Leadership for School Improvement

Nancy Protheroe

With accountability pressures requiring rapid change, the burden falls on the principal to make it happen.

In a recent article about the changing role of the principal, Shellard describes the principalship as “becoming increasingly complex and pressure-packed” (2003). Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in schools involved in improvement efforts. While the ideal approach is one that supports gradual and continuous improvement, the process in many schools over the past few years has been far from gradual. Accountability pressures and ambitious goals have placed both districts and schools in positions requiring rapid and often significant change.

Principals are at the center of this speeded-up process, and their leadership is the key to successfully navigating change.
Hallinger and Bridges note that school leaders can no longer concentrate solely on implementing system policies and rules, but that their roles must shift toward “supporting and developing the organization’s capacity for change” (1997). They must be able to identify and solve problems; communicate and collaborate with people both inside and outside the school; take risks; and encourage others to do the same (Hallinger and Bridges 1997; National Institute 1999). Finally, an “effective change agent must not only be a good leader (someone who has vision), but also a good manager (someone who can help others design and implement plans)” (Educational Research Service 1998).

**What the Research Says**

A recent study on school leadership identifies “two essential objectives critical to any organization’s effectiveness: helping the organization set a defensible set of directions, and influencing members to move in those directions. Leadership is both this simple and this complex” (Leithwood et al. 2004). The authors of the study talk about three sets of practices that make up the core of good leadership. In their view, without leadership focused on setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization to meet changing demands, “not much would happen.” Based on their analysis of studies of school leadership, they report “successful leadership can play a highly significant—and frequently underestimated—role in improving student learning” (Leithwood et al. 2004).

Educators working on the school improvement process in Maryland have identified five “critical leadership skills a principal must demonstrate to effectively lead a school in improving student achievement” and stress that the “five areas are not a chronology of what a principal must do first, second, and third, but rather are cyclical in nature and must be demonstrated continuously throughout the school improvement process” (Seremet et al. undated). The five skills are:

- Promoting collaborative problem-solving and open communication;
- Collecting, analyzing, and using data to identify school needs;
- Using data to identify and plan for needed changes in the instructional program;
- Implementing and monitoring the school improvement plan; and
- Using systems thinking to establish a clear focus on attaining student achievement goals (Seremet et al. undated).

Portin et al. feel that a principal needs to be a “diagnostician” if schools are to continuously improve. In their view, one challenge for principals stands out above all others:

…the challenge of understanding what the school needs and deciding how to meet those needs. This deceptively simple and straightforward observation defines the need for a complicated array of actions and talents on the part of the principal. It requires the ability to “read” a school’s goals, commitments, context, and resources. It requires understanding a school’s strengths and weaknesses. It means setting priorities, spurring others to act, and thinking long-term. Understanding what the school needs and then delivering what is required is the core job of the principal. The ability to understand and deliver lies at the heart of school leadership (Portin et al. 2003).

**Leadership and School Change**

Cawelti has reviewed research on schools and districts moving toward higher levels of school improvement from the perspective of what it can tell us about the role of the principal. In his view, there are four critical—and interrelated—responsibilities that require a principal’s personal attention if a school is to improve:

- Sustaining focus on student achievement. This means working every day at keeping the focus of students and faculty on the standards set for the school, the learning activities designed to engage students, and the assessments used to measure them.
- **Values.** These are the principles on which all decisions and actions should be based. Commit the school only to changes that fit with its values and sense of purpose.
- **Vision.** The principal and his/her staff must set goals, many of which may require changing the way the school is organized or run. It is important to prioritize the school’s goals and plan only a few improvements at a time.
- **Collaboration.** It is the responsibility of the principal, as a change agent, to help foster a cooperative spirit among staff members. If they are expected to support and implement a change, they should be included in its planning.
- **Communication.** Any collaborative effort requires effective communication among participants. Training in listening and conflict resolution skills may be helpful.

- **Encouragement.** There’s no denying that change is stressful. Acknowledging this, and taking the time to hear and address anxieties, may help allay fears.
- **Time.** Change takes time to plan and take root. In fact, some studies suggest that performance may dip below previous levels immediately after a change takes place. For change to be successful, participants must remain committed as initial problems are Perfecting a collaborative organization culture. This includes, for example, developing processes for people to work in teams to solve problems, get help with decision-making, and meet professional growth needs.

Helping teachers expand their repertories to include research-based teaching strategies. Teachers may need help sorting out those practices that truly have demonstrated their value in increasing student achievement.

Developing and sustaining a culture that encourages experimentation with new ideas to improve productivity (Cawelti 2004).

Research about school change also can help principals by providing information about critical elements on which they should focus their attention during times of change:
worked through and improvement begins.

Evaluation. As change begins to come about, continual feedback should be sought from staff members. A certain amount of resistance is normal, but continued rejection can signal a need to adjust change practices (Educational Research Service 1998).

A principal in a Texas elementary school that significantly improved student performance on state-mandated assessments after only one year of intensive—and often difficult—improvement efforts talked about this aspect of his efforts:

You won’t get total buy-in by staff at the beginning of the improvement process. The way to build toward it is to place the movers and shakers in strategic positions. I learned early in my career that if you want something new to work, you need to take a cadre of teachers with you...And you can’t always allow people to operate in their comfort zones—if you do, you will only get more of the same (Cawelti and Protheroe 2001).

Finally, Burkett adds one more responsibility for a leader of change: “Leadership means being relentless...being single-minded and purposeful.... Of every action and every decision we ask a single question: ‘How does this act support increased student achievement?’” (Burkett 1998).

References


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WEB RESOURCES

Asking the Right Questions: A Leader’s Guide to Systems Thinking About School Improvement

This guide is “designed to help school leaders, particularly principals, think systematically as they examine school improvement issues and make decisions about change.” It includes chapters on implementing standards and linking staff development to student learning. www.mcrel.org/topics/productDetail.asp?productId=82

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This research-based report addresses the importance of leadership in promoting the learning of all children and describes the essential ingredients of successful leadership.


Leadership by Walking Around: Walkthroughs and Instructional Improvement

This article makes a case for the need for principals to make frequent, brief, and focused visits to classrooms to observe the instruction being provided and the needs of staff and students.

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