

# What is the role of the middle level assistant principal, and how should it change?

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The traditional role of the middle school assistant principal has remained virtually unchanged for 30 years. The question of how this position should be changed is discussed.

## FULL TEXT

The traditional role of the assistant principal, that of building manager, has remained virtually unchanged in the 30 years of the middle school movement. Only recently has attention begun to focus on the assistant principal's critical role in successful middle level schools.

What do middle level assistant principals do each day? To help answer that question, I interviewed three middle level assistant principals in Maine. According to a national survey, middle level assistant principals are responsible for four major areas: administering student discipline, supervising substitute teachers, providing instructional materials, and establishing teacher duty rosters (Gorton and Kattman, 1985).

These survey results pale in comparison with the general duties of Mr. A, who reports that his job description also includes attendance, transportation, after-school activities, PETs, food services, intramural sports, and teacher evaluations. In addition, he is involved with computerizing the school's administrative functions, such as report cards and the master schedule.

The three assistant principals I interviewed all described themselves as "daily operations chief" of their respective schools. They viewed the principal as overseer of the school, the visionary who stays out of the "messy" work of daily issues. Curriculum and staff development belonged mostly to the principal, and none of the three assistant principals I interviewed wanted any increased responsibilities in that area, partly due to the overwhelming time constraints they were already experiencing.

As part of this "daily operations" responsibility, it is clear that student discipline consumes an inordinate amount of time and attention. Lack of home support has made assistant principals' jobs tougher in this area because youngsters adopt their parents' attitudes about the school. The critical report Turning Points (1989) has indirectly addressed this issue, asserting that administrators at all levels of elementary and secondary education, including the middle grade schools, are severely limited in their authority to make decisions regarding their own practice. Assistant Principal A could not agree more. Justification of his disciplinary actions to parents has become a huge concern for him and is easily the most frustrating aspect of his position.

## Making a Difference

Gregory Brown, assistant principal of Helfrich Park Middle School in Evansville, Ind., describes experiences with students with which most assistant principals can relate. "Tom" was an unusually defiant eighth grader who taxed Brown's patience, but Brown continued to work with this troubled young adolescent day after day, winning small victories along the way. At the end of the year, when it looked as if there was no real hope, Brown told Tom he could not help him anymore. From this usually fiercely defiant young man came tears and a plea, "Please don't give up on me." Brown was moved by the experience and helped Tom into high school.

"Ed" was uncontrollable in class. He resorted to tantrums and was sent to Brown's office frequently. The assistant principal made a deal with the sixth grader, urging Ed to come to the office before he felt the need to be in trouble. The deal worked and Ed's behavior took a turn for the better. For the first time, Ed was doing well in school because of the assistant principal's efforts. Despite the widespread complaint that parents don't care anymore, Ed's mother offered the ultimate compliment: "No one else ever cared for my son like this school has. He knows he can make it here." Brown had made a lasting difference in these young people's lives.

I find it interesting that Assistant Principals A, B, and C did not view the assistant principalship as an avenue to help youngsters. They did not view discipline as a means of reaching those young adolescents who need to be helped the most. There was a heavy emphasis on order, but little attention paid to the Positive impact it can make.

## A Commonsense Approach

Harvey Greer, assistant principal of Leawood (Kans.) Middle School, has outlined a "commonsense" approach to discipline that can help administrators understand the results of their actions. Greer believes that dignity, lack of grudges, eye contact, and positive reinforcement are skills needed to help at-risk middle level students. He believes an assistant principal can affirm that students who misbehave are "OK" despite their actions.

Greer believes strongly that students should know we still have faith in them, despite their problems, before they leave the office. This is important in raising the level of self-esteem and allowing for honest connections with the student in the future.

While all three administrators I interviewed employ a developmental discipline model, their attitudes toward discipline are strikingly different. Mr. A clearly sees his position as changing future behavior, not merely controlling it. He is more prone to using warnings before administering detentions. Mr. B's detention policy has fewer steps. Mr. C does not have a prescribed program in place, but simply takes action case by case. Both Assistant Principals B and C find discipline overwhelming at times and clearly not enjoyable or rewarding. Assistant Principal A sees his disciplinary responsibilities as challenging and unpredictable, two qualities that make him want to come to work each day. All three complained that many days appear to go by without making a real difference in a child's life.

## Leadership Style

A factor that greatly influences an assistant principal's role in a middle level school is leadership style. Mr. C, who is now retired from his position, believes that an assistant principal should truly "assist" the principal. Leadership should be limited to the principal's style and expectations.

Mr. A and Mr. B disagree with this thinking, and both exercise wide latitude in their leadership initiatives. Mr. A

believes in a democratic approach based on individual conferences with teachers, but admits that "hectic days" produce spur-of-the-moment decisions. Ownership and input are priorities, and he achieves these through team leader meetings.

Mr. B finds his leadership approach inconsistent. A self-proclaimed hard-line policy with change agent, he understands the value of using a teachers when it becomes necessary to do so. In order to move his poverty-stricken school toward success, Mr. B freely admits that democracy is not always the best method.

#### What Is the Assistant Principal's Role?

So, then, what is the role of the middle level assistant principal? Responsibilities for this position are almost universally under the umbrella of "daily operations chief," with major focuses on discipline, substitute teachers, student activities, and attendance.

The assistant principalship, by and large, is not viewed as a career position due to its "non-educational" nature, with student discipline the number one job dissatisfaction. Leadership style varies, but there is an underlying knowledge that the principalship is where leadership can be exerted on a greater level. Due to the lack of satisfaction and stability of the position, it can be concluded that greater degrees of prestige and attention are necessary elements in transforming the assistant principal's role.

What future role will assistant principals play in middle level schools? According to the Gorton and Kattman survey cited earlier, 50 percent will move on to higher positions within the next five years. Only 25 percent of the respondents planned to continue in their current jobs for more than five years. Mr. C resigned after completing only one year as an assistant principal after a long and successful teaching career. Mr. B, only one year into his position, had plans to move into high school administration. Only Mr. A, a middle school assistant principal for more than six years, planned to stay in his job. It can be argued, then, based on the literature and these three interviews, that middle level assistant principals probably will not be a significant force in the future due to this "revolving door" mechanism.

What can be done to ensure that the importance of the middle level assistant principal's position is fully recognized? I believe that change must start with assistant principals themselves. Attitudes toward the position need to change for the better: Assistant principals need to view themselves as change agents, not keepers of the status quo. Along with this comes a need for vocal and persistent efforts at calling attention to the inherent worth of the position. Again, assistant principals need to take charge of their image and project confidence in the importance of their work.

Middle level principals can help produce a shift in attitudes. They can start by delegating traditional "principal responsibilities," such as curriculum and community outreach, as shared duties of the administrative team. Daily operations, especially discipline, should not be exclusively confined to the assistant principal's office, but should encompass the skills and expertise of both officials. This goes a long way toward casting a unified office approach to the important work of the school. Shared decision making and supervision are keys to successful middle level administration.

#### A Final Suggestion

If it is accepted that the principal and assistant principal should share the various supervisory and administrative duties of educational administration, then is it not logical to advocate the need for a "dual principalship"? Perhaps

two leaders of a school can promote greater reform and instill the middle level concept at a far faster pace than if there is only one chief. No matter how you look at it, the assistant principal is just that: the "assistant" to the principal. An equal partnership between two chief would double the efforts to achieve middle level success and ensure stability in the front office. With the ever-increasing questioning of middle level schools by parents and community members, it becomes especially critical to maintain a "united front" to support the work of the school. Two principals are better than one.

But until (or if) this concept of the dual principalship becomes a reality, the middle level assistant principal should be afforded more responsibility and ownership over school matters. Keeping the assistant principal in a purely "assistant" role will not aid the school or its mission.

Turning Points earlier called for the empowerment of administrators as well as teachers. To do any less is irresponsible. In the end, it is our students who will be affected by administrative leadership—or lack of it. Without strong leaders, middle level schools will still survive. Mere survival, though, is not enough. The assistant principal has the capacity to facilitate the positive development of a middle school and lead it toward excellence.

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