Software Solutions to Improve Instructional Leadership

Assessment and evaluation of teaching is such a critical component of instructional leadership that school districts are in constant search of comprehensive evaluation systems to facilitate professional development and growth of teachers. According to a study by Ron Oliver of California State University, Fullerton, principals feel they need additional professional development in areas related to instructional leadership, particularly in impacting student learning.

In a survey of 941 administrators over a three-year period in Orange County, California, Oliver found that 73 percent felt they needed additional training in supervision, 68 percent needed training in assessment and evaluation, 90 percent needed training in effective instruction, and 55 percent needed training in time management. Because technology training is often omitted during professional development, administrators had limited knowledge of its benefits in these areas.

Barbara Shahid and other researchers at California State University, Bakersfield, have suggested that although instructional leadership is the top priority of principals, they often have difficulty devoting adequate time to it. In a series of recommendations to overcome this problem, Shahid emphasized the use of administrative software as one of the most important time-management tools.

In the past few years, multiple software programs have been developed to assist administrators with assessment.

**Observation Software**

Innovative products, such as the Mobile Principal (www.austinsky.com), allow administrators to perform wireless assessments, using Pocket PCs or Tablet PCs, with fully customized rubrics to meet individual district criteria. This software, according to Todd Bower of Austin Sky, allows users to create a database of observation results so that specific variables can be evaluated for individual teachers as well as for building-level analysis.

“The EVA Student Data Software (also available at www.austinsky.com) allows mobile access to student data with modules for discipline management, parent contact, academic progress, and other areas that can be synchronized with district databases. This product is most often used as a districtwide program in which all principals use the same assessment tool. Other software programs, such as eCove and Administrative Observer, both demonstrated at the 2007 NAESP conference in Seattle, allow handheld access to multiple types of instruments for teacher observation. The eCove software (www.ecove.net), which operates on both PC and Mac platforms, contains multiple “counters” that allow the user to monitor instructional time variables. Class learning time, on-task time, teacher talk, wait time, attention to gender, divergent and nondivergent questioning, as well as questioning based on levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy, can be evaluated during teacher performance with easily generated reports. The software also contains a generic counter that can be customized to fit individual criteria for observations.”

The Administrative Observer program (www.pessports.com) allows the user to develop classroom observation reports containing paragraph and bulleted summaries. With this software, administrators can evaluate categories such as preparation, lesson components, instructional performance, assessment and feedback to students, and classroom management. Pre-established checklists are included and the software is compatible with both Pocket PC and Palm systems.

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

A distinct advantage to these software programs is not only portability—allowing principals to take the technology with them as they travel to different classrooms—but the synchronization capabilities that allow for easy development of reports that can be immediately distributed to teachers. File transfer can take place either upon docking the handheld to a desktop computer and sending reports to individual teachers, or wirelessly direct from the handheld via e-mail.

Disadvantages include limitations and possible teacher contractual factors associated with predeveloped assessment criteria. Though many of these programs offer customization of the product to fit district criteria, the cost and lack of flexibility may be a limiting factor to some principals. With the recent development of pocket versions of Microsoft products, principals can use the same software programs commonly housed on desktop computers to develop personalized handheld instruments. Districtwide assessments can be developed at a minimal cost, using Word forms and Excel spreadsheets that provide teacher rankings of performance just as software programs do.
Most school systems already have these software programs available on their current computer systems.

Supervision instruments also can be easily transferred from desktop computers to handheld devices via programs such as Microsoft ActiveSync and distributed via e-mail to teachers. Though designing personalized assessments does take some time on the part of principals or instructional technology staff, the individualization and customization of instruments and reports that fit district and teacher contractual guidelines actually may be an advantage.

**Impact on Student Learning**

A recent study evaluating the impact of instructional leadership on student achievement found that student learning is linked to four key leadership behaviors:

- Active participation in the curriculum and assessment process;
- Detailed focus on curriculum implementation;
- Greater accountability for teachers in implementing curriculum; and
- Increased general knowledge of assessment and student performance.

Data from the Orange County study indicated that 82 percent of administrators felt they needed greater training in strategies to increase student learning. Technology can play a vital role in assessing these variables. Recently the New Teacher Center at the University of California, Santa Cruz, has been working with districts in the state of Washington to train administrators in using “Quick Visits” that target specific data linked to student learning. These three- to five-minute unannounced classroom observations collect specific data concerning evidence of student learning.

The focus of the visits may include student and teacher actions, student work, and engaging students in conversations about their learning. Evidence of student learning can be documented during visits by recording observation data directly to a Pocket PC or Palm. Custom-designed spreadsheets, Word documents, or templates provide feedback to teachers.

Principals can more effectively manage their time, provide immediate feedback to teachers, and be more visible in the hallways and classrooms of their schools when they use technology during short visits and full-class observations. Using handheld observation technology may have an even more important benefit—maintaining the personal health and sanity of principals in today’s stressful school atmosphere.

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