

## CHAPTER 1

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# Redefining Instructional Leadership

My first job as the principal was opening a new junior high school. My goal was to lead a school where teachers and students looked forward to learning together every day—a school where teachers could meet the needs of every student. Moreover, I believed that to create a positive school culture, the assistant principal Joe Landers and I needed to know the content of all subjects taught as well as the state standards for each subject.

During the second week of school, I walked into Joe’s office to discuss bus and lunch duty schedules and found him practicing Spanish using an online program. I asked, “Why are you trying to learn Spanish?”

He quickly responded, “You know the push in the building from you is all about instructional leadership and knowing the content of classes. I’m going to have to evaluate foreign language classes. Since I don’t know any foreign languages, I decided to learn Spanish.” I can vividly recall my reactions to Joe’s explanation: overwhelmed, sweaty hands, not knowing how to respond immediately, and then seriously starting to question the goal I had established.

In a flash, I recognized the burden of knowing the content and curriculum standards of each subject taught!

The next day Joe and I had a long discussion, and we concluded that an administrative team could understand and evaluate course content and instruction by reading professional books and articles—learning the research. In addition, we eventually recognized the importance of cultivating trusting relationships with teachers, staff, and students. Trusting relationships allowed us to offer supportive feedback and carefully listen to teachers' ideas. I scheduled meetings for departments to have collaborative conversations focusing on instruction and how teachers could team up to improve their practice and learn from one another. Either Joe or I attended each meeting. Now, teachers accepted some of the responsibility for instructional leadership and looked up to their colleagues for suggestions and support—not only to Joe and me.

## SHARING INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

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My first year as the principal pushed me to rethink an assumption I had embraced: instructional leadership was my job, and the assistant principal should also support this work. Beliefs change, and after many discussions with faculty during our second year at the junior high school, Joe and I recognized that schools could have many leaders and that administrators can and should create an environment for staff to grow as instructional leaders. No doubt, instructional leadership is hard work, but it is the work that holds the potential of supporting every learner in a school.

The principal's job is complex and often taxing. The duties that principals carried out, from my past experience, have not disappeared: bus, cafeteria, and hall duties, organizing

initiatives and meetings, designing schedules, teacher evaluations, attending after-school events, addressing students' behavior issues, truancy, designing the school's budget, communicating with parents, and so on. With shared leadership, I serve as an instructional leader among teacher leaders. Today, especially during the pandemic and post-pandemic months when children return to learning in schools, sharing instructional leadership is a vital part of the principal's job more than ever.

At the most basic level, instructional leadership aims to improve student learning and teacher effectiveness. As a school leader, you should always focus your energy on developing the team and building their capacity to enhance teaching and learning. A daunting task, but one you can do!



## RESEARCH SUPPORTS EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

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Understanding and reflecting on research can help impact teaching and learning. The *Australian Professional Standard for Principals and the Leadership Profiles* (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership) describes what effective administrators do:

*Principals create a positive culture of challenge and support, enabling effective teaching that promotes enthusiastic, independent learners committed to lifelong learning. Principals have a crucial responsibility for developing a culture of effective teaching, leading, designing, and managing the quality of teaching and learning and for students' achievement in all aspects of their development. They set high expectations for the whole school through*

*careful collaborative planning, monitoring, and reviewing learning effectiveness. Principals set high behavior and attendance standards, encouraging active engagement and a strong student voice.*

APSPLP helps you better understand the characteristics of influential instructional leaders by defining the characteristics of effective leaders. As you review and reflect on the list below, highlight or underline the characteristics that define you and those you'd like to embrace.

- Holds high expectations
- Inspires others
- Uses data to enhance teaching and learning
- Focuses on improvement
- Models agency
- Builds connections and learning networks
- Commits to best practices and professional development
- Communicates effectively
- Models collaboration
- Encourages trust, creativity, and innovation

By reading and thinking about the characteristics of effective leaders, you can enhance your understanding of instructional leadership. However, these characteristics alone will not make you an effective instructional leader. What can result in more effective instructional leadership within your building depends on the level of shared leadership combined with knowledge and an understanding of the theory and research as well as what both look like in practice.

## POSITIVE SHIFTS IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

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Today, the school principal has many roles and responsibilities. I have seen a shift from top-down decision-making to leadership that focuses on empowering staff through collaborative conversations and professional learning. To become an effective principal, you must be an instructional leader intensely involved in curricular and teaching issues that directly affect student achievement (Cotton, 2003). In addition to sharing instructional leadership with faculty and staff, you are also a teacher, coach, mentor, connector, collaborator, communicator, and motivator. You can motivate teachers to move beyond a teacher-centered classroom and, with the support of ongoing professional learning, gradually shift to a student-centered approach. By disrupting traditional teaching practices, you enable teachers to address the specific learning needs of all children (Hallinger, 2005).

Post-pandemic school years in America and across the globe will be critical for you and other school leaders as you collaborate to identify how to support teachers and create classroom environments that enable students to make learning gains across the curriculum. There is an old saying: *we tend to get results where we put our time*. While redefining your role as an instructional leader who rallies staff around improving learning for every student, reflect on the five goals that follow along with the characteristics of effective leaders on pages 28–29.

## FIVE GOALS THAT CAN REDEFINE YOUR INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Each goal has questions in italics for you to reflect on and can help you focus your instructional leadership on teaching and learning. As you consider your responses, think about

the limited time you have each day and how specific goals can best increase learning for students and empower your team to embrace a student-centered approach.

## 1. BUILDING AND SUSTAINING YOUR SCHOOL'S VISION AND MISSION

To create a mission statement, you and staff need to have a collective vision of what's possible in a specific time frame, the challenges you'll meet and tackle, and the growth you hope to achieve—growth that affects teaching and learning. When you collaborate with staff to use their vision to develop a mission statement, they will be more committed to transforming the mission of improved learning into reality. Researchers point out that when you communicate to all stakeholders that learning is the school's most important mission, there's a strong likelihood that you will develop a high-achieving school (Cotton, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005).

*Questions: How does the staff's vision impact your mission statement? Who has created the mission statement? Does staff understand the vision and the mission? Each day, do you communicate the vision and mission through your words and actions?*

## 2. EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Consider how you can delegate leadership work with clear expectations to other team members. Effective delegating builds agency and a capacity to learn and potentially frees you up to focus more on different aspects of school leadership. Principals who distribute leadership across their schools contribute to sustainable improvements within the school organization (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003).

Questions: *What are you delegating? How do you keep track of items and issues you delegate? How do you collect feedback from staff involved with shared leadership? What benefits do you see in sharing the leadership?*

### 3. LEADING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

Successful instructional leaders provide conditions through professional learning and collaborative conversations that incorporate the study of professional articles, books, and videos, successful curricula, hands-on demonstrations and practice of new skills, and peer coaching. To study the effect of new strategies on students' learning, school leaders use action research based on students' formative and summative data (Blasé & Blasé, 1999).

Questions: *How do you model agency for staff? How does staff know you're committed to student learning? How do you organize professional learning and collaborative conversations?*

### 4. DATA-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL DECISIONS

It is often said that schools are data-rich and action poor. Effective school leaders skillfully gather data and use it to determine instructional effectiveness. Data include different assessments but also provide a picture of the whole child using literacy stories, how peers view a student, and a student's words, actions, and behavior (Leithwood & Riel, 2003).

Questions: *How are you working with staff to ensure the data you have are what you need to inform decisions and take action? How do teachers keep records of and use formative assessment? Why is it important to know the whole child and not just data? What role do teachers have in organizing data for meetings to discuss students?*

## 5. MONITORING CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Trusting teachers to implement instruction effectively can increase their agency and self-efficacy, but you also need to monitor instruction with frequent classroom visits to verify the impact and results (Portin et al., 2003).

*Questions: How are you collaborating, observing, and providing feedback on the instructional curricula in your school? Are teachers moving to a student-centered approach? Do teams and departments discuss students' progress and collaborate to suggest interventions and support? How can you discover what professional development your team needs?*

At times, you might feel like a juggler—encouraging teamwork, using data and knowledge of the whole child to help teachers plan instruction and interventions, monitoring curriculum and instruction, and ensuring staff carry out their collaborative vision and mission—which can be daunting! Beware, however, that the desire to create and implement many changes at once can diminish the goal of enabling all students to improve and progress in all subjects.

## SCHOOLWIDE INITIATIVES CAN IMPROVE INSTRUCTION AND LEARNING

Initiatives aimed at improving students' reading, writing, and numeracy work well when teachers and other staff members actively support them and have been part of the process from the start. However, though most schoolwide initiatives begin with positive goals, not all of them are successful. As you read on, you'll explore reasons



that pinpoint why some schoolwide initiatives don't build forward momentum and often fail, as well as why some initiatives take hold and work.

## INITIATIVE OVERLOAD

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When I was a new principal, I thought it was best to develop and implement multiple initiatives at one time—the more the better. “Initiative frenzy” was a term my faculty used in jest as new initiatives were thrust upon them. At the start of a school year, and sometimes at multiple points during the year, they learned of a new initiative added to the always-expanding list. Launched by me as well as Central Office staff, new initiatives soon grew to unmanageable numbers, and many fizzled out and failed. Here is the big takeaway along with a question to reflect on and discuss with your administrative team:

- Working on seven or more initiatives is counterproductive, as it's impossible for you and staff to successfully implement all of them during a school year. Moreover, a staff's joking about “initiative frenzy” quickly sours and can transform into anger and frustration due to the amount of extra time they must invest to work on all initiatives. Eventually, as staff's commitment wanes, so do initiatives. *Why can initiative overload become a roadblock to effective leadership and change?*

Even if you have embraced the five goals and effective leadership characteristics, working on several major schoolwide initiatives at once can diminish your effectiveness as a leader. In addition, resist making top-down, solo decisions by choosing the initiative for your staff.

## TOP-DOWN INITIATIVES

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Though you might be tempted to make a top-down decision about adopting a schoolwide initiative, avoid the temptation! A colleague, a high school principal, shared a “great idea” for launching a schoolwide initiative. With no input or feedback from faculty, he planned and approved of a project-based learning (PBL) initiative! Teachers had to read two articles (most knew nothing about PBL) on PBL, create a new project-based unit every nine weeks, and submit their plans and a rubric to the principal for review. Resistance among faculty was palpable, and when some teachers refused to fulfill his demands, his top-down decisions became punitive: he documented teachers and required they plan units under his supervision. As teacher resistance spread, the building’s culture shifted away from a school focused on teaching and learning. Teachers who refused to comply with his demands feared reprisals. Not wanting to be part of this unhealthy environment, many teachers left. And to the relief of remaining staff, the principal left, too. Here are two takeaways and questions to discuss with your leadership team:

- The principal used positional authority to require teachers with limited knowledge and no experience design to implement PBL units each nine-week semester. He tried to enforce an initiative that was obviously unpopular among faculty. *What did this principal fail to do that’s crucial to effective leadership?*
- Teachers will resist initiatives when the principal enforces them without buy-in or a thoughtful plan by refusing to develop unit plans and rubrics. Their criticisms of the principal’s top-down decisions went underground. *What could a group of teachers have done to*

*try to alter the principal's thinking and actions and possibly turn this initiative into a successful one?*

PBL, an excellent way to motivate and engage students, did not flourish within the building. The principal used his positional authority to force teachers to comply. Great ideas are worthless if the team is unwilling to get on board. What he should have done was seek teachers' input using collaborative discussions to increase teachers' commitment to and investment in PBL.

## **COLLABORATIVE SCHOOLWIDE INITIATIVES**

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Staff will rally around a schoolwide initiative when you've taken the time to collaborate and build trusting relationships. When I had a personal goal of implementing a culture of reading in my school, I understood the importance of including teachers, our school librarian, and other staff in small-group conversations and planning sessions that I and other administrators attended. Teams and departments held meetings to create a list of what our middle school needed to put reading front and center in all subjects. Ms. Deem, our librarian, led a group of volunteers to study the school's library and develop a list of needs that would make the library the "family room" of our school—a place students would find inviting. A team of teachers studied the needs of building classroom libraries with books that represented the diverse cultures in our nation. Staff met to explore ways they could foster a love of reading among students. Groups recommended articles to study, videos to watch, and schools to visit. The entire school community worked in teams that reported their ideas at full faculty meetings.

Ms. Deem used this school initiative to enhance reading across our building. Teachers evaluated books' cultural relevance, and how much independent reading occurred in classes and in the school's library. Ms. Deem challenged staff to elevate independent reading of self-selected books for all students as we worked as a team toward a culture of reading within our building.

This initiative is in its fourth year, and issues of replacing books, estimating enough funding for purchases, and adding new books and materials to class and the school's library are ongoing. Follow-up years are not as intense as the first two years, but the point is that some initiatives are ongoing and will always benefit from adjusting and rethinking; adding one to two new initiatives to these is doable. Here are two takeaways and questions to discuss with your teachers and staff:

- Staff will rally around a schoolwide initiative when you've taken the time to collaborate and build trusting relationships. *Even if the process takes more time, why is it important to turn over the responsibility for developing a schoolwide initiative over to teachers and staff and put them in charge through collaborative groups?*
- School leaders must make an effort to participate in schoolwide initiatives. *Why is it beneficial for administrators to attend collaborative discussions as a group member?*

You can foster trust and cultivate relationships among teachers and students by making collaborative decisions that can lead teachers to learning about and trying current research-based instructional practices. Staff and students should always know the direction of the initiative as it moves forward and feel valued and trusted, so they take

intentional risks to become better teachers and learners. Remember, when you encourage leadership among teachers, staff, and students, you're redefining your role as instructional leader and enabling your school community to see the relevance of the initiative to their learning and progress.

## **ASSESSING WHETHER INITIATIVES WORK**

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Several years ago, when staff and I developed initiatives for the next school year that included differentiation, using technology to enhance instruction, and innovation, most teachers raised questions about instruction as we sought to identify queries that could monitor students' learning and progress. Teacher collaboration resulted in four focus questions to spark ongoing conversations and bring even more in-depth instructional focus (DuFour et al., 2010). The four questions (see below) guided conversations across the school among guidance staff, administrators, and teachers. These conversations raised questions about helping students struggling academically and/or with peer relationships, how to better support learners' academic needs in classrooms, social-emotional needs, and family outreach. Groups shared their notes. Under each focus question, you'll find teachers' suggestions for assessing in italics.

### **FOUR FOCUS QUESTIONS**

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1. How do we know if students are learning?

*Confer, observe them while they work, read written work in journals, listen to conversations, take running records, and review and assess student work.*

2. What do we do when students aren't successful?

*Target areas that need strengthening, plan interventions, confer, use the gradual release model, organize peer partnerships, reteach, notice, and share every small gain.*

3. How do we respond when students are excelling with the curriculum?

*Ask them what they'd like to learn, offer choices for extending their learning, invite them to work with a partner or small group on a collaborative project, and explore how technology can support enrichment.*

4. How are we using best practices and research as we plan and provide instruction?

*Grade-level teams or departments meet to share instructional practices and research behind them. Assess practices to ensure they help teachers meet all students' needs.*

A high level of focus on students' learning in your school shines a spotlight on instruction and is important, but even more so during the COVID-19 pandemic, as you transition in the fall to more students returning to classrooms. Tap into the expertise and experiences of your administrative team, teachers, staff, and students—knowing that with their feedback and support you can create the conditions needed for learning to occur for every child. There are no quick fixes, but with teamwork you can find a positive pathway forward.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book isn't a playbook that asks you to follow, in sequence, a series of guidelines.

The primary purpose of this book is to show how certain elements of leadership can equip you to effectively lead and empower your teachers as your school returns to normalcy after a year of COVID-19. You'll be able to select suggestions for improving literacy and numeracy in your school as well as review suggestions for productive collaboration with faculty, how to create shared teacher leadership, equity, and access, develop schoolwide initiatives, and build trusting relationships.



## HYBRID LEADERSHIP TIPS

The characteristics of instructional leaders can be modeled through your words and actions. Ensure that you connect with your staff frequently. Connections are different during virtual and hybrid learning, but their value does not decrease. Video meetings are important because your team needs to hear you and see you. During face-to-face meetings your words and actions should model optimism. It can be difficult to maintain optimism during challenging times, but by noticing and noting positive actions and behaviors such as increased student attendance, uplifting student art projects, excellent feedback on curriculum, and so forth, you enable teachers to focus on what's working prior to addressing areas that require rethinking and extra work.

*(Continued)*

Keep your focus on teaching and learning. If your teachers feel overwhelmed and frustrated by technology, extend the same grace to them that you encourage your teachers to offer to students—then have your school's tech person support them. Initiatives can be collaboratively assessed using the four focus areas on pages 19 and 20 as discussion points. However, since virtual and concurrent teaching can be challenging and frustrating, gauge the pulse of your staff and start small.

Communicate to students and their families through video, newsletters, or virtual meetings. Consider starting or continuing a student advisory group, so that you stay connected with students, listen to their challenges, questions, and successes, bring these to teachers, and together find ways to provide support.

Set aside time to invest in your learning by chatting with area school leaders, watching videos and TEDx Talks, reading professional articles and blogs, and taking time for self-care. Finding balance in your life and setting aside time to do what brings you joy will make you a more effective leader.

## CONSIDER THESE ACTIONS AND AIM HIGH

Each chapter will end with a list of actions for you to consider as you redefine your role as the instructional leader of your school.

- Identify your strengths as an instructional leader and list a few areas you hope to improve.
- Collaborate with staff to decide on and prioritize possible initiatives.
- Empower teachers to determine professional learning needs and attend the sessions they organize.



- Invite staff to annually revisit your school's vision and mission to refine and adjust the content.
- Form a team of teachers across disciplines to recommend possible initiatives that can advance learning gains for all students.
- Generate ways with your administrative team that you can expand leadership among teachers, staff, and students and meet with groups to ask for volunteers.
- Gather data on a specific initiative and discuss its impact on students' learning.
- Ensure you've created an environment where teachers can risk trying new and innovative teaching practices.

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## Closing Reminder

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Collaborating with teachers and staff to share instructional leadership and develop schoolwide initiatives that advance research-based instruction and students' learning create the conditions that enable everyone to fulfill your school's vision and mission.

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