

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

“Effective school leadership, in the form of a dedicated, skilled principal, is a key element in creating and maintaining high quality schools.”

—Philip A. Cusick

Practice since the early 20th century, when the principalship assumed a prominent role in schools (Beck & Murphy, 1993), and research ever since the School Effectiveness Studies in the 1980s (DeRoche, 1987) affirm the vital role of the principal in terms of establishing an effective and efficient school. With the advent of the federal “No Child Left Behind” Act of 2001, the principal has been viewed, perhaps more than ever before, not only as essential for creating and sustaining a well-run school, but most important, as critical for promoting student achievement (Matthew & Crow, 2003).

As recently as 15 years ago, principals were largely responsible only for ensuring a safe school building, managing bus schedules, keeping order by enforcing district and school policies, developing master schedules, ordering books and supplies, and other logistical managerial tasks. According to Paul Young (2004), “That principalship doesn’t exist anymore” (p. 50). Though still accountable for these and other managerial tasks, principals today are ultimately responsible for providing top-quality instructional leadership that aims to promote best practices in teaching and related instructional areas for the chief

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purpose of ensuring student achievement. Overseeing and delegating responsibilities to ensure a safe and secure school building are important, but good principals today focus on instruction, because they know that doing so, more than *anything else they do*, directly affects student learning. According to Young (2004), good principals

must be viewed as guides and coaches, leaders who establish high expectations and common direction . . . [they] regularly observe classrooms, guide lesson planning, create common planning time, monitor student learning, collect data, and use results to influence improvement plans. (p. 51)

Although important as ever, the principal today faces more demands, more complex decisions, and more responsibilities than principals of the past. The knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to become a successful principal of yesteryear are no longer adequate today. This book series is meant to provide you with the theory and tools necessary to meet the challenges, demands, and crises facing schools in the 21st century (Schlechty, 1990).

Principals are busy people; they are also consummate professionals. Many books serve as texts in graduate courses leading to a master's degree or state certification as a school administrator or principal. These books contain a great deal of important information—sometimes too much to be absorbed in just a short period of time. Much of the information they contain, albeit important, is often forgotten or overlooked, because the information really comes into play when people are on the job. No wonder so many principals indicate that much of what they learned in principal preparation courses in graduate school isn't relevant. It's not that these programs aren't sound; they do provide essential information. It's just the nature of the way theory and practices are bifurcated. This book, then, culls, in a concise, easy-to-read manner, only essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to get started in the principalship. It certainly doesn't represent all you ever need to know. No book or even series can do that. The principalship, like teaching or any educational enterprise, is a lifelong learning process.

The major themes or underlying assumptions of this book and series on the principalship are the following:

- The principal is *the* key player in the school building to promote student learning. It's not that students can't learn without a principal, of course; teachers play no small role in the classroom. But a specially trained instructional leader serving as building principal is vital in order to accomplish deep, sustained, and schoolwide achievement for all students.

- High achievement for all students is the major goal for a principal. A principal may possess charisma, increase parental participation in school activities, raise funds for the PTA, organize meaningful cultural events, or even possess great vision. However, the bottom line is that a principal first and foremost is concerned in activities that actively promote good teaching, which in turn promotes student learning. A principal cannot be considered successful unless high student achievement in academic areas is achieved.

- The principal must play an active, ongoing role in instructional leadership. The comprehensive study *Making Sense of Leading Schools: A Study of the School Principals* (Portin, 2003) indicated that principals do not necessarily have to have expertise in all areas (e.g., instructional, cultural, managerial, human resources, strategic, external development, micropolitical leadership), but they must be master "diagnosticians," able to provide the school what it needs at the right time and in the right context. Nevertheless, I maintain that instructional leadership is qualitatively different from other forms of leadership. Although it's difficult to separate each form of leadership from another, because they all form an undifferentiated whole, instructional leadership can never be simply delegated to others. Others serve as instructional leaders for sure, but the principal plays an active and orchestrating role.

- Simply stated, leadership matters. Research has continually demonstrated that leadership is critical for school success (Portin, 2004). More recently, data indicate that a substantial relationship exists between leadership and student achievement. According to Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004), who report on a 25-year-old continuing study on leadership by the Mid-continent

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Research for Education and Learning (McREL) group, there is a significant, positive correlation between effective school leadership and student achievement. An effect size of .25 between leadership and student achievement indicates that as leadership improves, so does student achievement. The report also indicated that instructional leadership matters most. Although effective leadership comprises many key areas of principal behavior (e.g., good communication, high visibility in the community, etc.), a principal's focus on instruction, curriculum, and assessment is most important in terms of promoting student achievement. This book, therefore, emphasizes the important and most necessary requirement—that a principal serve as an instructional leader—and in doing so, her or his leadership matters.

This book and series are also aligned with standards established by the prominent Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC). ELCC standards are commonly accepted by most educational organizations concerned with preparing high-quality educational leaders and as such are most authoritative (Wilmore, 2002). The ELCC, an arm of the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, developed six leadership standards used widely in principal preparation. These standards formed the basis for this book and series:

1.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning supported by the school community.

*2.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by promoting a positive school culture, providing an effective instructional program, applying best practices to student learning, and designing comprehensive professional growth plans for staff.

3.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of

all students by managing the organization, operations, and resources in a way that promotes a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

4.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by collaborating with families and other community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

5.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairly, and in an ethical manner.

6.0: Candidates who complete the program are educational leaders who have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

*This standard is addressed in the present book.

Readers should also familiarize themselves with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium and National Association of Elementary School Principals standards (see, e.g., http://www.ccsso.org/projects/Interstate_School_Leaders_Licensure_Consortium/ and <http://www.boyercenter.org/basicsschool/naesp.shtml>).

Another important point to make in this introduction is that some administrators claim they have little time to devote to instructional leadership. In fact, many claim they have scant time for anything educational. According to J. Johnson (2004), "Nearly three in four principals say that daily emergencies eat into time that they would rather spend on education issues" (p. 24). Certainly, we acknowledge the increased expectations and challenges placed on principals by local, state, and federal reform initiatives, along with the exigencies they face in running a school on a daily basis. However, exemplary principals find the time for what's really important. Skills of organization, delegation, and coordination are critical in order to devote time to what really matters. If principals really feel comfortable and committed to instruction, they will find the time.

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Reflective Questions

1. Which of the themes or assumptions above make the most sense to you?
2. Which of the themes or assumptions above make the least sense to you? Explain.
3. How do you find or how do you intend to find the time for instructional leadership? Be specific.

Allow me to offer a word on chapter format and presentation of information. Information in each of the three main chapters is presented as concisely as possible to make for easy and quick reference reading. Each chapter begins with boxed material called “What You Should Know About.” The box will list and briefly explain the concepts covered in each chapter. In most cases, a principal (or his or her representative) can conduct a workshop for teachers on most of the topics listed. Certainly, each chapter will not cover every bit of information there is to know about a given topic, as mentioned earlier. Each chapter culls, though, essential knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for a successful principal.

The following box serves as a summary of this introduction by highlighting three research-based ideas about instructional leadership that should serve as checkpoints for your own progress as an instructional leader:

Three Research-Based Findings About the Activities of an Effective Instructional Leader

Committed to instructional leadership, good principals know, among other things, the following:

1. The single greatest influence on students in a classroom is the teacher. “Teachers have a powerful, long-lasting influence on their students” (Stronge, 2002, p. vii). Good principals support good teachers by providing instructional services and resources

on a continuing basis. Moreover, good principals attract and hire certified teachers who have specific knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are essential to promote student achievement; certified teachers are more successful than unlicensed teachers. Good principals also realize that retaining good teachers is essential because experience counts. "Experienced teachers differ from rookie teachers in that they have attained expertise through real-life experiences, classroom practice, and time" (Stronge, 2002, p. 9). Research demonstrates that teachers with more experience plan better, apply a range of teaching strategies, understand students' learning needs, and better organize instruction. Good principals understand this research.

2. An emphasis on academics is crucial. Effective principal instructional leaders spend much time discussing the instructional program with colleagues, teachers, parents, students, and district office leaders. They use every available opportunity to discuss instruction: personal informal and formal contacts with teachers, memoranda, e-mail communications, grade and faculty conferences, assembly programs, parent meetings, and so forth. They realize that establishing an orderly environment conducive to educational excellence is necessary. Good principals set high expectations and standards for success (Squires, Huitt, & Segars, 1984). In addition, and more specifically related to instructional improvement, effective principals:

- Establish clearly defined academic goals for the school (by grade)
- Collaboratively develop clear and consistent schoolwide instructional policies
- Examine instructional grouping patterns to ensure student mastery of content
- Ensure that instructional time is protected (more on time on task later in Chapter 1, but good principals make sure to minimize intrusions, e.g., excessive announcements over the loudspeaker, intrusive attendance report collection by office monitors, etc., all of which interrupt and compromise classroom teaching and learning)
- Monitor adherence to local or state standards in the curriculum
- Maintain a systematic method of assessment procedures
- Review data collected as a result of implementation of an assessment system

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- Share and use the data to help improve the instructional school program
- Observe teachers and students engaged in the learning process
- Involve teachers in curriculum planning and decision making
- Assist teachers who are having instructional difficulties
- Provide for meaningful, ongoing, collaboratively developed professional development opportunities

3. The three primary elements of successful instructional leadership are as follows (Blase & Blase, 2004):

- a. Conducting instructional conferences is a primary element of successful instructional leadership. Whether involved in pre- or postobservation conferences, informal or more formal grade conferences, and so on, principals exhibit these behaviors: make suggestions, give feedback, model, use inquiry, and solicit opinions from teachers.
- b. Providing staff development is a second primary element of successful instructional leadership.

Behaviors associated with providing staff development include emphasizing the study of teaching and learning, support for collaboration, development of coaching relationships, use of action research, provision of resources, and application of the principles of adult growth and development to all phases of the staff development program. (p. 162)

- c. Developing teacher reflection is a third primary element of successful instructional leadership. Principals purposefully engage teachers in articulating feelings, sharing attitudes, and thinking deeply about instructional issues.

CASE STUDY AND REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

The alarm startled her as she squinted at the clock, revealing 4:02 a.m. Perfunctorily, she silenced the alarm, took a few deep breaths, and then suddenly popped out of bed. An avid biker and overall fitness enthusiast,

Melissa quickly donned her biking attire, grabbed some orange juice, and headed for the shed. For the next serene 40 minutes, she would speed through the picturesque bike path not far from her home overlooking the sea coast. For Melissa, the daily solitary journey energized her like no early-morning vitamin could. Hypnotically, she would take in the scenery as the breeze of the early morning cooled her face. She enjoyed spending some of this time reflecting on her day's activities. This quiet time for Melissa served two purposes. She benefited from some early-morning exercise, without which she couldn't function, and the solitude allowed her to strategize; she thought best while exercising in this manner.

In the office by 6:15 a.m. every morning, Melissa Tofighbakhsh, undisturbed aside from the usual small talk with Ray the custodian, sifts through myriad memoranda, policy statements, requisition forms, evaluation documents, and other paperwork. Dr. Tofighbakhsh is a self-starter, a highly energetic, strong-willed, and creative woman. The first in her family to attend college, teaching was her passion. "Melissa is a natural; students are attracted to her sincere demeanor and enthusiasm for her subject," explains Tom Healy, her first principal. Her second principal, Steve Isman, realized that she would not remain a teacher for very long, because "she was eager to find new and creative ways to make a difference in the lives of students." She had a reputation as an energetic, intelligent, and caring staff developer in her district. "Dr. Tofighbakhsh [was] as conversant with balanced literacy, differentiated instruction, and Socratic seminars as she was with technology as a teaching tool." Another one of her colleagues comments, "She was a much sought-after workshop leader; she was able to connect with her audience as she spoke to their lived experiences in the classroom."

After assuming the principalship in a neighboring district, Melissa put her talents to work. She actualized her passion for teaching and teachers by developing the district's prototype for sustained, collaborative, and practically relevant professional development seminars. Her commitment to instructional excellence, above all else, was obvious to all. Teachers appreciated her insights because she "walked the talk." "Dr. Tofighbakhsh is not at all condescending. She solicits your input, is a good listener, and knows her stuff," one teacher comments. Another reports, "It seems that we always are discussing what's happening in the classroom . . . I mean, instructionally. She cares, she listens, advises, and shows the way. She respects our own expertise, yet she offers insights and ideas that are helpful."

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Melissa enjoys the early morning, because she prioritizes her time during the day and appreciates having a chance to deal with what she calls “administrivia of the previous day” before the school day officially begins. Her early-morning Instructional Council, from 7:45 to 8:35 a.m. two mornings a week, is open to everyone, including paraprofessionals, student teachers, parents, students, and of course teachers. Voluntary, the meeting time affords staff the opportunity to discuss any aspect of the instructional program, from workshop topics to sharing teaching strategies to arranging for guest speakers. “Dr. Tofighbakhsh is admired and respected,” explains Beverley Harris, the district’s deputy superintendent. “She places priority on what really matters, instruction.”

Each morning, Melissa blocks out 2 hours on her calendar for various activities that include doing walk-throughs, conferring with teachers, conducting demo lessons, observing teachers and students interact, listening to teachers’ instructional challenges, and offering some advice or suggestions when appropriate. Melissa finds this early-morning time most valuable in that “it’s the quiet part of the day, and it allows me to focus on instruction. Besides, it’s what I love to do.” As the day wears on, emergencies arise, parents call, district office administrators request information, and student misbehavior issues must be dealt with. Although she divides responsibilities for attending to these noninstructional matters with her assistant principals, Melissa handles her fair share of them as well. Although she oversees lunchroom activities and daily scheduling and responds to never-ending e-mails and a host of other administrative matters in the school, she insists that principals “can find the time for attending to instructional leadership. It’s a matter of not compromising what you believe is most important. Once you demonstrate your priorities, others (secretaries, custodians, district office officials, and teachers) will realize and respect your passion. It’s even contagious.”

In the late afternoon, she sets aside 45 minutes each day, barring an emergency, to meet with a teacher, offer a seminar at a grade conference, plan a professional development session, meet with a group of teachers, or deal with any instructional dilemma that might have arisen. “Ann, my secretary, knows not to disturb me. Although she feels at times she needs an answer to a particular problem, she knows this time for me is important. She understands, though, the difference between an ‘important’ matter and an ‘urgent’ one.” She continues, “Teachers also realize that this time I spend is not meant to discuss a

bake sale or any other noninstructional matter. It's time for anything instructionally related—from dealing with a recalcitrant student to developing more thought-provoking questions to cooperative learning strategies.”

Melissa also realizes that building sustained professional development initiatives requires a team approach to instructional leadership. She identifies teachers and others in the school and district who volunteer to form an Instructional Leadership Team to plan and coordinate purposeful, participatory, knowledge-based, ongoing, developmental, analytic, and reflective professional development sessions.

“Educational excellence is the core of what I do as principal,” Melissa is fond of explaining. “Resource and facilities management, although necessary, merely provides the foundation and support in order to carry out our core mission, that of ensuring educational excellence through strong, uncompromising instructional leadership.”

Reflective Questions

1. Why do you think Dr. Tofibakhsh is an effective instructional leader?
2. What strategies does Dr. Tofibakhsh incorporate to provide for instructional leadership?
3. Would any of these strategies work for you? Explain why or why not. Be specific.
4. Do you agree with her approach to instructional leadership? Explain.
5. Explain what factors would preclude or permit your using her instructional leadership approach.
6. What other strategies could you suggest to make time for instructional leadership?