

FEATURES

Assistant Principals: The Case for Shared Instructional Leadership

By Leslie S. Kaplan and William A. Owings

In today's restructuring secondary schools, principals have new instructional leadership responsibilities on top of already demanding management responsibilities. Not enough time exists for one person to address all these expectations successfully. Assistant principals can effectively share instructional leadership roles to increase a school's success as a learning organization for students and educators.

School leadership is changing. Twenty years of school effectiveness research affirms the principal's leadership role in school success (Heck and Marcoulides 1993; Krug 1993; Keller 1998; Portin, Shen, and Williams 1998). Similarly, school restructuring activities have brought striking changes in the work and relationships between principals and their professional staff (Stronge 1993; Murphy 1994; Payzant and Gardner 1994; NASSP 1996; Kaplan and Evans 1997; DuFour 1999).

The assistant principal (AP) can be a valuable asset to the principal's overall leadership in the school. This article describes the AP's role in shared instructional leadership as designed and enacted in one high school.

Changing Schools, Changing Principals

Initial research on restructuring suggests that principals are experiencing a great deal of change, much of which centers around how to redefine power relationships, delegate responsibilities, and develop collaborative, decision-making processes (Murphy 1994). New instructional leadership responsibilities continue to be added to other administrative duties, but none are removed.

Paradoxically, even as principals have larger responsibilities for vision setting and sharing, curriculum supervision, school improvement,

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increasing student achievement, and creating close ties between school and community, their daily activities remain increasingly managerial and present-centered (Murphy 1994; Portin, Shen, and Williams 1998; DuFour 1999).

Accordingly, principals are fast approaching the limits of the amount of time they can dedicate to their jobs. Their workload is becoming unmanageable (Mackler 1996; Portin, Shen, and Williams 1998). Principals report increasing ambiguity and complexity, and declining morale and enthusiasm. Some principals do not delegate some leadership roles because they are familiar only with the “leadership as control” model of running a school (Payzant and Gardner 1994).

NASSP and many school districts are reporting a shortage of qualified applications for secondary school principalships (Olson 1999). With these realities, the future of school-based reform comes into question unless principals redefine their roles and include other administrators in a shared school instructional leadership model.

Sharing power is both difficult and important. Studies suggest that empowering others represents the biggest change and most difficult task for principals (Murphy 1994). As a result, today’s schools need a new model for the principal as instructional leader (Wheatley 1992; Block 1993; Bierema 1999; DuFour 1999). Senge (1990) calls for a model based on accountability without control, trust, redistribution of power, deeply help purpose and rewards for living by it, communication, coaching, teaching, and learning. A principal’s role now moves beyond management activities to cultivating new leaders to accept part of the challenges of school improvement and student achievement. In this new context, assistant principals can become key agents in schools’ shared instructional leadership.

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The Assistant Principal’s Role

In spite of the increasing burdens placed on principals and the calls for empowering educators to accept leadership roles in school reform, assistant principals receive scant mention in a selective review of the professional literature. In a review of 756 articles published between 1993 and 1999, only 8 articles, or 1 percent, focused on the role of the assistant principal. Assistant principals remain viewed in roles of “daily operations managers,” (Porter 1996) “caretakers,” and “sophisticated policemen” (Koru 1993)

largely responsible for administering student discipline, supervising substitute teachers, monitoring student activities, and attendance.

To a great degree, principals and other educators view the assistant principal's role as non-instructional. *Breaking Ranks* (1996) does not even mention APs by role at all, let alone as possible leaders of school reform or as candidates for professional development. Instead, APs remain an invisible part of "others in the school community" (p. 103). Nevertheless, many assistant principals are highly capable and likely partners for principals in sharing instructional leadership responsibilities (Marshall 1992a, 1992b, 1992c; Kaplan 1997).

As entry-level administrators, assistant principals typically maintain the norms and rules of the school culture, accepting major responsibilities for student safety as chief disciplinarians, student conflict mediators, and hall patrollers. Other professional assignments include "duties as assigned" to keep the school functioning, from calling substitute teachers, to counting textbooks, to coordinating bus arrivals. All these activities contribute significantly to the safe and orderly climate essential for student learning.

Many assistant principals, however, seek a shared instructional leadership role. They become involved with improving curriculum and instruction, creating new projects to increase student achievement. They have, and are willing to learn, the professional knowledge and skills to act as capable instructional leaders. They need principals who want leadership partnerships, who will mentor and support the AP's professional growth, and who are willing to restructure the school administration to make shared instructional leadership happen to benefit student achievement.

As an instructional leader, the AP can focus on creating a learning environment that supports higher achievement for all students. Roles to accomplish this include becoming a vision co-designer, teacher coach and evaluator, master schedule designer, program developer, instructional manager, and communicator.

Vision Co-Designer. As instructional leaders, APs work closely with their principals. Together they define what their view of the "ideal school" would look like in terms of student achievement, curricular and instructional excellence, teacher and staff behaviors and working environment, and parental and community involvement. Principal and assistant principal define their philosophy of education, consider their unique student popu-

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lation and community needs, and review the professional literature and best practices. Together they select those organizational and instructional models they believe best advance their goals for increased student achievement, teacher effectiveness, and parent and community involvement.

In this position, APs have direct input setting the direction of school improvement that will guide all future instructional and organizational decisions. They work closely with their principals to define and refine their thinking about how learning will happen, what academic standards will hold for all students, and how their communities will participate. As vision co-designers, assistant principals radically shift their orientation from a largely preventive and reactive here-and-now focus on discipline and management to a future-oriented perspective. Assistant principals become planners and actors with a clear idea of how these actions will contribute to the school's long-term goals.

Teacher Coach and Evaluator. Classroom teachers are the most important components of school improvement. Teachers must be able to select the most appropriate curriculum, and must design and conduct engaging learning activities to help all learners master the highest level content. Until this happens in every classroom, student achievement remains unimproved.

Many assistant principals have responsibility for teacher evaluation. Too often, this means conducting brief classroom observations with a checklist that does not address instructional excellence or mention components essential to student learning. Nor do the observation criteria directly contribute to a teacher's continuous improvement and professional growth. A coach, on the other hand, is a mentor, supporter, teacher, and guide who actively helps players improve performance through instruction on best techniques, supervised practice, and application with feedback. Instructional coaching helps novice teachers gain the skills and confidence to be effective with a wide range of students. Instructional coaching helps mature teachers reflect on their strengths and consider ways to be even more effective with more students.

To become an instructional coach, APs can learn one or more research-based instructional models that incorporate the best and most recent thinking about how students learn. As a "teacher coach" the AP can use conferencing, observations, modeling, or direct instruction to help teachers master how to support the highest learning from all their students. This instructional role strengthens administrators' impact on student

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achievement, increases teachers' effectiveness, and builds collegiality as the two educators discuss teachers' strengths and areas for continued growth.

Master Schedule Designer. In shared instructional leadership, the AP learns how to use all resources to maximum advantage. The master schedule can also become an effective tool to increase student achievement.

The professional literature contains an increasing amount of research on best practices regarding use of time. Schedules such as the alternating day (A/B) model or the 4 x 4 model (Shortt and Thayer 1997, 1999; Kramer 1997; Bugaj 1998) report students achievement gains as measured by standardized tests as well as by teacher tests. Innovative course placement within the schedule can also increase the number of students taking higher level classes successfully. (Canady and Rettig 1993, 1995).

Assistant principals work closely with the principal to clarify their goals for student learning and achievement, review the professional literature, visit successful schools that use innovative scheduling practices, and design the school day to support student achievement.

Program Developer. In shared instructional leadership, APs can help advance the current school program and student achievement to meet the vision co-developed with the principal. Using a wide assortment of school achievement data, assistant principals can work with others to identify gaps between desired goals and present performance. They can then work with teachers, students, and the community to design and enact strategies to move the school closer to the desired ends. Whether serving as a committee member, chairing a committee, or coordinating the entire school improvement process, APs can focus on the school's vision as they work with others to design programs.

Instructional Manager. As instructional managers, assistant principals coordinate the school's instructional leadership team. They meet regularly with department chairs, teacher leaders, and school improvement committee heads to address the school's instructional concerns. As a team, they design staff development programs to meet current and emerging teacher needs, plan ways to bring school division initiatives successfully into each classroom, and build the master schedule.

APs also gather a variety of student achievement data and prepare it in meaningful ways to share with instructional leaders, teachers, and the community. Finally, as instructional managers, they prepare school accreditation reports, participate in interviewing and hiring teachers, articulate with feeder schools to ensure a smooth transition for students, and assist as needed to keep the instructional program running.

Communicator. As communicators, APs take every opportunity to share their vision of student achievement and of their school as a learning

community with teachers, students, parents, and others. APs can articulate the goals for higher student achievement levels and how the school is addressing this goal with all school stakeholders. The more the AP speaks about the vision, the more it becomes part of the school's culture, affecting teachers and students' beliefs and behaviors about expectations for their learning. In addition, the more the AP talks about learning, the more that person becomes a symbol for the message that student learning is the school's most important purpose.

Supporting the AP as Instructional Leader

Enacting the instructional leadership role takes time and professional expertise that assistant principals may not have. Unfortunately, the urgent tends to take precedence over the important. The daily realities of addressing student discipline and supervision, managing books and buses, and overseeing facilities leave assistant principals without practical opportunities to develop instructional leadership skills.

Principals who want to share instructional leadership need to reorganize their school administration to permit increased instructional focus. Typically, APs share most administrative responsibilities, divided only by grade levels. In this "generalist" model, APs manage student discipline, school operations, and limited teacher evaluation assignments. Their days tend to be reactive, crisis oriented, and revolve around school safety and school climate issues. No time remains for instructional leadership activities.

One model for APs in shared instructional leadership (Kaplan 1997; Kaplan and Evans 1997) reduces the number of assistant principals and increases the number of administrative assistants or deans. The two assistant principals, one for instruction and one for operations, accept leadership responsibility for planning, coordinating, and supervising others in their areas of expertise. Administrative assistants, hired on a different contractual year and paid on a different salary scale, manage the day-to-day supervisory and crisis-oriented relations with students. This division of labor permits assistant principals to accept leadership responsibilities such as those mentioned above and build expertise working successfully as leaders of adults.

Satisfactions in Shared Instructional Leadership

Accepting the shared instructional leadership role brings assistant principals many professional satisfactions and opportunities for professional enrichment.

Control Over One's Work. Instructional leaders have a degree of control over their work that is absent for administrators who must continually react to emerging events. While the instructional leaders have heavy job

responsibilities, the nature of these responsibilities permits planning ahead for uninterrupted periods of time to address complex and extensive projects that have long-term implications. Parents still call and drop in, teachers still stop by during their planning periods, and principals still leave “surprise” projects on their desks, but the restructured role permits a serious commitment to complex problem solving.

Flexibility. The instructional leadership role has flexibility that permits assistant principals to schedule their time rather than constantly reacting to daily events. They can plan for school improvement activities, make time for teacher coaching and evaluation, and engage in the high-level professional learning inside and outside the school that keeps good ideas and best practices as the school’s focal point.

Initiative. The instructional leadership role offers opportunities to be creative and use initiative to strengthen the school’s supports for higher student achievement. Vision setting and program development responsibilities provide a context for working with others to find the best practices and adapt them to the school’s unique populations.

Collegial Support and Affiliation. Instructional leaders work closely with other educators to support higher achievement for all students. Working on school improvement committees with teachers and community members brings a shared commitment to solving problems and the satisfaction of successfully meeting challenges. Involving teachers in instructional coaching builds trust and respect between teachers and administrators as the coaches look for teachers’ classroom strengths and help build on them. Mutual respect, trust, and good fellowship result from collaborative relationships and create strong bonds among all educators.

Valued and Visible Work. APs who are instructional leaders are visible throughout the building, in classrooms, in the halls, and at cocurricular events. They are active after the student day ends, leading school improvement meetings and working with teachers and parents. Last year’s debriefings become this year’s operating plans. Debriefings from last month’s classroom observations and teacher conferences result in more student and teacher success in the classroom next month. Students and teachers value the administrative visibility and resulting teamwork.

The principal’s role is expanding rapidly into new areas of increasing accountability. The time limits of what can be accomplished in the job have been stretched to the maximum. The assistant principal is one valu-

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able instructional resource that principals may fail to use effectively. Principals can no longer afford to have the AP relegated to books and buses. Sharing the instructional leadership role with the AP allows a greater emphasis on instruction in the school, increased job satisfaction for all professional employees, and a more active administrative position in the school. This approach also provides much-needed grooming for future principals. Shared instructional leadership allows greater visibility to all stakeholders in the instructional process.

Handling New Stressors

Assistant principals accept additional stressors with the addition of instructional leadership responsibilities. APs must be aware of these stressors and learn how to deal effectively with them. These factors include different and wider responsibility; increased planning, organizing, and coordinating; more time needed for the job; more “balls in the air”; more problem solving; more involvement with adults; more professional writing and public speaking; and more professional learning.

Different and Wider Responsibility.

Accepting a shared instructional leadership role increases the AP’s responsibility for increasing student achievement. Working with others to design a master schedule that not only accommodates most students’ requests but that also makes reasonable demands on teachers’ preparations and is ready on time is a weighty undertaking. Structuring the school day and courses within it to promote and accelerate student learning becomes an additional challenge. The principals’, teachers’, and school divisions’ expectations now include making a measurable difference in student outcomes. In the face of barrier tests that may determine student graduation as well as school accreditation, accountability for student learning becomes a major stressor.

More Planning, Organizing, and Coordinating. Assistant principals as instructional leaders exchange daily crisis management for long-term planning and school improvement. This requires time for planning, organizing, and coordinating. Attention to detail, a view to the future, time management, and knowledge of available resources become important. Tomorrow is expected to be more productive than today and instructional leaders are accountable for results. Organizing for instructional success is critical.

More Time Needed for the Job. Many assistant principals’ days end shortly after the student day. With buses gone and most students out

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of the building, APs can complete their paperwork and leave the school. For instructional leaders, the end of the student day signals the start of the school improvement day. This is the only time available to work closely with teachers and the community. At the same time, all assistant principals return for evening concerts and sports events.

More “Balls in the Air.” Instructional leaders must develop the ability to deal calmly with a highly complex work role. Multi-tasking becomes routine. Many projects are underway at one time, all in a different stage of development or completion, each with a different timeline. Learning to handle the many “loose ends” and lack of easy or prompt closure can prove both essential and stressful.

More Problem Solving. All administrators handle problems. Instructional leaders have the normal teacher, student, and parent issues to help resolve. In addition, instructional leaders have the abstract, conceptual, and pragmatic school improvement issues of identifying and modifying the best practices to fit their school’s needs, student populations, and communities. They also must understand how to gather, organize, and present student achievement data to use for decision making.

More Involvement with Adults. Instructional leaders continue working with students but increasingly work closely with other adults. For many, this can be stressful because working collaboratively with teachers and parents requires different skills than working with students. Shared responsibility and mutual respect become essential components of adult relationships, while they are helpful but not necessary for working with students. Working with adults means increased sensitivity to speech and behavior that can cause stress for some administrators.

More Professional Writing and Public Speaking. Instructional leaders communicate their vision and their progress to many stakeholders. They must know how to speak effectively to groups of parents, students, and community members. They must be able to write clearly and without educational jargon to explain the school’s goals and how well those goals are being met. On the other hand, writing for highly educated adults requires a different type of preparation than is required in the classroom or in the “Chief Disciplinarian’s” office.

More Professional Learning. Instructional leadership requires knowing how to handle tasks that are not required for the traditional disciplinarian, supervisor, and facilities manager roles. The varied responsibilities noted above take much time to learn.

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Expertise and Preparation for the Principalsip. Over time, instructional leaders must develop a wide range of expertise to perform their role well. As instructional leaders, APs must learn how to identify and support classroom instruction that will permit all learners to reach the highest academic levels. They must learn the leadership abilities to define and share a vision for educational excellence and to understand how to effect change in organizations successfully. They must be able to analyze problems and determine the critical issues involved. They must be able to make good decisions with the information at hand. They must be able to handle stress and opposition to their ideas and practices, and to think on their feet. They must be effective writers and speakers. They must be effective conflict managers and problem solvers who are also sensitive to others and able to deal effectively with people who are experiencing strong feelings.

Assistant principals need to understand adult learning and how to design and conduct effective staff development so teachers can continue to build on their classroom and leadership effectiveness. As instructional leaders, APs need to have excellent time management skills so they can manage both their own time and that of others.

In short, APs who wish to be instructional leaders must learn the same skills that make principals effective. Taking on a shared instructional leadership role effectively prepares them to be principals. Naturally, they cannot learn all these skills at once nor may they learn them quickly. Working closely with a principal as mentor, as well as in a variety of other settings, assistant principals can expand their current skills by accepting opportunities to apply them to instructional leadership. They can also make opportunities to observe, learn, and practice new skills.

Learning About Instructional Leadership

Since adults learn in different ways and through cycles of experience (McCarthy 1996), learning about instructional leadership can occur in contexts of personal meaning, expert knowledge, practical tinkering, and refining and extending. The more contexts from which APs can select learning experiences, the deeper and more extensive their skill repertoires become.

Personal Meaning. Personal meaning motivates individuals and connects them to the learning they seek. It provides relevance between the individuals and their goals and directs their attention to the new information.

Assistant principals can begin learning instructional leadership by seeking the personal meaning the role has for them. They can reflect on their personal goals, asking themselves if they want to accept responsibility for learning and doing the tasks required of instructional leaders. Do they aspire

to be an instructional leader as assistant principal or do they seek positions as principals or central office educators? Knowing their ultimate professional goals will help assistant principals select and practice the leadership roles they will need for their intermediate and their long-term ambition.

Mentoring also provides personal meaning. When principals or experienced assistants tell aspiring instructional leaders they have the personality and talents to advance professionally to an instructional leadership role, and they offer their goodwill and advice to make it happen, assistant principals feel personally supported in seeking professional advancement.

Observing effective instructional leaders also gives personal meaning to this ambition. Watching firsthand as a charismatic principal motivates a faculty toward a shared vision or advances a work group toward solutions involves assistant principals in an immediate and personal way. Participating in a win-win parent or teacher conference in which a skilled leader makes it possible for frustrated adults to solve problems gives a powerful experience that novice administrators want to duplicate. Taking the opportunity to watch skilled leaders in action and observing how they are accomplishing their ends provides personal meaning and a model for assistant principals to practice in other settings.

Reflecting on how the desired role will fit with the present role also helps bring personal meaning to emerging instructional leaders. Assistant principals ask themselves whether they will be required to behave differently with their new responsibilities, how this will affect their old and new relationships with teachers and students, and whether these adjustments are acceptable.

Support groups of colleagues, graduate school classmates, family, and friends also offer personal meaning as they encourage the assistant principal to accept additional responsibilities and learning. Finally, keeping a written or oral journal of personal reflections about the desire to move into instructional leadership and the meaning of experiences along the way can help assistant principals learn how to become effective instructional leaders.

Expert Knowledge. Many people learn best when they hear what the “experts” believe. When they approach learning in a conceptual manner, they feel comfortable gathering data, connecting it to what they already know, and reflecting on how they can use it.

Instructional leadership can be learned through formal and informal activities focused on the content and processes contained in the body of knowledge about this professional domain. Graduate courses provide a formal learning program as well as supervisory experiences and credentials in instructional leadership. The professional literature is also available without

admission into a formal program of study and contains the most current best practices and best thinking available about instructional leadership issues. The professional literature also contains information about the instructional and organizational models, which provide clear directions for improving school organization and student achievement.

Mentoring from a principal, experienced assistant principal, or other instructional leaders also provides opportunities for assistant principals to discuss how to conduct certain leadership activities, occasions to practice new skills, and chances to receive positive and constructive feedback about effectiveness with these behaviors. In addition, several educational leadership associations and universities offer short-term professional growth programs in which assistant principals can conduct in-basket leadership activities or learn and practice leadership skills and receive assessments of their performances. The National Association of Secondary School Principals' Assessment Centers and programs such as Leader 123 and Springfield are examples of such leadership development programs.

Finally, professional development comes through membership in professional associations, attending professional conferences, and participating in local staff development programs. Professional associations offer current literature on best thinking and best practice as well as opportunities to hear how effective practitioners are conducting their roles. Networking occasions to share concerns and experiences with colleagues also support assistant principals as they gain expert knowledge to learn how to become instructional leaders.

Practical Tinkering. The third stage in the learning cycle brings personal meaning and expert knowledge together as assistant principals try out some of their learning on their job. Many people need to understand the new information or skills enough to test, experiment, and become comfortable with them. This allows them to apply what they learned to see how it works in the real world. This might mean using a new teacher observation model in the classroom, designing a staff development program for teachers using a new adult learning model, or leading a school improvement committee.

Practical tinkering might mean adapting new information about block scheduling and regrouping into a new master schedule followed by trial and error until the new arrangement works. Trying out new information and skills might mean presenting a new school division initiative to teachers so they can understand the expectations and start working to meet them.

Extend and Refine. Once assistant principals have learned the content and skills needed for instructional leadership, and after they have mastered the vocabulary and mental models required for effectiveness in this

role, and tested these approaches in a limited way, they need occasions to use these leadership skills in meaningful ways.

Assistant principals may design and conduct professional development programs for teachers that address increasing students' classroom achievement; use learning models that help teachers better plan learning activities to support high level learning; compile student achievement data in meaningful ways to improve school decisions; or lead school improvement activities that address systemwide changes within the school. At this point, assistant principals can turn their journals and experiences into professional journal articles.

Conclusion

It is clear that strong collaborative and instructional skills are critical qualities needed for effective school principals and assistant principals. Research demonstrates that effective principals develop teamwork in leading, planning, implementing, and evaluating the instructional program. Principals and assistant principal can work collaboratively as an instructional leadership team to make positive differences in students' lives.

The current management and leadership responsibilities for today's principals are too much for one person to carry alone. The need to increase all students' achievement, manage emerging crises, and keep up with the legal, financial, and political requirements of running a successful public school require principals to share power and create an instructional leadership team. The model of shared instructional leadership in which assistant principals accept a significant role in creating a learning organization would promote greater school success for teachers and students alike. Creating such a leadership partnership would also make the principals' job more manageable and more effective. It also prepares assistant principals to become principals.

Many assistant principals have the interest and the capacity to promote positive student achievement in their schools. Assistant principals can become key instructional leaders able to substantially help principals increase student achievement.~**B**

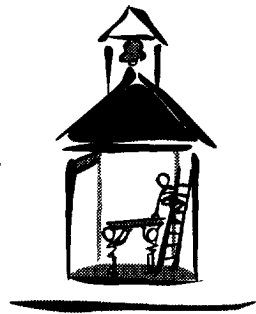
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