

An Integrative Essay: Understanding the Principalship

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Who is the principal?

The principal is an instructional leader. The principal is an educator. The principal is the manager of the building. The principal creates the climate and culture of the building. The principal is a visionary. The principal is an ambassador for the school. The principal is a communicator. The principal collaborates with others, promotes shared decision making and empowers her staff. The principal is a person- a person who grows into the role and makes it her own.

Studying the principalship provides insight into how the position has evolved and grown to encompass the many roles that a principal must play. The role of the principal began at the start of the 20th century when select teachers took on the title of “principal teacher”. The “principal teacher” taught classes but also took on a managerial role taking charge of building maintenance, finances, and ensuring that teachers had the textbooks/resources needed. As time passed, the managerial tasks increased, and the principal’s role as a classroom teacher was phased out. In the 1940s, the principal’s role grew to include supervisor, as well as curriculum leader and public relations specialist. In the 1960s and 1970s, the principal’s role expanded to include bureaucrat (who respected and implemented a hierarchical distribution of power). Throughout the 1980s, the 1990s, and to the present, the principal’s role continues to grow (Daresh, 2002). The principal is now viewed as the teacher of teachers: an instructional leader, a manager, a visionary, a motivator in improving teaching and test scores, a communicator, a collaborator, and finally, a person.

The principal is an instructional leader

The principal is an instructional leader, the “teacher of teachers”, as stated in the video “The Principal Series” (ASCD, 1999). Instructional leadership can be broken into two categories: direct and indirect instructional leadership. Examples of direct instructional leadership that a principal provides are staff development, teacher observations/evaluations, and supervision (Liu, as cited in Daresh, 2002). As the descriptor “direct instructional leadership” implies, this is instruction that the principal is providing directly to an individual or a group. Assistant Principal for West Irondequoit Schools, Kathleen Bush, suggests providing direct instructional leadership in the form of in-service training. “It is as close to being back in the classroom as I can get; we often work for days preparing workshops, making sure to differentiate our instruction for the teachers” (personal communication, February 5, 2007).

Indirect instructional leadership requires the principal to play more of a supportive role to teachers. Examples of indirect instructional leadership include instructional facilitation, hiring qualified staff, resource acquisition, building maintenance and student problem resolution (Liu, as cited in Daresh, 2002). Principal of Rush Henrietta’s Ninth Grade Academy, Greg Lane, spoke about best practices in providing indirect instructional leadership to his staff by “working with the staff to support their needs while making sure they have all of the resources to help the students learn” (personal communication, February 2, 2007).

Both direct and indirect instructional leadership are key roles of a principal. If principals practice instructional leadership daily, then they are successful in coaching and empowering teachers to improve student achievement.

The principal is a manager

Although the most current dynamics of successful principals focus on instructional leadership, the principal is still responsible for maintaining a safe and caring learning environment. Cotton (2003) states:

Effective principals involve others, including students, in setting high standards for student behavior. They communicate high expectations for behavior, and they apply rules consistently from day to day and from student to student. They expect teachers to handle most disciplinary matters, and they provide in-school suspension with support for seriously disruptive students. They foster a sense of responsibility in students for appropriate behavior and work to create an environment that encourages such behavior. (p. 68)

Successful principals take on the responsibility of encouraging an orderly learning environment by minimizing distractions. Immersing the entire school community in the use of behavior prevention plans can aid in preventing discipline referrals. This calls for the entire school community to take responsibility in sending a consistent message to students regarding expectations for behavior. An example of a preventive measure might include teachers integrating character education into their daily lessons and interactions with students. Although the intent of character education is to prevent disciplinary issues from occurring, a principal needs to be prepared if unacceptable behavior does occur. Kathleen Bush suggests using these student interactions as teachable moments or “individualized instruction in problem solving” (personal communication, February 5, 2007).

In addition to dealing with daily student management issues and protecting instructional time, the principal is also typically responsible for making recommendations regarding the hiring of staff and implementing the school's budget. Depending on the size of the school and the presence of assistant principal(s), the principal's responsibilities may also include duties such as building organization, master schedule development, maintenance/security, and any other duties from the district office. Essentially, if the principal is an effective and responsible manager, then the daily operations of her building run smoothly.

The principal as climate and culture shaper

Effective principals center their ideas, days, and job on enhancing student learning by providing a safe and orderly learning environment with minimal distractions. How do successful principals create this environment? By sending clear and consistent messages regarding expectations of students and staff, hiring quality teachers, and presenting an encouraging demeanor, a principal sets a motivating tone for her school. Successful principals set a positive tone for their school with an unwavering focus on student learning. They do not tolerate distractions and act in the best interests of their students and the learning environment.

Another important factor that a principal has control over is a new hire. Whitaker states in *What Great Principals do Differently* (2003):

A principal's single most precious commodity is an opening in the teaching staff. The quickest way to improve your school is to hire great teachers at every opportunity. Just as the only way to improve your average grade is to turn in a better-than-your average assignment each time, the most significant way to

rapidly improve a school is to add teachers who are better than the ones who leave. Great principals know this and work diligently to hire the best possible teachers (p.43).

Not only is it important to hire great teachers but also to maintain them. This is reinforced by the idea that successful principals focus on students-by focusing on teachers (Whitaker, 2003). Great principals celebrate the successes of their students and staff, instilling a sense of value in their achievements. If the principal is successful in creating a positive school culture and climate and praises student and staff performance at all levels, self-esteem is enhanced, and people feel that their time and work is valued and appreciated.

The principal is a visionary

The successful principal has a vision of what education should be. She shares her vision with others by articulating it; however, an effective principal also models her vision through daily actions. A successful principal is committed to implementing her vision. Consequently, in addition to articulating their vision, visionaries have an action plan, which lists the key players and steps needed in executing their vision (Daresh, 2002). Implementing a vision, which oftentimes means implementing a change, can be risky. Leadership, however, entails risk taking and standing for beliefs, even when the odds are not in the leader's favor. Principal of Rush Henrietta Senior High School, Beth Patton, suggests, "Communicating with clarity and direction the district's vision. I took part in creating the vision, so I truly own it. There should be no mistakes. There is to be an unwavering focus on student learning" (personal communication, February 1, 2007). When making a decision, an effective principal asks herself how the decision will impact

student learning and proceeds with that thought as her focus. If the principal is clear in articulating and sharing her vision then the school community understands where she stands.

The principal is an ambassador of the school

Although the principal is expected to play many different roles throughout the day, she does not always have the liberty of choosing when to do so. Reflecting, prioritizing, and time management are skills that a principal must constantly hone, working toward achieving a healthy balance in life. In Mawhinney's (1990) article, *A Framework for Reflection on the Principal's Domain: Choices, Constraints, and Demands*, he suggests that a principal reflect on the time spent working on the actual demands, constraints, and choices in her work. This must begin with identifying and prioritizing what the principal believes to be most important. For example, Patton, indicates that she makes a conscious effort and choice to be visible and easily accessible to students and staff. She has made it a personal goal to walk through the lunch room and several classrooms every day (personal communication, February 1, 2007). The best practice of being visible and accessible is consistent with Cotton's (2003) research, "Successful principals make themselves available to teachers, students, and others in the school community, they frequently visit classrooms to observe and interact with teachers and students" (p. 68). As well as being visible and accessible to students and staff, it is equally important for the principal to be visible at school/community events (e.g., athletic events, musical events, plays, open house). In this way the principal serves as public relations representative of the school. This shows parents that the principal is approachable, accessible and involved in the community. If the principal is visible and

serves as ambassador of the school, then stakeholders see her as committed to students and approachable for questions and concerns.

The principal is a communicator

Communication is critical in a principal's job. Clear, consistent communication with students, staff, parents and community is imperative to the role of a principal. Similar to the teaching and reinforcement of math and reading skills, policies, procedures, and expectations need to be taught, practiced, and reinforced to students and staff. Successful principals indicate taking the time to teach the students, talk with them and show them their expectations. Some principals go over the student handbook and code of conduct to ensure that both student and parent have signed off on reading it. The reinforcement of policies and procedures with discussions regarding their purpose also help in communicating expectations with students.

When communicating with staff, technology provides principals with the tools and ease to communicate with the masses on a daily basis. Patton, posts a note to staff every morning via email. The note often includes updates on students, building issues, and friendly comments or even a simple thank you (personal communication, February 1, 2007). However, these notes do not take the place of friendly conversations, nor do they decrease the value of faculty meetings.

Communication with parents and community is also imperative to a principal's position. Communication via monthly newsletters helps to disseminate "need-to-know" information to parents. In reviewing common threads of principals, the majority spoke of having an open door policy, seeing students, parents and staff alike.

Non-verbal communication is just as important as verbal communication. Successful principal's practice active listening when a student, staff member or parent has a concern. Listening carefully and observing the surroundings can help the principal gain a feel for the climate and culture of her building. If the principal listens and validates the concerns of stakeholders, then the lines of communication are open. A principal cannot over communicate.

The principal as collaborator

Although the principal is ultimately responsible for building decisions, successful principals delegate, consult, and collaborate with staff. With a plethora of duties to manage, it is imperative for principals to trust their employees (assistant principals, teachers, paraprofessionals, clerical staff, custodians) and to create committees to take on responsibility for some of these tasks. In addition to making the principal's job more manageable, shared decision making also helps in empowering teachers and creating "buy in" for implementing change.

In Principals and Student Achievement, Cotton (2003) suggests that effective principals not only collaborate with staff on decision making, but also encourage staff to work together on instruction and curriculum best practices. Though deprivatizing instruction with open door teaching exposes vulnerability, it also allows teachers and principals to learn and build on the strengths of their colleagues. If principals are effective in creating a collaborative school with professional learning communities, then risk taking and learning takes place at all levels, thereby improving instructional practices.

The principal is a person

Considering the demands of the principalship and the various roles that the principal is expected to play, it is not surprising that the principalship has a turnover rate estimated at more than 40 percent (Doud & Keller, as cited in Johnson, 2005). It seems that prioritizing, time management, and organization skills are critical in helping the principal find a balance. The principal who prioritizes does not get buried by the demands of paperwork but instead uses the time when school is in session to visit with the children in school. The principal that continues to hone her time management skills might multitask by returning phone calls while driving between buildings. The principal who is organized leaves her office with a clean desk everyday.

In addition to juggling duties during the school day, balancing the many hours needed to attend school and community functions with a family can be a challenge as well. The principalship is not a 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. job. Consequently, a principal needs to be passionate about her work but also needs to find a balance between work and home. The role of the principal requires one to be active and think on her feet. This requires a fit mind and body. Reflecting on daily actions, keeping abreast with professional development, reading and engaging in a stress relieving activity, such as exercise, are all activities that can help the principal manage her workload (Johnson, 2005). It is important to remember that the principalship does not seem to define the person but rather the person defines the principalship. If the principal reflects often, then she will learn to find a healthy balance by prioritizing and managing her time.

The Successful Principal

The principalship requires flexibility in juggling the many roles that it requires the principal to play. In reflecting on the information gleaned from interviews, books, journal articles and observations the following conclusion is drawn:

If the principal is able to balance being an instructional leader, a manager, the creator of a positive climate and culture, a visionary, an ambassador, a communicator, a collaborator, and a real person, then she is likely to be a successful principal.

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