

BEHIND PRINCIPAL EYES

Three principals share insights about their roles in improving classroom instruction



Taffeta Connery

Taffeta Connery is in her second school year as principal of Sugar Hill Elementary School in Sugar Hill, Georgia. Prior to that, she was assistant principal of Corley Elementary School, also in Gwinnett County, for three years, and of Oakcliff Traditional Theme School in Dekalb County Public Schools for five years.



Angie Wright

Angie Wright has been principal of Craig Elementary School in Lawrenceville, Georgia, since 2008. She was previously an assistant principal at Louise Radloff Middle School and has worked for Gwinnett County Public Schools since 2003.



Bron Gayna Schmit

Bron Gayna Schmit has served as a principal in Gwinnett County Public Schools for the past 18 years. She has led Simpson Elementary School in Peachtree Corners, Georgia, since 2004, and took the helm at Walnut Grove Elementary School in Suwanee, Georgia, in 1999. Prior to that, she was assistant principal of Peachtree Elementary and Walnut Grove Elementary schools.

Today, the nation's high school graduation rate is at a record high—more than 84 percent, according to the U.S. Department of Education—dropout rates are hitting historic lows, and more students than ever are attending college.

At the heart of these trends are effective principals and their push to advance achievement. From improving the quality of classroom instruction to offering continued professional learning opportunities, principals empower teachers to excel at instructing and students to excel at learning.

Principal magazine recently held a roundtable with three principals from Gwinnett County Public Schools—Georgia's largest school district—to get their take on the principal's role in shaping classroom instruction.



Quality instruction begins with teachers and their level of mastery. How can principals encourage growth for their entire staffs, despite teachers having different approaches to instruction and varying levels of experience?

Connery: I strongly believe that it's my job to create opportunities for continuous improvement in the classrooms. We create opportunities for full-day planings, and we schedule substitutes so all teachers in grades K–5 can participate. During this time, our grade-level teachers collaborate, and we analyze and look at schoolwide data to determine our impact in order to make instructional adjustments if necessary. This reflection time is critical in ensuring that every staff member is able to make informed decisions based upon student performance on common, district, and state assessments.

Whether it be STEM opportunities or guiding reading or math, we want to make sure that pedagogy is strong and we're here to work as a team. We only succeed when everybody from kindergarten through fifth grade is successful.

Schmit: In a very complex world, and in the very complex world of education, I think it's important for the instructional leader to keep it simple and focused. The way we do that is to concentrate on what's most important—teaching and learning—because it's easy to get caught up in what's urgent, what's critical, or what needs to be done today, versus what can wait until tomorrow.

I think teachers all have different beliefs about pedagogy, and they have

heard different opinions about quality instruction. So, I think it's important for the principal and the administrative team to say, "In our county and school, we follow these research-based, quality teaching strategies."

For teachers who are new to our school system or to our school, it's important to provide a mentor program. New staff members are bringing good ideas, but as a principal, if we don't keep those instructional arrows pointing in the same direction, we're going to be all over the place, and our student achievement is going to be all over the place. If we concentrate and eliminate and direct ourselves—with all our arrows going in the same direction—we're going to improve student achievement.

Wright: I think one of the most difficult challenges as a principal is trying to create equity in instruction among the classrooms. At Craig, our instructional expectations are grounded on our district's Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies. We focus on the workshop model in reading, writing, and mathematics. As educators, we have to sift through all the information that is coming out in education and really ground ourselves on what the research indicates are the best approaches to teaching our students.

We begin every nine weeks with unpacking our standards. Whether you are a veteran or a brand new teacher, we all have our interpretation of the standards. Once we have an understanding of the standards, we then discuss how we will formatively and summatively assess the standards.

At times, our veteran teachers will model different strategies to our new teachers to ensure everyone has a clear

understanding of the standards. These conversations enable us to create a common vocabulary and a common approach to instruction that we utilize with our students from kindergarten through fifth grade—we are building upon their knowledge every year.

What methods of professional development have worked well in your district?

Connery: As a new principal—this is my second year in this role—Gwinnett County has outstanding support measures in place. As a member of our district's Aspiring Principal Program, I was exposed to research-based case studies on high-performing schools.

We also have "leader-mentors" who provide individualized coaching sessions. We sit down one-on-one and talk about the teaching and learning practices occurring in the building. We also conduct paired observations in classrooms. All leader-mentors are former principals, so they are highly skilled to navigate situations that happen in a school on a day-by-day basis.

I believe in developing teacher leaders. We have in place what we call "live lessons," where teacher grade-level teams plan to address areas of growth identified in our district assessments. The actual lesson is modeled by our coach and by one of the grade-level teachers, who brings their classroom into our live lesson room. That lesson is streamed throughout all of those grade-level classrooms. This instructional practice has shown an increase in student achievement for three consecutive years—on our district as well as our state assessments.



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—Angie Wright, principal, Craig Elementary School, Lawrenceville, GA

Schmit: This is where my age comes into play. As a principal for 18 years, it's trial and error. Early in my career, I offered professional development to our staff, and it was a one-size-fits-all type of thing. And it was OK. But as I grew as a leader, I realized we expect teachers to differentiate their lessons for their learners. So, why should we not, as administrators, differentiate our professional development for our teachers?

For example, in the area of technology, why should some teachers sit through the basics of spreadsheets when they can move on to the intricacies

of e-class pages? We began differentiating instruction. Now, we offer four levels of technology staff development.

Our next step involves teachers observing in other teachers' classrooms, and taking the time to debrief after those visits. It's been hugely effective.

Wright: One of the areas that I had to grow in as a leader was increasing my level of engagement when presenting new learning to the teachers. I wanted to create an environment where teachers were doing the heavy lifting in their learning, versus me doing it. Through the National School Reform Faculty, I

was able to develop as a facilitator in utilizing protocols. I could then create an environment where I presented content that the teacher needed to determine what was valuable and how it could be implemented into instruction.

In addition, I knew that I had to develop more leaders in the building. At times, teachers listen to other teachers more than they listen to administrators. They need a practitioner who's doing the work that we're asking them to do. In each grade level, we developed two facilitators in the areas of language arts and mathematics. Their roles are to help

lead instructional conversations, continue the staff development, and to help work with the instructional team to determine or adjust the professional development.

With ESSA empowering principal leadership by giving school districts and individual states more autonomy than its No Child Left Behind predecessor, how do you see that shaping classroom instruction?

Connery: This ESSA plan, in my opinion, is challenging our leaders to rethink the current structures in place and build more opportunities for teacher collaboration and shared leadership. I believe now we have more flexibility to determine what works best for our individual schools. We are extremely lucky that our district supports us with strategies that work best in our buildings. In regard to the classroom, it gives us as leaders the ability to meet students where they are and increase that collaboration with teacher teams in

order to differentiate our own needs. I am appreciative of the flexibility that it offers individual schools as well as districts.

Schmit: I love the word “empower.” If schools are following the district direction and we are experiencing success, then why not breed that success by applauding and recognizing things that are happening that are going right at the school? Same thing about the classroom—if teachers are increasing student achievement, and they have aligned themselves with our vision, then can we



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Wright: This is an interesting question, because I have felt—working in a very

progressive district—that we have the autonomy to make so many decisions on what’s the best approach to move instruction forward at our individual schools. For instance, Gwinnett County has a contract (IE2) with the state of Georgia that enables us to make instructional decisions based on how we believe certain policies and procedures could be adjusted to meet the needs of our school. There are benchmarks that we have to meet. If we meet those benchmarks, we’re allowed to determine where we need flexibility. In addition, Gwinnett

County has its own evaluation system—the Weighted School Assessment—which empowers principals to perform at high levels so that you have the flexibility and autonomy in your building.

As an instructional leader, I’m an avid believer that you need to walk alongside your teachers. We have to be in the classrooms, we have to be present, we have to listen, and we have to encourage them. If we’re focused on instruction, if we’re focused on our students—on that teaching and learning—students will succeed. •