Principals as Classroom Leaders

There are several simple steps that principals can take to indirectly help teachers grow.

Ask teachers what they expect in a principal, and you probably won’t hear “maintains an orderly building,” “keeps the schedule running smoothly,” or “enforces disciplinary codes.” The expectations of thoughtful teachers go beyond these essentials to embrace leadership that supports teachers in their classrooms. Wanted are principals who are able to identify closely with the work of teachers and who are able to encourage and support them as they strive to improve their teaching.

IN BRIEF

The author suggests five ways in which busy principals can indirectly demonstrate their classroom leadership by encouraging teacher specialization, giving teachers opportunities to present case studies of at-risk students, building a diverse intellectual climate, instituting an idea exchange, and scheduling time for teachers to openly discuss a variety of self-selected topics.
Emily: A Case Study

Baffled by the learning problems exhibited by Emily, a seemingly bright fifth grader, her teacher scheduled an after-school study session to present her case and generate discussion and suggestions from fellow teachers. Following is a summary of the presentation by Emily’s teacher:

Emily’s very worst subject is math. It just seems impossibly difficult for her. She appears to pay attention and to try hard in class, but math ideas just don’t come together for her.

Science is a similar experience for Emily. She frequently has trouble with the steps of experimental procedures and usually has more problems than other students relating the conclusion of science experiments to hypotheses guiding investigations.

Whatever the subject—math, science, social studies, or language arts—Emily seems to lose a lot of the information taught, to struggle constantly to have things make sense, and to work harder than others to figure out what is expected of her.

After examining Emily’s written work, the participants could see strengths as well as weaknesses. Her writing indicated creative abilities not yet fully recognized, and work samples from language arts suggested resourcefulness and persistence. As the teachers explored explanations for Emily’s performance, one offered the possibility of a memory problem, especially with subjects that required her to follow complex sequences and procedures. This seemed to explain why Emily could produce a good story or poem, yet fail in math and science.

Before the session concluded, participants offered Emily’s teacher several strategies that are now being used successfully. Along with heavier reliance on mnemonic techniques to improve Emily’s memory, her teacher now builds more writing opportunities into Emily’s schoolwork, including a journal in which Emily writes about her triumphs and frustrations with math and other subjects.

Teachers yearn for principals who think like teachers, speak the language of teaching, and who understand the pressures and demands of life in the classroom. But what can busy principals do to give teachers the help and support they need without sacrificing valuable time from their many other responsibilities?

The answer is surprisingly simple. By following these suggestions, principals can function as indirect catalysts in helping teachers develop and mature while demonstrating the leadership so integral to their success and well-being.

Encourage teachers to select areas for informal study and specialization. The area might be content-based (e.g., math or language arts) or it could relate to a particular teaching technique, such as personalized or collaborative learning. Teachers also could choose special challenges, such as attention disorders, reading difficulties, or classroom organization and management. Personal interests, such as storytelling or drama, represent another category of choice, as do parental communication and team building.

The idea is to allow teachers to become “specialists” in areas of individual interests or needs. Within their chosen specialties, teachers can then function as informal consultants to fellow teachers, offering a ready supply of ideas as well as their availability to answer questions or talk through problems.

As teachers become more knowledgeable and confident in their selected areas, they also may choose to venture into workshop presentations—or even writing for publication. In any event, their specialized expertise will improve their teaching performance and add immeasurably to a sense of professional worth as they share their specialties with colleagues.

Provide opportunities for teachers to present case studies of students with special needs. By following the model of medical teams—physicians working together to diagnose patients’ symptoms—teachers can use case studies to resolve complex student problems. The process begins with the collection of available information about a student—classroom performance, behavior patterns, and any interventions tried or in process. The presenting teacher then organizes this information for a scheduled session with colleagues, where questions will be raised and suggestions offered (see box).

Build a diverse intellectual climate within the school. Principals can do much to encourage intellectual activities that hold rich promise for teaching. For example, reading and discussing good books can rekindle teachers’ imagination and spirit, while sharing travel experiences can broaden their perspectives and thought. Even discussing politics and the economy can recharge teachers’ minds by calling on them to express and defend their views. Giving teachers opportunities to engage in intellectual discussions not immediately related to their teaching can have surprising benefits that translate directly into the classroom.

Hobby and interest groups also help bring teachers together in positive ways. Quilting, cooking, exercising, woodworking, and gardening are examples of activities that broaden and energize teachers, making them happier, more relaxed, and potentially more effective in the classroom. Large or small, tightly or loosely structured, interest groups can motivate and inspire teachers while demonstrating personal growth and lifelong learning to students.

Institute an idea exchange. By creating a medium for the free exchange of ideas—many of them originating from teachers’ discoveries in their daily practice—principals stimulate the flow of useful information into classrooms. Beyond the practical benefits of such sharing, an idea exchange encourages teachers to think more cre-
atively about teaching and to look to colleagues for ongoing assistance. Ideas may be distributed by the principal, presented informally at faculty meetings, or solicited by teachers on an “as needed” basis. The objective is to elicit as many useful ideas as possible, and to reinforce the truth that teacher-to-teacher communication is the ultimate learning link.

Principals also can stimulate the exchange of ideas by posting a “problem of the week” in the lounge. Encouraging teachers to talk about these problems broadens their perspectives and strengthens their intellectual and personal relationships with each other.

Give teachers time to talk. Talk among teachers almost always can be turned to benefit. Schedule a time and place for it, put teachers in charge, and watch good things happen. Topics can be wide-ranging, such as how to work with under-motivated students or how to improve cooperation among teachers. Talk sessions work best when informal, with rules for participation kept to a minimum. Teachers should come prepared to participate, even if it means writing down ideas in advance.

Principals are expected to be competent with the nuts and bolts of school management, and no school can flourish without leaders who are proficient in dealing with buildings, budgets, and people. But teachers also want principals to be at home in their classrooms and to identify closely with their efforts to change and grow. Through carefully structured activities, principals can meet these expectations and become part of the developmental process so essential to the success and well-being of teachers.

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WEB RESOURCES

Education World provides a variety of resources for principals and teachers, including sections on professional development and technology integration. [www.educationworld.com](http://www.educationworld.com)

Annenberg Media supplies free video course and workshops for teachers. [www.learner.org](http://www.learner.org)

Teacher/Pathfinder, which describes itself as an “educational Internet village,” addresses issues involving principals, teachers, parents, and community. [www.teacherpathfinder.org](http://www.teacherpathfinder.org)

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