The Effective Principal: Riding the Wave

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While considering a future as an educational leader, I am reminded of my son’s first venture into a wave pool. He stood at the edge of the pool full of excitement, yet anxious about what to expect. When the first wave came he was thrown about, startled by the force of the water. Determined and knowing what to expect for the second round, he gripped my hand tightly and backed up when the water became too much. Throughout the years I have watched my son gain confidence and success. Each summer he ventures deeper into that wave pool, backs up when things get too rough, and prepares to go at it again. The excitement of being a building principal comes in new waves each and every day. Just when a leader thinks she knows what to expect, the current changes and she must find additional supports to hold on to. An effective principal must know when it’s wise to rush forward and know when it’s necessary to back up and ride out the wave. Like my son, a leader learns from each wave, adjusts accordingly, and is better prepared for what comes next. The resolve and strength needed to wait for each approaching wave is made easier when a principal focuses on five key elements of effective leadership:

1. Winning by developing relationships;
2. Always put students first;
3. Vision should be shared and focused;
4. Excellence in teaching and learning;
5. Systems and planning make management easy.

**Winning by developing relationships**

School leadership often involves difficult decisions and uncertainty. As schools are constantly changing to meet new mandates and students are experiencing more problems, having
a leader who can navigate through these difficult times is essential. However, no matter how outstanding the leader is, she cannot navigate alone. Therefore, it is critical that an effective principal immediately and consistently works on developing and maintaining relationships with students, staff and the community.

Building positive relationships with all stakeholders in the school is a time-consuming task, but the efforts will pay great dividends. An educational building leader makes an effort to talk with and listen to all members of the school community. Clayton Cole, a successful middle school principal, notes the importance of relationships. He says the time he spent cultivating relationships and building trust during his first year as principal was his most important job. Since then he has been able to bring new initiatives to the school, work with community members, and rely on teacher-leaders to help improve the teaching and learning in his building (personal communication, September 25, 2011). Building relationships will enhance a positive school culture, thereby making it easier to work together toward common goals. “Schools cannot sustain excellence in the absence of trust” (Uebbing & Ford, 2011). A leader who spends time on these relationships is in a much stronger position to help improve student achievement in a school. Many students come to school with various needs and circumstances. Establishing relationships with families and community services will allow a principal to provide the best possible learning environment for all students. Some ways in which a principal may accomplish this are: holding parent coffee hours once a month, reaching out to local social workers and psychologists, participating in an established parent group, and spending time at community events held in places other than the school. Alvy and Robbins (2005) cited building strong relationships as being one of the most important things that new principals do.
The people who make up a school – students, teachers, classified staff, families, and the
greater community – will either unite around a common cause or function as independent
components going in different directions. Principals who build trusting relationships go a
long way toward establishing a healthy school culture in which everyone works together.
Principals do not gain trust because of the title on their office door. They must earn trust.
And to earn trust, they must give it – that is, they must demonstrate faith in the
independent skills and decisions of others. (p. 52)

The trust that principals need is a two-way street that comes from building relationships and
treating every person with respect every day.

Another large aspect of building positive relationships is communication. School leaders
must consistently communicate with all members of the school and community. When people
know and understand what work is being done in our schools, they are more likely to support our
school and students. A facet of this communication should focus on student success. Students in
schools accomplish amazing things each day; school leaders must ensure the success is shared
consistently and celebrated regularly in order to maintain a positive school culture.
Communication, in the form of newsletters, websites, phone calls, and meetings further enhances
the trusting relationships the principal has taken the time to build. Although written
communication is important, personal contact is equally vital. Effective principals must be
visible, accessible, approachable and responsive to the needs of students, staff, and community
members. It is critical that a leader follows through on any conversation she has so others know
she is committed, interested and dependable. A leader who builds relationships, treats others with
respect and acts ethically in all situations will be able to lead a school to a higher level of
achievement.
Always put students first

If schools are about teaching and learning, then students are the customers. Educators are responsible for meeting our customers' needs and ensuring that each student is given a high-quality experience in school. Therefore, an effective leader keeps students at the heart of every decision. Alvy & Robbins (2005) say school leaders must "get in the habit of asking themselves student-centered questions whenever they make decisions or take action concerning school policy, district initiatives, or the everyday activities of schools" (p. 50). In order to create a culture and climate where students feel valued, Harris & Lowery (2002) indentified three things effective principals always focus on: respecting students, communicating with students, and supporting students.

Students want to be treated fairly and equally. An effective principal knows this and makes sure students are always respected. For example, dealing with discipline issues privately rather than in front of others, and making sure consequences are equitable makes students feel respected (Harris & Lowery, 2002, p. 64). This culture of respect is also enhanced when a school leader takes the time to communicate with students. "Effective principals both talk and listen to students to learn more about them" (Harris & Lowery, 2002). Students notice when a principal is interacting with students in the halls of the school each day. The communication lets students know the principal is there to help each student reach their goals and dreams. Lastly, supporting students means the principal "can be accessible to students; reward them, be an advocate for them, and provide them with a safe, secure learning environment" (Harris & Lowery, 2002). An effective principal who respects, communicates with and supports students creates a safe learning environment where individual students can flourish.
Vision should be shared and focused

Creating a school vision and making sure the vision permeates every decision made is a hallmark of an effective principal. Every school’s vision should focus on student learning and every decision made should increase student achievement. “According to an extensive review of the research literature funded by The Wallace Foundation, goal- and vision-setting, are areas in which educational leaders can have the most impact” (Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC, 2008). Creating and implementing a school vision around student achievement is one of the principal’s most important tasks. This vision is best developed when stakeholders have input. The effective principal should invite school and community members to share their ideas about what is working well in the school and district, and what positive changes could be made to move the school forward. Then, after listening to suggestions, the principal should articulate, share and implement her vision.

A principal with a clear vision must share the vision with all stakeholders in the district. She must not only clearly articulate her vision but also model what implementation of the vision looks like. Uebbing and Ford (2011) recognize the importance of visionary leadership and the necessity of creating a vision that will move an organization into the future. Visioning requires a strong leader who is willing to initiate and support a change in the culture of the school. A vision with a sharp focus on student success will easily be accepted by all stakeholders; making the vision a reality requires a strong principal with a plan. The plan not only includes the vision, but includes the individual and cooperative steps to be taken by each member of the school. For example, a student improvement team should discuss all solutions with the school vision in mind. A principal should include the vision and the steps being taken to accomplish the vision in
all parent and school newsletters. Budget decisions, staffing and programming should all be viewed from a lens that attempts to uphold the school’s vision.

There may be times when a school leader faces roadblocks to implementing her vision. When this occurs, she may need to consider sources in the larger educational context to achieve student success for all. Reaching out for assistance in these circumstances often goes beyond the realm of the school or district. For example, a principal may write a grant to secure after-school funding providing extra academic support for at-risk students. There may be times where an effective leader needs to work with state education officials and congressmen to lobby for increased financing or changes in the curriculum. During these difficult economic times, a principal may need to seek creative solutions when striving to offer students a challenging curriculum. Creative solutions may include sharing services with other districts to offer advanced courses or combining athletics to offer opportunities to more students. When a leader works with sources outside of a school district, she is better able to support her vision for student success.

**Excellence in teaching and learning**

For many years, school principals were viewed as managers who ordered materials, handled discipline, and focused on keeping things in the school running smoothly so teachers could do the job of educating. Now, however, a principal’s most significant role is that of a learning leader. Current research shows that school leaders are a critical component to improving learning in schools (Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC, 2008, p. 9).

As the learning leader in a school, the principal can influence learning through the formal processes of planned observations, supervision and mentoring of staff. However, the principal can have even more influence in many other ways. Lunenberg (2010) says there are five key
tasks a principal must do as a learning leader: have a focus on learning, encourage collaboration, use data to improve learning, provide support, and align curriculum, instruction, and assessment (p.1).

Effective principals are knowledgeable about best practices and share these practices during faculty meetings, professional learning communities and conversations with individual and teams of teachers. A successful leader is often seen in the classroom and in discussions with teachers about the instruction being used. She also shares the successes she sees happening in the school. A successful educational leader stays current with readings to ensure that best instructional practices are being employed for all students. For example, if ELA scores are a concern for a school, it is the leader’s responsibility to research best practices on reading and writing instruction and then share best practices with staff. Also, an effective leader uses data to hold herself and her teachers accountable. By collecting data often, a leader is able to make informed decisions about teaching and learning to ensure all teachers strive for continual student achievement. The principal knows what professional development her staff needs and participates in the trainings. This unwavering focus on learning reminds everyone in the school community that academic success for all students is the purpose of schools.

An effective principal can impact the culture of learning in her school when she makes decisions about scheduling. For example, teachers need to be given time to collaborate regularly. Scheduling common planning time for teachers sends the message that collaboration to improve student learning is important. During these times of collaboration, principals can provide support by attending meetings and participating in the professional learning community. Teachers need to know the principal does not have all the answers but is willing to work with the teachers to find the keys to helping each student achieve his/her best. Finding the keys to help each student
may not lie within the school building; a principal may need to work with other districts, a regional BOCES, local colleges or other institutions to find what each student needs to achieve his/her potential. Collaborating with others allows a principal to maximize all her resources in a quest to do what is best for students.

If schools are about learning, then the curriculum, instruction and assessments are the most important tools schools use on a daily basis. An effective principal is a part of the ongoing, cyclical nature of curriculum development. She ensures that assessment is rigorous and aligned to the curriculum, that data-driven instruction is used regularly, and that the curriculum is detailed enough so teachers know exactly what needs to be taught. However, the principal does not just oversee these processes; she is an active participant in all aspects of teaching and learning.

An effective principal acting as a learning leader develops a school where excitement about learning and celebration of achievement is evident on a daily basis. "When learning becomes the preoccupation of the school, when all the school’s educators examine their efforts and initiatives of the school through the lens of their impact on learning, the structure and culture of the school begin to change in substantive ways" (DuFour, 2002). As the principal shifts a culture to a focus on learning, she can then begin to recognize and grow teacher-leaders. These teacher-leaders act as ambassadors for the principal’s vision and assist in the learning culture for all teachers and students. Michael Fullan (2010) gives a clear view of what a principal as a learning leader looks like.

Powerful principals are obsessed with the instructional core of personalized learning and getting results for each and every student. They make instruction a priority. They deal
effectively with distracters. They create a culture of job-embedded learning. They help
the school focus on a small number of core priorities they resolutely pursue while
avoiding innovation overload. (p. 14)

This is an exciting time for exceptional teachers who love the classroom to use their expertise
about teaching and learning in the role of building leader.

**Systems and planning make management easy**

A school leader is faced with new challenges on a daily basis and the number of tasks
required of an effective leader may sometimes feel insurmountable. “Today, education leaders
must not only manage school finances, keep buses running on time, and make hiring decisions,
but they must also be instructional leaders, data analysts, community relations officers, and
change agents” (Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC, 2008, p. 3). A school
principal’s first line of defense is putting systems and procedures into place to manage the
multitude of tasks she is faced with each day.

School leadership is far from simple and in order to be successful, effective leaders must
use the resources available and must be good managers (The Wallace Foundation, 2012, p.12). A
successful school leader plans time in her schedule to do what is important. For example, if a
leader’s vision is around student achievement then she will schedule regular time to visit
classrooms, meet with teachers about data, and communicate goals and successes with the
community. Additionally, effective principals delegate what they can and plan carefully to avoid
problems. Having a system in place to deal with students, staff, parents, and community
members will streamline these time-consuming activities.
Student management can take up a large part of a principal’s day. If a leader puts into place a proactive approach to student management, then she will save time in the long run. Such proactive measures include working collaboratively with teams of teachers and support staff to talk about students in need and making a plan to help these students. Also, setting clear expectations for students, communicating these expectations and monitoring success can help principals handle issues that arise before they become too big. In *What Great Principals Do Differently* (2003), Todd Whitaker recognizes the importance of setting clear expectations for both students and staff on the first day of school. These expectations should directly support a principal's core beliefs and vision for the school. When all members of a school community know the expectations and the vision for the school, the principal can spend her efforts on implementing changes for success rather than reacting to problems along the way.

In the current educational times, principals are also being asked to implement many new mandates at the state and federal level. These mandates can be overwhelming, especially knowing sufficient funding is not available. An effective principal must stay positive and filter the information given to the staff (Whitaker, 2003). To assist in the implementation of many new mandates, a school leader must delegate effectively and use her teacher-leaders. Teachers respond well when they know why they are being asked to do something new and when everyone is working toward the same goal (C. Cole, personal communication, September 25, 2011). Teachers are more likely to jump on board when new mandates are presented by the principal in a positive manner and when they are tied to the vision of the school. Additionally, when hiring new staff, an effective principal can hand-pick teachers that share her vision and who have the tools to implement the best practices toward accomplishing the vision. The
Combination of great new hires, teacher-leaders and an effective principal will go a long way to improve student achievement.

**Conclusion: Effective Principals Ride the Wave**

"School leaders are critical to helping improve student performance. Research now shows that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that influence student outcomes" (Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC, 2008, p. 9). An effective classroom teacher has a targeted sphere of influence, but an educational leader has a much larger area of influence. It is an exciting time to enter the world of educational leadership. Now that research shows what effective principals do, many young leaders will be armed with the knowledge of what it takes to be an outstanding educational leader. Although apprehensive about that first wave rushing in, I know I'm prepared, I have strong footing, and I will jump back up when I get knocked down. Most of all, I'll enjoy the ride.
References


