



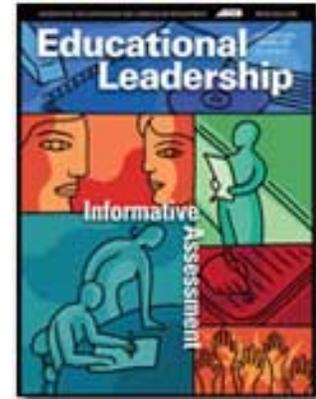
# Educational Leadership

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## The Principal Connection / What Is Instructional Leadership?

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"Principals should be instructional leaders." How often have you heard that statement? In reading books on the principalship, perusing job descriptions, or listening to superintendents talk about the role building leaders should play, I find a pervasive assumption that a principal must be the instructional leader of the school.

I agree: Principals should be instructional leaders. The title *principal* emanated from the term *principal teacher*. The assumption behind the title was that the principal had more skill and knowledge than anyone in the building and would guide others in how to teach. Much has changed in the schooling enterprise, but our expectations for the principal remain the same: He or she needs to be the educational visionary, offering direction and expertise to ensure that students learn.

But scads of other responsibilities also fall to the principal: These include student discipline, building security and cleanliness, athletics, relationships with parents, personnel supervision, test scores, and meeting adequate yearly progress goals. True, sometimes the principal is intimately involved in an area and sometimes he or she delegates, but the principal always bears the responsibility, which cuts into the time and energy needed to think about pedagogy.

These additional duties are not the main obstacle to principals' instructional leadership, however. Another deterrent, in my candid opinion, is that teachers today know so much more about how students learn than they did when the principalship emerged. Perhaps long ago a principal could be the resident instructional expert and offer advice to everyone—but no more! Not only has knowledge about learning mushroomed, but teacher expertise has also grown. In my school,

quite a few teachers know far more about pedagogy, curriculum, and student learning than I do, and I'm thrilled that they do. Ideally, this would be the case for every principal in every school.

But having teachers with expertise doesn't abrogate the principal's responsibility for being the instructional leader any more than does a myriad of responsibilities. So how can we lead?

## Leader as Catalyst for Collegiality

Although today's principals have neither the time nor the expertise to be the instructional leader in the traditional sense—by knowing the most—we can exercise instructional leadership just as powerfully through facilitating teachers' learning. Roland Barth's notion of collegiality described in *Improving Schools from Within*<sup>1</sup> provides a model. Barth says that if students are to grow and learn, their teachers must grow and learn, too. He discusses four aspects of collegiality: teachers talking together about students, teachers developing curriculum together, teachers observing one another teach, and teachers teaching one another. I would add teachers and administrators working together to shape a solution for a particular school issue.

I often use Barth's components of collegiality to consider how I might enhance teacher collaboration in my school. Some activities, like teachers talking together about students, occur naturally. I try to enhance these conversations by nudging teachers toward a growth perspective. I might ask, "What areas are students soaring in or struggling with? Why?" Other collegial practices, such as teachers observing one another, require a push from me. I recently met with some of my senior teachers to talk about getting more observations going. We agreed that observations would be beneficial and plan to begin more teacher observations soon.

I share the concept of collegiality with my faculty, which helps them see themselves as resources and partners in creating a collegial setting. I expressly include collegiality on teachers' end-of-year evaluations, commending some for leading committees or helping teammates and pointing out to others that they are not yet active participants in our learning community.

## Leading Questions

An important aspect of leading through facilitating teachers' growth is offering input on lessons and leading teachers to their own discoveries. I often use the following questions when I give teachers feedback on a lesson plan or delivery:

- How did this lesson address the needs of your three strongest and three weakest students?
- What would you do differently the next time you teach this lesson? Why?
- How will you know what your students know?
- How could you create an assessment tool that would help you teach these concepts?

Each of these questions is a starting point for a face-to-face conversation, an e-mail exchange,

or a wider group discussion. After one recent observation, for example, a teacher and I shared ideas both in person and through e-mail for helping a talented but distractible student.

Today's teachers don't necessarily look for answers from an instructional leader. But they need to know that their leader understands and appreciates their work and recognizes their challenges and frustrations. Teachers need to see their principals as partners in education, learning with and from them.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Barth, R. S. (1991). *Improving schools from within*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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Instructional leadership is generally defined as the management of curriculum and instruction by a school principal. This term appeared as a result of research associated with the effective school movement of the 1980s, which revealed that the key to running successful schools lies in the principals' role. However, the concept of instructional leadership is recently stretched out to include more distributed models which emphasize distributed and shared empowerment among school staff, for example