and Ambiguity in Complex Organizations” (p. 156).

An observation protocol from a previous study of assistant principals, the *1970 Report of the Assistant Principalship*, (Austin & Brown, 1970) was approved for use and for modification. The purpose of the observations of assistant principals in their buildings was to explore typical daily actions of assistant principals interacting with administrators, faculty, teachers, parents, and students, which provided a snapshot in time.

Procedures

The EIS Public Dataset 2016 of all public school employees in Illinois, available from the Illinois State Board of Education was used to determine the assistant principals for the study. All school employees other than Assistant Principals of Elementary, High School and Unit districts were removed from the EIS dataset. The assistant principal dataset was organized according to Illinois Association of School Administrators' three geographical Super Regions: Northcentral, Northeastern, and Southern. For this study, the Northcentral and Southern Region assistant principals were selected as participants in this research based upon the facts that follow. First, the number of districts with assistant principals represented in the Northcentral Region and the Southern Region were similar in number, respectively, 96 and 97 districts. Second, district enrollment information from Illinois Interactive Report Card (IIRC) district and school report cards, demonstrated a similar distribution of districts when organized by enrollment. Geographically, the Northcentral and Southern Regions encompass nearly four-fifths of the state's territory and represent the diversity of public school in Illinois. With these facts considered, the Northeastern Super Region which includes Chicago Public Schools was excluded from the study's population. Email addresses were obtained for the assistant principals by consulting district and school websites or by making phone or email contact when necessary.

The PIMRS assessment was transposed to Qualtrics. A link to the Qualtrics survey was embedded in an email message sent in late August 2017 to 468 assistant principals in the database. The survey closed on Tuesday, October 3, 2017. Ultimately, 453 emails in the database received the survey. Survey participation represented 109 respondents, a 24% participation rate. As surveys were completed, contact was made with respondents who expressed interest in participating in an interview and/or an observation. Seventeen interviews and six observations were conducted with assistant principals who volunteered.

Limitations

Participation in the PIMRS survey, interviews, and observations was voluntary. Survey fatigue may have contributed to individuals choosing not to participate in the survey. Obtaining permission for an on-site observation in a school district may have been an obstacle for some assistant principals. Observations of assistant principals were scheduled in advance. If individuals in the school had advanced knowledge of the visit, this may have affected their engagement with the assistant principal for the day.

Findings

In the Findings, AP will be used for assistant principal. For this paper, limited descriptive statistics of the PIMRS are reported. A future paper will provide more specific analysis of PIMRS results. A triangulation of predominant themes from survey results, interview responses, and observation notes served as the framework for the analysis of data.

PIMRS

The PIMRS survey results were analyzed to determine the job functions with the highest mean scores. Themes from the interview responses and from the observation notes were compared with the PIMRS results to find alignment of their perceptions, their stated beliefs, and their actions. The following table represents the number, range, mean, and standard deviation of participant responses for each of the 10 Job Functions in the PIMRS.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics of PIMRS for Job Functions

| PIMRS Job Function | N | M | SD | Variance |
|---|-----|--------|--------|----------|
| I. Frame School Goals | 103 | 3.6621 | .93433 | .873 |
| II. Communicate the School Goals | 101 | 3.3604 | .81683 | .667 |
| III. Supervise and Evaluate Instruction | 96 | 3.8979 | .67246 | .452 |
| IV. Coordinate the Curriculum | 96 | 3.4125 | .88297 | .780 |
| V. Monitor Student Progress | 96 | 3.2245 | .82816 | .686 |
| VI. Protect Instructional Time | 95 | 3.8189 | .66529 | .443 |
| VII. Maintain High Visibility | 95 | 3.5621 | .52616 | .277 |
| VIII. Provide Incentives for Teachers | 95 | 3.1853 | .69297 | .480 |
| IX. Promote Professional Development | 94 | 3.6755 | .84798 | .719 |
| X. Provide Incentives for Learning | 94 | 3.1745 | .90172 | .813 |

Quoting from Hallinger and Wang’s book (2015) “...the PIMRS is used to assess the extent of the principal’s engagement in the practices that comprise the instructional leadership role” (p. 54). The authors contended that “...even the most effective principals do not necessarily score ‘5’ on all subscales of the PIMRS” (p. 54). They added, “Mean scores of 4 and above should, therefore, be treated as indicators of ‘high engagement’” (p. 54). The mean scores from respondents in this study would indicate engagement in each of the 10 job functions. The job functions with the highest mean scores are Supervise and Evaluate Instruction $m=3.8979$ and Protect Instructional Time $m=3.8189$. These functions became the subjects of further analysis with themes from interviews and observations.

Hallinger (n.d.) provided research-based descriptions of these two job functions, edited for space:

“SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTION – to ensure that the goals of the school are being translated into practice at the classroom level...coordinating the classroom objectives of teachers with those of the school and evaluating classroom instruction...providing instructional support to teachers and monitoring classroom instruction...(Levine, 1982; Lipham, 1981; New York State, 1974)” (p. 3).

“PROTECTING INSTRUCTIONAL TIME – ...uninterrupted work time...classroom management and instructional skills are not used to the greatest effect if teachers are frequently interrupted by announcements, tardy students, and requests from the office...development and enforcement of school-wide policies related to the

interruption of classroom learning time (Bossert et al., 1982; Stallings, 1980; Stallings & Mohlman, 1981, Wynne, 1980)” (p. 3).

Interviews

Nineteen APs expressed interest in responding to interview questions, while only 17 committed to the interview process. Of the 17, 10 were high school APs, three were middle or junior high school APs, and four were elementary APs. Eight APs served in suburban school districts; six APs served in town districts; and three APs served in rural districts.

Responsibilities. The first interview question asked if the APs knew their responsibilities and if so, what they were. Discipline was identified as a primary responsibility for 11 of the 17 APs interviewed. Among these respondents five of them included attendance, absences, tardies, and truancy as a group of disciplinary issues for which they were responsible. Evaluation of teacher performance, was noted as a significant responsibility for most of the APs. Eight of the APs evaluate teacher performance for 10 or more teachers per year.

There were other responsibilities cited by some of the APs that were associated with instructional leadership. Two high school APs clarified how their approach to discipline was linked to instructional leadership. One said, “Last year we had an initiative to improve building relationships, measured by the number of student issues sent to the office from teachers’ classrooms. About 80% of these issues can be solved with better relationships and understanding between teachers and students.” Another said, “Fifty-one percent of my job is instructional leadership. We are trained in Valentine’s engaged learning which works on the importance of relationships between teachers and students.”

Among the responses from the remaining APs, seven made statements that they “help with,” “contribute to,” or “participate in.” Others made stronger cases of instructional leadership responsibilities. One AP referenced a grant that allowed him to implement a social-emotional learning program for early learners and hire a counselor in his school. He commented, “We are seeing the impact of this program, when kids self-regulate we have fewer discipline problems. It has become a natural process, not a stand-alone program.” Another AP said, “I’m all over programming in the school, any mentor programs, anything that goes with character education. I do both mentoring for students and for teachers. These are my main duties.” An elementary AP, noted important work with School Improvement Plans, implementation and stewardship of reading program, and weekly teacher meetings regarding student progress.

Another elementary AP stated her job responsibilities very succinctly, “Supervise instruction, provide to staff professional development, build relationships between community and us, and to provide the best education for my students.” Among other individual responses were responsibilities related to supervision of students, transportation, mandated testing, weekly communications, and student handbooks.

Autonomy and authority. The next interview question was posed to discern the AP’s perception of autonomy relating to their responsibilities, questioning if an AP’s autonomy is influenced at the school level by the principal or at the district or board level. A prevalent theme among the APs was one of having autonomy to carry out responsibilities.

Most of the APs interviewed expressed a high degree of autonomy in their schools and districts. One claimed a “stated belief is ‘we recommend, board hires.’” He went on to

say, "If it got to the point that I would have to recommend dismissal, the response to me would be, 'That's why we hired you.'" There were individual responses of "no autonomy," "limited, but improving autonomy," and "autonomy only in discipline."

The autonomy question led to asking if the AP's responsibility and authority with teacher performance evaluation are supported at the building and district level. A hypothetical situation followed by a question that drilled down to the heart of the issue. The situation: A student is sent to your office for a classroom discipline issue, which in your estimation is an issue related to classroom instruction or management that needed improvement. The question: Do you have the authority through teacher conferencing, teacher evaluation, or teacher remediation, to ensure improvement in the classroom will be achieved? Four of the APs interviewed had no responsibility to informally or formally evaluate teacher performance. Among the APs that had teacher evaluation responsibilities, only one identified with having no support for teacher improvement saying, "I may make recommendations, they may not be given attention. At least I know I have been honest and done my job. I can often encourage and see improvements. I wish we were given more backup with regard to teacher improvement through the evaluation process." Twelve APs indicated they have the authority to ensure teacher improvement to a limited degree. Some of these assertions of authority were weak and not very formidable. Among their responses were these statements: "I try to address things," "I try to step in and provide guidance and support for teachers," and "We expect our teachers to make changes in the learning environment." Other principals spoke extensively, in sharp contrast to the previous remarks, illuminating a theme of instructional leadership which is supported by the authority to act and to get results.

One AP said, "I have been in a position of having to assume authority for a teacher dismissal. Our approach is to hire well." He went on to explain the school system, "PBIS drives our student expectations, in the school, on the bus, and in the classroom." About teacher improvement he mentioned conferences with teachers asking about what to do differently, how to help students be successful, and what accommodations can be used. He employs peer observations. He asks teachers rated as excellent, "Have you met your ceiling?"

Another AP said, "In my first year, we dismissed two teachers as a result of poor evaluations. One reason for this is I have the responsibility and the authority....Teaching is relationship-driven. We recently had a social-emotional wellness workshop to remind teachers to think of the whole student. I check for retention of and action on PD with exit slips and follow up at faculty meetings with discussion of the application."

A high school AP assured me of his authority to ensure teachers make instructional improvement when necessary. "I couch my assurance in the mission, a community of learners. I am the learner-in-chief. I am an approachable, nice guy. I have never given a discipline sanction, detention [to a student]. I am collaborative. Some relational discipline does come to me. I ask: What is the teacher doing? What can be done? I try to be intentional in feedback. Learning comes from reflection." As well, this AP spoke of acting as an instructional leader by facilitating difficult conversations over a period of time, among the administration, parents, and a teacher where the primary concern of the discourse was a health-related issue which contributed to a student failing a final exam. Ultimately, the AP was "proud of the outcomes for this student" as the student was able to retake the exam. This same AP along with the school nurse negotiated an early school dismissal for a high school father and mother to be able to take care of their infant.

These are important instructional leadership actions that APs have facilitated to attempt to ensure success for students who may be at-risk of failure without these accommodations. In each of these examples, it was apparent teachers were not helpful in developing or providing accommodations for student success. APs must be granted the authority to ensure accommodations are provided. APs must be drivers of belief systems in their schools that incorporate what is best for each student and must be empowered to uphold this belief among faculty.

Another high school AP asserted a similar approach to ensuring instructional improvement in respect to teacher evaluation and collaborative conversations. "If I have a teacher needing coaching, I describe concerns and areas of improvement with the department head. I expect coaching to make an improvement which will then be looked for in a formal evaluation. Teachers are comfortable to come to me for help, for advice. My practice is establishing relationships outside of classroom. Informal observations and classroom visits have established a level of trust and helpfulness and encouragement to succeed. If necessary, following an evaluation, I get best results asking for self-reflection. If not, I am up front about PD that is needed for improvement. We do assign mentors for new teachers to help them adapt and improve."

Another high school AP responded, "I'm a primary evaluator. I have created extensive documentation and am very certain my experience and relationship of trust with the principal that dismissal will not be problem, if necessary. We have collaborative conversations about teachers who may be at-risk. Conversations with teachers are direct, follow protocol to improve, and will be held accountable."

While APs have demonstrated instructional leadership with teacher supervision and evaluation, they appear to lack instructional leadership by failing to protect instructional time. Their implementation of certain policies and practices frequently reduces or eliminates a student's instructional time with their teacher of record. In many instances, this reduction or elimination instructional time is a repeated practice with individual students.

While this example of instructional time is not explicitly referenced in Hallinger's definition of protecting instructional time, it is widely recognized that the instructional time a student spends with an effective teacher has a positive effect on student achievement. There appeared to be limited recognition of this among some of the APs interviewed.

One example of reducing a student's classroom instruction time was explained this way by an AP. "...Whenever a situation like that has arisen in the past,...it is because both the student and/or the teacher have become frustrated with one another, and they need a break from one another....I make my presence known there, so that way the kid knows that we mean business and they have to make sure that they are following along etc. And then after school, I'll sit and talk with the teacher...". Later in the interview this AP went on to explain how he handles discipline problems saying, "...teachers will get frustrated with other teachers, because...why can't they deal with this....Some teachers get frustrated with administration, because how come this kid keeps on continuing to do this....So I drew up a...split chart...teacher managed behaviors...office managed behaviors."

One AP related the story of a student who could not attend school for a week because he did not have the required vaccinations for school attendance. This week-long absence from class resulted in being assigned to ZAP (Zeroes Are Not Permitted) first hour and missing advisory support. Then the student was assigned to the after-school teacher until the make-up assignments from the week's absence were submitted to all of his teachers.

A high school AP who had no responsibilities relating to teacher evaluation, has substantial control over attendance, absences, tardies, and truancy. The AP explained, "First and foremost, we rely on teachers to take accurate period attendance everyday....if you are late to school first period and...if unexcused, we no longer send them to first period. We send them down [ISS] or we keep them here in-house, until second period begins. And then it becomes the student's responsibility to follow up with that first period teacher." The AP shared that attendance, tardies, and truancy were over one half of the nearly 600 discipline referrals in the previous year's first semester. He asserts that this "tightening of policy" has reduced referrals to approximately 120 at mid-semester this year. The AP went on to say, "Secondly we run our Wednesday reports...of students who have missed two consecutive days and Wednesday mornings are devoted to home visits." The AP and the counselor make these visits, and attempt to identify the root cause of truancy, provide sources of services to help, and express their desire to see the student graduate. However, there is a negative academic impact inherent in the truancy policy. The AP explained, "If you are truant for any part of the day, even 10 minutes, you are considered truant and in an in-school-suspension for all day. Truant for any part of the day, it is one day ISS. Work is sent down and no adverse impact with regard to academics....Not punitive."

Student achievement. The final item in the interview asked the APs to explain which of the following two statements they agreed with: 'I know exactly how my job is related to student achievement.' or 'I am uncertain as to how my job is linked to student achievement.' They were also asked to provide an example of how they know this. This question produced a significant, three- to five-second pause before answering among several respondents. There was one audible "Hm" before answering from one AP, and another AP, after a pause, said, "Boy! That is a tough question!"

Most of the APs articulated the importance of their role in establishing a school culture that enables all children to learn. One AP said, "Yes, I know how my job is connected to student achievement. Most student achievement is based upon having a trusting relationship with students who come to our school. We need to see they feel welcomed in school. Can you care? Can you try? The more they are engaged with learning, meaningful practical everyday connections, they more they will flourish. Relationships, connections, feel valued and trusted." Another said, "A teacher's efficacy and involvement with students is really the number one determinant of student success. My involvement with staff, what I bring to those relationships with coaching and guidance has made a profound difference."

An elementary AP said, "I do know exactly how my job is linked to student achievement. I make efforts to support the teachers in the things that they need to help students be successful whether that's behavioral support for specific students or academic support....and those things are directly related to student achievement." Another elementary AP said, "There are so many things that go into student achievement. Social emotional learning is key. In this school they have their first social interactions. We are huge proponents of social emotional growth in our building. As well, our first-grade reading growth is of huge importance to overall student achievement."

A high school AP said, "I'm pretty sure what I do is linked to student achievement. What I do affects how teachers feel about their jobs and how students feel about attending school." One AP cited his role in conducting evaluations positively impacted student achievement, but added, "Also as an assistant principal you take on a role helping with the educational culture which I think is a large factor in achievement. We are seeing this as we

are doing a book study with our teachers on culture of institutions around the world right now.”

One AP is very involved in data analysis and curriculum evaluation and added, “But with the evaluation system, I have a direct route to improve teaching to impact their teaching performance.” Curriculum work with teachers at the building level was cited by several APs. When APs worked with curriculum their comments revealed the importance of curriculum that met the needs of specific students through critically selected interventions that would lead to student growth behaviorally, social emotionally, and/or academically.

Two APs’ responses indicated the role of establishing a welcoming and inviting culture appeared to be their job alone. One AP who works primarily with high school students whose success relies on instructional support through MTSS said, “My job is to keep these high-risk kids in school. I related to them because I’ve been in their shoes in a lot of my life situations. It’s easier for them to come to me and trust me.” This principal, as well, expressed he had responsibility or authority to evaluate teachers or to work with them in creating a more inviting environment in their classrooms for students he worked with. Another AP in an elementary school, expressed the importance of his morning greeting of the students getting off the bus in the morning. “Yes, I know exactly how it is connected to student achievement. It is the exact same reason why I go to the bus stop each morning...wait for the kids to get off the bus. I have rewards when they do well on the bus. I know that 10 minutes of my morning prior to the kids getting there is going to save everybody’s day without a headache. Because if kids feel good and they’re ready to come to school and feel it’s a good place to come and learn then that’s going to make the classrooms pretty easy to learn in.” While this is a statement of the APs impact on the start of the day, it raises a question about the importance of the teacher’s impact on individual student classrooms every hour of the day.

Three APs struggled with their initial response, opening their answers with these statements, “Well, that could be interpreted in different ways,” “I am uncertain. But I guess I know how it is linked to student achievement,” and “I am uncertain.” The first of these two principals did complete her response in this way, “I don’t have data. I know scores on tests. Although I try to be an instructional leader, I do believe that reducing student tardies, absences, and truancy affects student achievement...If I need to see a student, I do not remove them from a class where they need to be.”

Another high school AP, paused and then said, “Boy! That is a tough question.” This AP struggled with an answer, but said he functions as a resource for teachers. In a previous answer, this AP shared detailed information about a school goal to improve attendance, reduce absences, tardies, and trancies. It is curious that he did not connect this school goal as one that is linked to improving student achievement.

A few responses were unsettling. One AP said, “I am uncertain. Discipline and student achievement are the same thing.” Another AP said, “The first one. If there is no discipline in a school nobody’s going to learn very much. Your angel students will still behave and come and sit down and listen to the teacher, but your sort of students who maybe have less self-discipline or less home discipline aren’t going to act properly if there aren’t any consequences. You know, it undermines the whole process.” Another AP who failed to identify agreeing with either statement offered this, “My teachers here are hesitant about change and....they don’t want to put time and effort into the next step. I don’t want to say

they are spoiled, but they are needy. If I need to lead them to water, that I can do, but to get them to drink that is a tough one. Discipline-wise it is easy.”

Observations. Of the six APs observed in their schools, five were high school APs and one was an elementary AP. Observations of APs at work demonstrated the importance of their visibility in the school, contributing to relationships with students and faculty and to building a school culture that is welcoming but also accountable. The APs who were observed spent one-quarter of their time supervising students. Supervision of students included mingling with them, supervising them, and having deliberate conversations with some students, on the school grounds, in the school, as students arrived on campus to start the school day, during lunch hours, and during class breaks. While most students were unaware of the AP’s presence as they went about their day, with little recognition of them, many students “checked-in” with the APs. Students would approach an AP with a dilemma saying, “Here’s my problem. What should I do?” As well, students would approach with expressions of accomplishments saying, “I got my homework all done last night!”

High school APs engaged more frequently with students in their office or in the attendance office as the school day started having conversations with students about absences, tardies, and truancy and in-school suspensions. Many of these conversations were routine. The AP would report the calculation of days missed, review the policy, and ask the student how they planned to correct the situation. Many of the situations described were well beyond a student’s ability to correct. APs did offer suggestions to students, such as using the alarm on their cell phone to awaken in time to get to school. The student would typically listen, offer a willingness to improve, and then be sent to class.

Several APs demonstrated instructional leadership in a variety of ways. Most frequently, APs were observed ensuring students with special needs had their needs met. For example, one high school AP met with the special needs coordinator to ensure that a teacher complied with accommodations for a student who had difficulty reading aloud in class. The conversation was problem-solving and solution-finding to meet the student’s instructional needs. As well, there was a purposeful agreement to hold the teacher accountable for providing the appropriate accommodations for the student.

One high school AP had personal and more meaningful conversations with students who had absences. Each student was asked about their academic performance in at least two different courses. The principal was knowledgeable about their class schedules and their current grades.

During the observations, two of the APs conducted teacher evaluations--one of an elementary teacher, another of a high school teacher. The high school AP evaluates over 20 third- and fourth-year teachers and three non-certified staff persons. This AP is confident of his expertise in teacher evaluation and in his relationships with teachers concerning instructional improvement. This AP led the professional development for teachers as the state’s Performance Evaluation Reform Act was initiated.

One AP conducted a post-evaluation conference. In the post-conference conversation two of the teacher’s responses demonstrated a relationship between the teacher and the AP that could be characterized as a trusting relationship that allowed the teacher to grow instructionally. One example was the teacher’s response to the question “What went well in class and what didn’t?” The teacher described how she configured a group discussion, how it did not go as planned, and how she had reflected on the situation and did not consider the individual needs of a specific student in one group. Later in the post-conference, the AP

complimented the teacher about a willingness to develop new initiatives. The teacher proudly talked about a peer-group she had organized that conferences about individual students each week. They collectively support each other and the students they have in common. Soon, another teacher will join this group. Supporting new teachers in new endeavors and in respect to their new ideas builds their capacity for growth--an excellent example of instructional leadership.

One AP attended a high school administrative team meeting. All items on the agenda had a thread of connection to instructional leadership: school improvement goals, graduation rate, course test scores, district and building climate surveys, IEP meetings, and PSAT.

All APs had business to take care of. Among these business items were follow-ups on discipline issues such as a cafeteria fight, a student returning from juvenile detention, a possible criminal case, a return call to a parent. As well, one AP handled transportation issues and followed up on a reported case of a driver who fell asleep. Another AP was highly focused on safety plans and safety drills. Another AP provides oversight of National Honor Society selection, induction, and parent questions. Two APs managed substitute teacher assignments in the school. One of these APs covered a class period for a substitute teacher who became ill and had to leave the school. A significant issue occurred during one observation when an AP had an hour of his day taken because of a campus-wide search for two students who did not report to class. This event caused the AP to miss a scheduled IEP meeting. An elementary AP spent time working with a social worker attempting to calm a student with anxiety. Another elementary AP spent an hour setting up and supervising a teacher's beard-shaving ceremony, a reward to students for meeting a fund-raising goal for an organization that provides food and supplies to needy families.

Most of the APs found 15 to 30 minutes of time, at least once during the observation hours, when they checked and responded to emails, text messages, and phone calls. In fact, any available free minute was spent checking and responding to emails, messages, and phone calls. With some APs, a block of time, 15 or more minutes was set aside for these tasks. It was apparent that any task requiring extended concentration or attention was probably scheduled after regular school hours. Several APs responded to emails and texts 'on the fly,' while walking the hallways, while supervising lunch, while in the office. While it was not always apparent what the subject of these responses were, in most cases they were managerial items.

Implications for Practice

The triangulation of PIMRS data, that indicated an engagement in supervision and evaluation of instruction, with interview and observation themes supported a finding of many assistant principals acting as instructional leaders. The assistant principals who were responsible for teacher evaluations were more likely to act as instructional leaders than those assistant principals who handled discipline exclusively. Assistant principals who evidenced acting with high levels of instructional leadership had expert skills concerning teacher evaluation and believe their leadership resulted in better instructional practices and higher levels of student achievement. In addition, assistant principals acting with high levels of instructional leadership, ensure that individual student needs are accommodated by teachers, where the teachers employ appropriate strategies that lead to student success and engage students in

constructive relationships. In many of these cases, assistant principals act on their own and operate outside of the assumed role of assistant principal, which often occurs through leveraging instructional leadership without the direct support of their principal. Mertz and McNelly (1999) learned through their study of assistant principals that this was not unusual. Among the assistant principals in their study, they found that an assistant principal must choose to conform to the norms or the role as established by the organization or by the last person in the role, or to “retain and operate out of the values brought to the position, and in so doing, influence the position held” (Mertz & McNeely, 1999, p. 15).

School principals influence the assistant principals who are chosen to work with them. They also influence the work they do and the way they perform their duties. Principals must hire assistant principals who are experienced and tested instructional leaders, and they must support them in the role of an instructional leader rather than the role of disciplinarian. Furthermore, principals must protect their assistant principals’ time for evaluating teachers and support their assistant principals’ recommendations for instructional improvement in the classroom.

Assistant principals who acted as instructional leaders were members of an administrative team and of a school culture that embraces a belief system of success for every student. Of the assistant principals in schools where this belief was most widespread, there were few students sent to the assistant principal from a classroom for a discipline issue. As one high school assistant principal said, “We don’t have problems because we have the right people who understand the relationships necessary for student success.” In other high schools, teachers were committed to practices that engaged students in a desire to come to school and to actively engage in class work. One principal remarked, “Teachers in this group call meetings with students, parents and teachers, and guidance to discuss particular student needs.” Superintendents are responsible for ensuring that district core beliefs about the importance of instructional leadership as the work of assistant principals is embraced and modeled by building administrative teams.

Following on this recommendation, the assistant principal must be re-imagined as a member of a school’s professional learning community, not a “siloed” administrator who functions as a manager of policies and people. The assistant principal’s position can be an administrative position that engages with teachers, school service personnel, parents, and students as an expert practitioner focused on instructional improvement and academic achievement. Assistant principals operating as instructional leaders in this study were treated as an instructional colleague who had conversations with stakeholders about helping students reach their potential. They were not seen as the person who took care of teachers’ issues with students sent from their classrooms.

There is room for improvement related to changing the role of assistant principal from disciplinarian to instructional leadership among some assistant principals. The greatest need for improvement is in the implementation of policies and practices dealing with absences, tardies, and truancy. In most interview responses and during observations, policies for absences, tardies, and truancy were punitive. These issues are rarely solved with disciplinary actions. The typical disciplinary actions reduce students’ instructional time with a teacher of record. The disciplinary actions diminish a student’s opportunity for relationship building with a teacher of record and deny a student appropriate academic instruction or academic engagement with a teacher of record. There is burgeoning research on solutions to school absenteeism and truancy taking into consideration family needs and

social emotional needs of students. Districts wanting to move toward greater academic success for at-risk students may find this research helpful. As well, principal preparation program must make principal candidates aware of current research on the cause of and solutions to absenteeism and truancy changing the approach from a disciplinary action to an intervention.

Finally, as boards of education and superintendents are focused on accountability and student achievement, they should examine the role and responsibilities of the principal and assistant principal administrative team considering two things. Consider whether the principal's disposition and beliefs are focused on student learning or focused on student compliance with policies, since the principal typically determines the assistant principal's role and responsibilities. Consider the return on investment associated with student academic and behavioral outcomes in schools where assistant principals act as disciplinarians or act as instructional leaders.

Resistance to change the way assistant principals have primarily operated as disciplinarians and the recognition by some assistant principals of the professional advancement risks by acting outside established assistant principal norms, may mean there will not be much gained in numbers of assistant principals acting as instructional leaders. The responsibility for achieving this change is in the hands of superintendents and principals who work with assistant principals. They must support the change with as much conviction as assistant principals desire the role of instructional leader. The assistant principals who acted as instructional leaders in this study provide hope for their ascension to positions where they will be able promote instructional leadership among assistant principals.

References

- Armstrong, D. E. (2009). *Administrative passages: Navigating the transition from teacher to assistant principal*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Armstrong, D. E. (2010, March). Rites of passage: coercion, compliance, and complicity in the socialization of new vice-principals. *Teachers College Record*, 112(3), 685-722.
- Austin, D. B. & Brown, H. L. (1970). Report of the assistant principalship. (Volume 3: The Study of the Secondary School Principalship.) Washington, D.C.: National Association of Secondary School Principals.
- Barr, A. S. (1929, February). The supervision of classroom instruction. *NASSP Bulletin*, 13(25), 142-155.
- Bossert, S. T., Dwyer, D. C., Rowan, B., & Lee, G. V. (1982, Summer). The Instructional management role of the principal. *Educational Administration Quarterly* 18(3), 34-64.
- Brookover, L., & Lezotte, L. (1979). *Changes in school characteristics coincident with changes in student achievement*. East Lansing: The Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University.
- Calabrese, R. L. (1991, March). Effective principals: What do they do? *NASSP Bulletin*, 75(533), 51-57.
- Collins, J. D. (1976, November). The assistant principal as antagonist. *NASSP Bulletin*, 60(43), 65-69.
- Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research 3e: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Edmonds, R. (1979). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership*, 37(1), 15-24.
- Greenfield, W. D. (1985, November). Developing an instructional role for the assistant principal. *Education and urban society*, 18(1), 85-92.
- Hallinger, P. (n.d.). *Instructional management rating scale: Resource manual, version 2.2*. Bangkok, Thailand: Leadingware.
- Hallinger, P. (1982, 1990). *Principal instructional management rating scale*. Sarasota, FL: Leading Development Associates.
- Hallinger, P. (2010, October). A review of three decades of doctoral studies using the Principal Instructional Management Rating Scale: A lens on methodological progress in educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 47(2), 271-306.
- Hallinger, P. & Wang, W. (2015). *Assessing instructional leadership with the principal instructional management rating scale*. Switzerland: Spring International.
- Hassenpflug, A. (1990, September 26). A wasted reform resource: The assistant principal. *Education Week*, 10(4), 23.
- Heyde, Christina R. (2013). *Teacher and administrator perceptions of the effectiveness of current teacher evaluation practices and the impact of the new Illinois Performance Evaluation Reform Act of 2010 (PERA)*. Doctoral dissertation, Northern Illinois University.
- Kaplan, L. S. & Owings, W. A. (1999, November). Assistant principals: The case for shared instructional leadership. *NASSP Bulletin*, 83(610), 80-94.
- Lezotte, Lawrence W. (2009). [*Effective Schools: Past, Present, and Future*](#). Okemos, MI: Effective Schools Products.

- Mertz, N. T., & McNelly, S. R. (1999, April). Through the looking glass: An up front and personal look at the world of the assistant principal. Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.
- Milanowski, A., Scott, J. A., Miller, J., Finster, M., Doll, M., Lewandowski, H., Roseland, D., & White, B. R. (n.d.). *Evaluation of the Performance Evaluation Reform Act: Interim report*. Springfield, IL: Illinois State Board of Education. Found here <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/pera-interim-report-14.pdf>
- National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), (1970). *The Assistant principalship in public elementary schools—1969: A research study*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals.
- Pellicer, L. O., Anderson, L. W., Keefe, J. W., Kelley, E. A. & McCleary, L. E. (1990). *High school leaders and their schools: Profiles of effectiveness* (Volume II). Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.
- Reed D. B., & Himmler, A. H. (1985, November). The work of the secondary assistant principalship: A field study. *Educational and Urban Society*, 18(1), 59-84.
- Rizzo, J. R., House, R. J., & Lirtzman, S. I. (1970). Role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 15(2), 150-163.
- Schroeder, E. L. (1925). Chapter XXIII: The status of the assistant principal in the elementary school. *Fourth Yearbook of the Department of Elementary School Principals*, 4(4), Washington D. C.: National Educational Association, pp. 389-400.
- Searby, L, Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Wang, Chih-hsuan. (2016, July). Assistant Principals: Their readiness as instructional leaders. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 16(3), 397-430.