

The Learning-Centered Principal

Richard DuFour

Schools need leadership from principals who focus on advancing student and staff learning.

I can summarize the most universally accepted conventional wisdom regarding the fundamental role of the contemporary principal in a single phrase: The principal must serve as the *instructional leader* of the school. For more than 30 years, research has described the principal in this way. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2001) defines its mission, in part, as “strengthening the role of the principal as instructional leader.” State legislatures have mandated that principals serve as instructional leaders, and school districts have written their job descriptions for principals to include a reference to instructional leadership. But allow me to offer a radical proposal: The focus on the principal as instructional leader is flawed.

Confessions of an Instructional Leader

When I entered the principalship a quarter century ago, the research on effective schools warned that without strong administrative leadership, the disparate elements of good schooling could be neither brought together nor kept together (Lezotte, 1997). I heeded the message and embraced my role as a strong leader with gusto. I was determined to rise above the mundane managerial tasks of the job and focus instead on instruction—I hoped to be an *instructional leader*. I asked teachers to submit their course syllabi and curriculum guides so that I could monitor what they were teaching. I collected weekly lesson plans to ensure that teachers were teaching the prescribed curriculum. I read voraciously about instructional strategies in different content areas and shared pertinent articles with staff members.

But my devotion to the clinical supervision process at the school was the single greatest illustration of my commitment to function as an instructional leader. I developed a three-part process that required me to be a student of good teaching and to help teachers become more reflective and insightful about their instruction.

During the pre-observation conference, I met with teachers individually and asked them to talk me through the lesson I would be observing in their classroom. I asked a series of questions, including What will you teach? How will you teach it? What instructional strategies will you use? What instructional materials will you use? During the classroom observation, I worked furiously to script as accurately as possible what the teacher said and did.

During the postobservation conference, the teacher and I reconstructed the lesson from my notes and his or her recollections. We looked for patterns or trends in what the teacher had said and done, and we discussed the relationship between those patterns and the lesson's objectives. Finally, I asked the teacher what he or she might change in the lesson before teaching it again. I then wrote a summary of the classroom observation and our postobservation discussion, offered recommendations for effective teaching strategies, and suggested ways in which the teacher might become more effective.

The observation process was time-consuming, but I was convinced that my focus on individual teachers and their instructional strategies was an effective use of my time. And the process was not without benefits. As a new pair

of eyes in the classroom, I was able to help teachers become aware of unintended instructional or classroom management patterns. I could express my appreciation for the wonderful work that teachers were doing because I had witnessed it firsthand. I observed powerful instructional strategies and was able to share those strategies with other teachers. I learned a lot about what effective teaching looks like.

In Hot Pursuit of the Wrong Questions

Eventually, after years as a principal, I realized that even though my efforts had been well intentioned—and even though I had devoted countless hours each school year to those efforts—I had been focusing on the wrong questions. I had focused on the questions, What are the teachers teaching? and How can I help them to teach it more effectively? Instead, my efforts should have been driven by the questions, To what extent are the students learning the intended outcomes of each course? and What steps can I take to give both students and teachers the additional time and support they need to improve learning?

This shift from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning is more than semantics. When learning becomes the preoccupation of the school, when all the school's educators examine the efforts and initiatives of the school through the lens of their impact on learning, the structure and culture of the school begin to change in substantive ways. Principals foster this structural and cultural transformation when they shift their emphasis from helping individual teachers improve instruction to helping teams of teachers ensure that students achieve the intended outcomes of their schooling. More succinctly, teachers and students benefit when principals function as *learning leaders* rather than *instructional leaders*.

From Teaching to Learning: One School's Story

I became principal of Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, in 1983. One of the first steps we took in our transition from teaching to learning was to organize all staff members who taught the same course into teams. For two years, each team worked together to

- Clarify the essential outcomes of the course and the outcomes of each unit of instruction within the course. A school's teachers cannot make student learning their focus until they know what each student needs to learn. The Stevenson teacher teams examined state curriculum guidelines, the recommendations of professional organizations, and competencies assessed by such tests as the ACT and SAT to clarify the essential outcomes of their courses. Teams limited themselves to 8–10 such outcomes per semester. In effect, teams narrowed their focus and reduced their curriculum by eliminating nonessential content.
- Develop two common assessments per semester and specify the standard of mastery for the assessment as well as for each subtest within the assessment. Once a team had agreed on what students should learn, its members turned their attention to the question, How will we know whether students have learned the essential outcomes? Teams developed at least two common assessments each semester to give to all students enrolled in the course. Typically, teachers teach, test, and hope for the best. Stevenson teachers established standards of mastery for these common assessments and for each subtest within a common assessment. They set a bar for student performance and then worked to ensure that each student could make it over that bar.
- Analyze results and develop strategies for improvement on the basis of the analysis. The common assessments provided the teachers with valuable information. They saw how successful their students were in meeting an agreed-on standard compared with all the other students in the school who were attempting

to meet the same standard on the same test. A teacher whose students struggled on a particular subtest could turn to the team for ideas, strategies, and materials to improve student learning. A teacher with expertise in helping students master a particular concept could share that expertise with colleagues. Finally, the team assessed the performance of the entire group of students, celebrated areas of high performance, identified areas of concern, and developed and implemented action plans to improve the performance of all students.

As principal, I played an important role in initiating, facilitating, and sustaining the process of shifting our collective focus from teaching to learning. To make collaborative teams the primary engine of our school improvement efforts, teachers needed time to collaborate. Teachers, accustomed to working in isolation, needed focus and parameters as they transitioned to working in teams. They needed a process to follow and guiding questions to pursue. They needed training, resources, and support to overcome difficulties they encountered while developing common outcomes, writing common assessments, and analyzing student achievement data. They needed access to relevant, timely information on their students' performance. They needed help writing specific and measurable team improvement goals that focused on student learning rather than on their team activities. They needed encouragement, recognition, and celebration as they progressed. They needed someone to confront those individuals or teams of teachers who failed to fulfill their responsibilities. All of these tasks fell to me, the principal. Staff members' consensus to transform our school into a learning community did not diminish the need for effective leadership in the school, but the focus of that leadership shifted from teaching to learning. In fact, I am convinced that a school cannot make the transition to the collaborative, results-oriented culture of a professional learning community without a principal who focuses on learning.

A System of Interventions to Promote Learning

A focus on learning affects not only the way that teachers work together but also the way that they relate to and work with each student. Because a desire to ensure student learning drove the team planning process, Stevenson teachers and teams focused on the percentage of students achieving mastery rather than on the average score of the group. This attention to individual student mastery enabled us to identify specific students who were having difficulty acquiring the intended knowledge and skills. The staff then worked together to build an intervention system that provided struggling students with more time and support during the school day.

We assigned a faculty advisor to every incoming student to monitor his or her learning. Counselors met with freshmen every week. We issued academic progress reports in each course every three weeks. When we identified a struggling student, his or her advisor and counselor worked together to develop a plan of response. First, the advisor and counselor might assign the student to daily tutoring sessions with an upperclassman mentor. Next, they might move students who continued to struggle into small-group tutoring sessions with a certified teacher. Sometimes they placed students in small study halls with 8–10 other students in which a supervisor monitored their homework daily. Struggling students were also enrolled in special classes that focused on study skills, note taking, time management, and reading in the content areas.

This systematic response to those who were not learning made it clear to both students and staff members that we *expected* all Stevenson students to learn. Time and support varied—the expectation that all students would achieve the intended outcomes of their courses remained a constant.

From Instructional Leader to Lead Learner

Educators are gradually redefining the role of the principal from instructional leader with a focus on teaching to leader of a professional community with a focus on learning. One of the National Association of Elementary School Principals' six standards for what principals should know and be able to do calls on principals to put student and adult learning at the center of their leadership and to serve as the lead learner (2001). The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, a program of the Council of Chief State School Officers, has also identified six professional standards for principals, one of which calls for the principal to be

an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. (1996, p. 12)

By concentrating on teaching, the instructional leader of the past emphasized the inputs of the learning process. By concentrating on learning, today's school leaders shift both their own focus and that of the school community from inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results. Schools need principal leadership as much as ever. But only those who understand that the essence of their job is promoting student and teacher learning will be able to provide that leadership.

References

Council of Chief State School Officers. (1996). *Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards for school leaders*. Washington, DC: Author. Available: www.ccsso.org/pdfs/isllestd.pdf

Lezotte, L. (1997). *Learning for all*. Okemos, MI: Effective Schools Products.

National Association of Elementary School Principals. (2001). *Leading learning communities: Standards for what principals should know and be able to do*. Alexandria, VA: Author. Available: www.naesp.org/lc.pdf

National Association of Secondary School Principals. (2001). NASSP Background [Online]. Available: www.principals.org/about_us/02-01.html

Richard DuFour is Superintendent of Adlai Stevenson High School District 125, Lincolnshire, IL 60069; rdufour@district125.k12.il.us. He is and the lead consultant for *The Principal Series* (ASCD video series, 1998–99).

Copyright © 2002 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development