

In the Middle



Masters of Content

Understanding lessons in a larger context can keep middle school teachers from stagnating and enhance instructional leadership

BY TIM HAMILTON AND JESSICA BULGARELLI

Take a moment to think about a few highly effective teachers in your middle school building. What do their classrooms look like? How do they differ from less effective classrooms? How do students feel during class? How do these teachers respond when given feedback?

After several years of teaching math, I (Hamilton) was asked to support middle school math teachers as an instructional coach with the Baltimore City Public Schools. Jessica Bulgarelli was one of the teachers, whose pedagogical practice ranged drastically from passively printing and distributing worksheets to actively designing engaging tasks.

One of the priorities of BCPS' support model was to provide actionable teacher feedback. Each quarter, we picked a domain in the district's instructional framework and focused professional development and feedback on key indicators within that domain. Our biggest challenge? Providing meaningful feedback to teachers considered effective by school administrators. These teachers were able to "check the boxes" that imply effective instructional practice.

Year after year, however, the district experienced high turnover among this subset of teachers, undermining consistency in school culture and instruction. Exit interviews indicated that these teachers felt stagnant in their professional growth. To address this sentiment, we revisited our approach to instructional feedback and PD. We also began to examine the roles of, expectations from, and differences between administrators and instructional leaders.

An Unspoken Expectation

Mastery of content is at the core of pedagogical excellence, and there is an unrealistic and unspoken expectation for administrators to be experts in all content areas. In elementary school, most teachers handle instruction in a variety of core content, increasing the likelihood that elementary school administrators who come from the classroom will command some mastery over core subjects. Consequently, the elementary administrator can more organically assume the role of instructional leader.

At the middle school level, however, administrators who were once teachers might have engaged with only one core content subject in the classroom. As such, they might struggle "to determine the appropriateness of either the content or the level of its rigor [and] resort to generic observations about teaching," according to a 2013 article, "How Do Principals Really Improve Schools?"

While evaluative demands on a school administrator vary little across grades, the capacity to serve as an instructional leader differs by grade, since it relies on content expertise. To retain high-performing teachers, administrators must build opportunities for continuous instructional growth. But they can't do this on their own.

In the same way a student feels success upon receiving an A, a teacher feels success by being deemed "effective" through evaluation. Yet retention of effective teachers

remains low in many schools, because as educational leadership experts Bob and Megan Tschannen-Moran wrote, “evaluation is not a prelude to development, and development is not a consequence of evaluation.”

At the middle level, teachers are moving toward a student-driven classroom—one that paves pathways of understanding and cultivates students’ critical thinking and complex problem-solving skills. With the reality of limited time, resources, and administrative capacity, we must think realistically about the structures that empower these teachers and provide meaningful instructional leadership.

Developing Expertise

Given the expectation that principals have cross-curricular expertise, administrators might struggle to provide feedback beyond generic student and teacher actions. As a result, they might need to look externally for content-specific instructional leadership.

If schools look internally for most school-level instructional leadership, many teachers will not receive content-driven development, fueling sentiments of stagnation. External content experts can lead professional development structures that build knowledge for administrators, detangle evaluation and development, and connect the school’s long-term vision with daily instructional practice. By empowering teachers with ongoing support from outside experts, schools can take the first step in transforming an engaging classroom into an empowered classroom. Administrators must think outside the (check) box and the school building.

With Great Minds—a curriculum developer that works in schools to provide comprehensive, content-driven support—we support administrators and 6–12 mathematics teachers across the country in teaching math as a coherent story. We try to remove content silos that separate mathematical domains such as algebra and geometry, while providing ongoing, empowering professional support.



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In our experience, districts implement curricula most successfully when administrators intentionally prioritize the time, space, and resources for in-depth, content-specific study. We have also found that in alignment with research-based best practices, lesson demonstration brings content-specific best practices to life and furthers the development of presenters and observers.

During the 2018–2019 school year, we worked with a New Jersey school district to provide ongoing, nonevaluative support and cultivate a school environment in which teachers grew their content-specific practice. Each month, we provided teachers with action items and strategies aligned with math content, outlining the “why” behind instructional practice and encouraging teachers to set long-term goals.

We served as a liaison between teachers and administrators, creating a space for trust and meaningful dialogue. The mathematics department chair said that our support made it easier for teachers to “honestly ask content questions and raise concerns when they were developed by coaches outside of our evaluative structure.”

Teachers were empowered to plan intentionally, as opposed to checking the boxes of lesson-plan compliance. Together, we retooled school-based requirements to better align with curricular structures. Previously, teachers were required to submit weekly lesson plans that outlined daily learning objectives, but they told us that seeing the full scope of “where the curriculum was going made it easier to make connections to our daily practice.”

This kind of shift doesn’t come without struggle. Empowering

teachers to move from the “how” of daily instruction to the “why” of long-term planning requires space and support, and such PD asks teachers to become agents of change.

Feedback and Growth

Looking forward, school leaders should ask themselves a few critical questions: Does generalized feedback enable professional growth? Are we creating an environment in which teachers set attainable, long-term goals with periodic benchmarks? Are we equipping teachers with the pedagogical skills and toolkits necessary for success?

Leaders must think critically about the difference between engagement and empowerment. If we are to move beyond a prescribed checklist, we must also make sure that assessment and progress-monitoring are aligned to instruction. In our example, teachers were held accountable to district-created quarterly benchmarks that weren’t necessarily aligned to their chosen curriculum. As a result, teachers made instructional decisions focused on the benchmarks, which undermined the coherence of students’ educational experience.

We often encounter seasoned educators who have become jaded by a revolving door of curriculum, evaluation, and educational philosophy. Stakeholders rarely experience the impact of such shifts, since no shift is maintained throughout the course of a student’s education.

Rather than arbitrarily searching for new approaches, middle school leaders should instead aim for holistic improvement. Consistency bolsters teacher investment, creates a space for reflection, and offers students a more cohesive educational experience that builds upon prior knowledge and experiences.

Mastery over content and a deep understanding of the chosen curriculum can serve as the crux of professional development and student growth. We have to encourage a community of learners and leaders, and ongoing, nonevaluative support delivered by content experts can enhance instructional leadership. ●

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