



Resources for Instructional Leadership

Effective principals must often build a body of knowledge that supports professional growth for themselves and their teachers

BY M. DIANE McCORMICK

Armed with student-centered coaching concepts drawn from Diane Sweeney's books, several teachers at Sonia Sotomayor Elementary School in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, were recently considering rearranging the school's math curriculum. They felt students weren't ready for a single unit but wondered why the units were ordered as they were.

Principal Tracy Vik picked up the phone. "We contacted the authors of the curriculum and asked what the thought was behind it," she says. "They called and met with us and explained their reasoning." Armed with the whys behind the curriculum, the teachers felt confident teaching the units as the authors intended to better serve their students.

It was the right resource to offer at the right time. Effective principals such as Vik are deft at conducting instructionally focused interactions with teachers, building collaboration, and managing professional learning communities. However, these qualities aren't baked into a principal certificate.

"For many school leaders, the skills required to give teachers meaningful feedback and authentic coaching support must be learned," says The

Wallace Foundation-supported research analysis “How Principals Affect Students and Schools.”

Effective principals rely on resources that instill the skills needed to improve teachers’ classroom instruction. Networking, collaboration, and reliance on research, veteran educators say, form a body of knowledge that supports professional growth for themselves and their teachers. Here’s what a few of them had to say about creating that growth:

Assess the Quality of the Research

To ensure that teachers are participating in high-quality professional development opportunities, principals must learn to recognize the characteristics of high-impact professional development offerings.

“I think about what I want to see in the classroom, and that directs me to the resources,” says Sue Choi, principal of Spring City Elementary Hybrid Learning School in Spring City, Pennsylvania, and Title I federal programs coordinator for the Spring-Ford Area School District. “The CASEL framework is going deep into SEL competencies and strategies. We want our teachers to understand the standards to the teachers, and it’s effective to provide examples. I can always give you the definition, but you have to envision what it looks like, what it feels like, what it sounds like.

“If Achieve.org is telling me something, or if I’m searching in the Standards Aligned System of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, I know they’re trusted resources. It’s not the ‘du jour.’ NAESP and ASCD provide access to many resources. There’s so much capacity and really good minds working toward building this network and putting it together for us.”

Learn What the Teachers Must Learn

The strategies for building a developmental culture of feedback are “deeply embedded in relationship-building and creating a schoolwide infrastructure for collaboration,” the Wallace-supported research review says.

“Right from the beginning of my administrative career, I became active in the Nevada Association of School Administrators just to be able to talk with people,” says Keith Boone, principal of E.C. Best Elementary School in Fallon, Nevada, and president of the Nevada Association of Elementary School Principals. “In my third year as elementary principal, I joined NAESP and went to Tampa for the national conference and fell in love with it. Just about every single thing that I implement with my staff, I’ve gotten at a state or national conference.

“Everyone always needs to know the why. If people know the why of what they’re doing, they’ll do it effectively.”

—Patricia J. Wells-Frazier, principal, *Panorama Elementary School, Temple Hills, Maryland*

“I like to become efficient at the professional development before I introduce it to my staff and have those expectations of them,” he says. “One big trend is social-emotional learning. I dove into it and educated myself. We talked about it as a district and a staff, and it became a staff expectation. Effectiveness at PLCs and instructional interaction comes from [the] practice of running your collaboratives. Your focus becomes keener and more specific.”

Reach Out for Ideas

In the search for exemplary professional development, principals can turn to networks, mentoring, and study groups for “communities of practice and support for problem-solving,” says Wallace’s “Preparing School Leaders for a Changing World.”

“Find online communities. They will feed you ideas and resources for free. Seeing other people’s experiences in a vastly different context than our own can help us be better leaders,” says Scott McLeod, professor of Leadership for Educational Organizations at the University of Colorado Denver. “The value of being in a community is that you’re still learning about the key leadership practices, including collaboration and instructionally focused interactions, in the context of your school. Hopefully, you’re getting help from the district, but if you’re in these communities, you can reach out with questions about some aspect of those behaviors.

“The best way to put new ideas into practice is to not do this work alone,” McLeod says. “You have a building leadership team. It’s us doing the work, and that will make sure it starts getting rolled out in your school. We never want the principal to be the sole conduit to staff. We need groups of people feeding the web of learning within the building.”

Build Professional Capacity

Effective instructional leaders

“demonstrate expertise around high-quality instruction that enables them to observe and evaluate teachers and classrooms in a constructive manner,” while offering responsive and actionable feedback to improve teaching and learning.

“Most of my training this year has been centered around social-emotional learning for students and building teacher capacity around this topic: how to give teachers more time, streamlining teacher workload to lessen stress, and supporting teachers emotionally,” says Patricia J. Wells-Frazier, principal of Panorama Elementary School in Temple Hills, Maryland. “I also seek out training around what I can do as an instructional leader to improve student achievement. Webinars focusing on leadership and instructional coaching/teacher feedback help build the capacity of my leadership team as we are supporting teachers instructionally within the classroom.

“You want to align with district initiatives and school goals so you can see student achievement—so that you can see your teachers’ capacity being built,” she says. “You have resources through your district. You have resources through NAESP, where you’re exposed to conferences, webinars, and trainings. I subscribe to Wallace Foundation scholarly articles, *EdWeek*, *EduTopia*. Everyone always needs to know the why. If people know the why of what they’re doing, they’ll do it effectively.

“To put an idea into practice, I bring it to my leadership team. I share how it aligns with the

work we’re doing and begin to turnkey it in that way,” Wells-Frazier says. “You have that collaborative conversation. What did we see? What did we wonder? What were some of the highlights and the wows?”

Focus PLCs on Student Needs

Establishing professional learning as a priority and maintaining teacher communities contribute to student achievement. Effective principals engage directly to facilitate the collaborative work of teachers. “Look at your building and find out the most critical needs,” Vik says. “If you don’t feel equipped to meet those goals, then you find those resources.

“The dean of students and I review the PLC agendas in advance to make sure they’re instructionally focused. Then, the teachers drive the conversations,” she says. “We’re just there as resources, but by reviewing those agendas, we’re prepared because we know what the topic is. I’ve got two days to look for resources so I can be of the most assistance.

“I made the commitment to purchase an extra set of the math, language, and intervention teacher guides for our educational assistants, interns, administrators, and instructional coach,” Vik says. “When we put heads together to backwards-plan toward the end goal, we can be actively involved in that conversation. We also have the guides in front of us for evaluations. We’re not going to know every one of the topics, but it helps to have shared knowledge.” ●

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