

Let's End the Ambiguous Role of Assistant Principals

Twenty pairs of small, curious eyes stared up at me from the carpet in front of me. I was seated in a circle with 20 of the pre-K students in our elementary school. It was Community Helpers Week and the class had invited different guest speakers each day to explain what their job was and how they helped people. It was Tuesday morning and, as the assistant principal, it was my day.

"What do you do?" the first student asked me. The question rang over and over in my head as I gave a nervous laugh, repeated the question out loud, and tried to think of a relatively intelligent answer that would satisfy the inquisitiveness of 4-year-olds.

"Well," I began, "I help children—and Mr. Aiken," who is the principal.

"Yeah, but what do you *do*?" another impatient voice rang out. I managed to blurt out some coherent answer that got me out of the hot seat and on to easier questions like "What's your favorite food?" I never realized that the hardest part of my job would be trying to explain it to others.

The Assistant Principal's Many Roles

Since graduating with a degree in school administration, my classmates and I get together periodically to exchange stories and offer support. Most of us have accepted positions as assistant principals, and I have discovered many differences in our roles. There are the traditional tasks typically assigned to assistant principals that involve managing textbooks, handling discipline, and coordinating buses. Most of us are also involved in the formal classroom observation process, where we observe teachers and provide feedback. Beyond these standard tasks, none of our duties is the same.

One of my classmates collaborates with others to create the school's master schedule. Another has the task of checking teachers' weekly lesson plans. Still others supervise detention, lead

professional learning communities, and handle maintenance concerns.

While I think such diversity is great, I believe establishing more uniformity among our positions, especially within the same district, would increase productivity and establish more consistent norms. My district has gone further than most districts. Our superintendent hosts an administrative retreat prior to the start of each school year to discuss goals and expectations, disseminate pertinent information, and to allow time for administrators to reflect together.

The Importance of Standardization


Standardizing job responsibilities of assistant principals within a district would decrease ambiguity, help them understand what is expected, and help others to understand the nature of the position. The responsibilities of other professions, such as medicine, have more consistency. Although general procedures may differ from one environment to another, doctors typically have the primary duty of diagnosing patients. Assistant principals, however, take on many roles and need to be provided with clear, concrete expectations.

For example, if an assistant principal is in charge of discipline, procedures need to be defined and implemented that will tell him or her how to do the job. Is there one database that is used to track and record all discipline incidents other than just suspensions? Is there a standard letter sent to parents? Should data that are tracked and compiled be sent to anyone at the district level? The

same principle could be applied to any other category—buses, instructional leadership, maintenance, or other tasks they are asked to handle.

Also, districts should advertise open positions by listing quantifiable expectations and linking these to performance outcomes that are measured by a relevant evaluation tool. Often, evaluation tools are tailored to fit principals and overlook the managerial tasks that characterize most assistant principal positions.

Class Dismissed

About a year ago, I sat through my last school administration class. Along with all of my eager classmates, I thought that I was ready to take on the world. I still am, but I would like to know exactly what is expected of me as an assistant principal. I understand that the nature of school administration cannot be changed overnight. I like that every day is unique and filled with different challenges. It is this excitement that keeps it from being a monotonous job that would not challenge me to grow professionally. Yet clear, concrete expectations can help me and other assistant principals help their schools accomplish the goal of supporting each teacher and educating every child. 

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HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author argues that the job responsibilities of assistant principals should be standardized within school districts to establish uniformity of the position. Is this feasible given the differences between the needs of various schools? Do you find the responsibilities of the assistant principal in your school to be ambiguous?

Let your colleagues know what you think by going to the Principals' Office blog at <http://naesp.typepad.com> and clicking on "Speaking Out."

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