5 PIVOTAL PRACTICES THAT SHAPE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

THE EFFECTIVE PRINCIPAL

By Pamela Mendels

When most people hear the word "principal," they think of the noun meaning the chief, the top executive, the head of all others, the person who controls the levers. Not so Dewey Hensley, himself a former principal and today an assistant commissioner in Kentucky's Department of Education. Hensley likes to remind people that when it was first used in connection with school leadership in the 1800s, the word "principal" was an adjective in front of another word, "teacher" (Pierce, 1935, p. 11). The "principal teacher," he says, was a kind of first among equals, an instructor who assumed some administrative tasks as schools began to grow beyond the one-room buildings of yore. The original principal, Hensley stresses, was, like the other teachers in the school, concerned with instruction above all.

Principals in the 21st century, he says, could do worse than keep this 19th-century definition in mind as they face the challenges of turning around failing schools and work to live up to the ideals embodied in a more contemporary term, "instructional leader." Today's best principals, Hensley says, "know what good and effective instruction looks like so they can provide feedback to guide teachers."

This view of the principalship — that it should center on instruction, not building management or other administrative matters — is one that has gained currency in recent years. So has the idea that if instruction is the heart of their job, principals have a vital role to play in school improvement. Consider a 2010 survey of school and district administrators, policy advisers, and others in the education world. They named "principal leadership" as second only to teacher quality when they were asked to rank in importance 21 education issues, ranging from special education and English language learning to school violence and reducing the dropout rate (Simkin, Charner, & Suss, 2010, pp. 9-10).

A major reason for the attention being paid to principals is the emergence of research that has found an empirical link between school leadership and student achievement. A seminal 2004 study, *How Leadership In-*

fluences Student Learning, asserted that leadership was the second most important school-based factor in children's academic achievement and noted that there were few, if any, cases of troubled schools turning around without effective leaders (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). In 2010, the authors of that study, a team of researchers from the University of Minnesota and the University of Toronto, published a detailed sequel to probe school leadership in depth. They reaffirmed their earlier conclusion, declaring that: "In developing a starting point for this six-year study, we claimed, based on a preliminary review of research, that leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning. After six additional years of research, we are even more confident about this claim" (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010, p. 9). And they found, further, that although school leadership does not make its impact directly, its indirect workings have a statistically significant effect on student achievement (Louis et al., 2010, p. 37).

What exactly is it that effective principals do that ripples through classrooms and boosts learning, especially in failing schools? Since 2000, The Wallace Foundation, which has supported projects to promote education leadership in 24 states and published 70 reports on the subject (including the Minnesota/Toronto research), has been trying to answer that question. A recently published Wallace Perspective report that takes a look back at the foundation's research and field experiences finds that five practices in particular seem central to effective school leadership (The Wallace Foundation, 2012):

1. Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards;
2. Creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit, and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail;
3. Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision;
4. Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost; and
5. Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement.

When principals put each of these elements in place — and in harmony — principals stand a fighting chance of making a real difference for students.

SHAPING A VISION

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Effective leadership begins with the development of a schoolwide vision of commitment to high standards and the success of all students. The principal helps to spell out that vision and get all others on board with it. "The research literature over the last quarter-century has consistently supported the notion that having high expectations for all, including clear and public standards, is one key to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students and for raising the overall achievement of all students," write education leadership researchers at Vanderbilt University (Porter et al., 2008, p. 13).

The Minnesota/Toronto team found that principals rated highly by teachers for having created a good instructional climate or taken sound instructional actions had been able to nurture a strong vision that all students can learn. "Clearly, what gets the highly rated principals out of bed each morning is what keeps them awake at night: They have a vision and believe that all students can achieve at high levels," the researchers say. "... They emphasize the value of research-based strategies. They speak about the amount of time that is invested in developing the school's vision, gathering research information, and then applying it to the local setting." In one passage, the researchers quote a teacher and the principal at a school where the vision has been securely planted: " 'My principal is very firm in what she believes,' " the teacher tells the researchers. For her part, the principal makes clear that the vision is "nonnegotiable," as the researchers put it, commenting that her expectations are high and the teachers know that. " 'I simply put it out there: We've got to kick it up a notch,' " the principal says (Louis et al., 2010, p. 84).

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CREATING A CLIMATE HOSPITABLE TO EDUCATION

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To be sure, effective principals shape schools buildings characterized by the basics — safety and orderliness — but they also see to it that schools create an atmosphere in which students feel supported and responded to. For teachers, too, principals set a tone. The feel is nonbureaucratic, and teachers form part of a professional community that is "deeply rooted in the academic and social learning goals of the schools" (Goldring, Porter, Murphy, Elliott, & Cravens, 2007, pp. 7-8). Principals ensure that teachers do not work in isolation from one another, but work collaboratively, giving each other help and guidance to improve instructional practices (Louis et al., 2010, p. 50).

Effective principals work hard at building such school communities, found University of Washington researchers in an examination of leadership in urban schools. "Alongside their efforts to prioritize collaboration and address trust in the building, the principals, aided by other admin-

istrative staff, made improvement of the work culture a central target of their efforts to lead a learning improvement agenda," the researchers found. "Some had arrived at their job feeling that they needed to change a toxic culture at the school to do what they needed to do. Other spoke of 'building a culture,' 'moving toward a culture,' or 'leading a culture of change.' "

The University of Washington researchers went on to list the key elements of a climate hospitable to learning: "a sense of student and staff safety; respect for all members of the school community, without regard to the professional status or position; an upbeat, welcoming, solution-oriented, no-blame, professional environment; an effort to invite and involve staff in various schoolwide functions; and a parallel outreach to students that engaged and involved them in a variety of activities" (Portin et al., 2009, p. 59).

CULTIVATING LEADERSHIP IN OTHERS

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Effective principals know they cannot go it alone. They are not the lonely-at-the-top, hero-principal who has become a fixture of popular culture. Instead, they make good use of all the skills and knowledge on the faculty and among others, encouraging the many capable adults who make up a school community to step into leadership roles and responsibilities.

The more open a principal is to spreading leadership around, the better it is for student learning, the Minnesota/Toronto researchers found. Indeed, a particularly notable finding of their study is that effective leadership from a variety of sources — principals, teachers, staff teams and others — is associated with better student performance on math and reading tests. "Compared with lower-achieving schools, higher-achieving schools provided all stakeholders with greater influence on decisions," the report says. It then goes on to explore why, suggesting that when it comes to leadership, the adage about two (or more) heads being better than one applies. "The higher performance of these schools might be explained as a consequence of the greater access they have to collective knowledge and wisdom embedded within their communities," the researchers say (Louis et al., 2010, p. 35).

What's more, leadership appears not to be a zero sum game. The researchers found that principals "do not lose influence as others gain influence" (Louis et al., 2010, p. 19).

IMPROVING INSTRUCTION

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Effective leaders focus laser-like on the quality of instruction in their schools. As the Wallace Perspective notes, "They emphasize research-based strategies to improve teaching and learning and initiate discussions about instructional approaches, both in teams and with individual teachers. They pursue these strategies despite the preference of many teachers to be left alone" (The Wallace Foundation, 2012).

Principals spend time in classrooms to evaluate instruction or, especially in the case of secondary schools where they can't reasonably be expected to be experts in all academic disciplines, they ensure that someone who is qualified does so. They make close observations of what's working and what isn't. And they make sure to discuss what they have found with teachers.

The Minnesota/Toronto study contrasted its high-scoring principals with their low-scoring counterparts.

The first group made frequent, short, and often spontaneous classroom visits, which they quickly followed up with feedback to the teacher.

Visits by the second group tended to be scheduled and not for instructional observation, but "most damaging," the researchers write, is that the low-scoring principals failed to provide their teachers with feedback.

In the cause of improving instruction, effective principals take advantage of the collaborative culture they work to create in their schools, the University of Washington researchers found, noting that the school leaders they observed "consistently expressed" the desire to see teachers working, teaching, and helping one another. "To create opportunities for teacher collaboration and learning, supervisory leaders across school sites turned to the school schedule to create the time and endorsement for this kind of work to occur," the researchers found. "Some principals moved to a block schedule, others gave up administrative meeting time to create more planning time for teachers, while others used the master schedule as a tool to create opportunities and accommodate for various teacher professional development activities, such as 'lab sites,' peer observations, grade-level meetings, and professional development sessions" (Portin et al., 2009, p. 59).

MANAGING PEOPLE, DATA, AND PROCESSES

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Effective leaders hire well and know how to retain the high performers. They also know how to give their teachers the backing they need to thrive. "Indeed," writes Stanford University education policy analyst Linda Darling-Hammond, "the number one reason for teachers' decisions about whether to stay in a school is the quality of administrative support — and it is the leader who must develop this organization" (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 17).

At a time when federal and state accountability mandates have made data analysis a fact of school life, effective principals also know how to make the best use of data, learning to ask useful questions of it and taking advantage of it for collaborative inquiry among teachers and helpful feedback to students (Portin et al., 2009).

Strong principals also know how to go about their jobs systematically. The Vanderbilt researchers, who have developed a tool known as VAL-ED for assessing principals, have pinpointed six key steps that school leaders follow in carrying out their central responsibilities: planning, implementing, sup-

porting, advocating, communicating, and monitoring (Porter et al., 2008, p. 15).

BETTER LEADERSHIP ON THE POLICY AGENDA

Knowing what constitutes good school leadership is one thing. Putting it into effect is another. The good news is that a deeper understanding of what strong instructional leadership looks like is emerging at the same time that policymakers are beginning to take leadership seriously. Once an issue at the margins of school reform, boosting school leadership has climbed high on the policy to-do list. One need look no farther for evidence than the most recent in a series of yearly reports on leadership legislative initiatives. It identifies 23 states that, as a group, enacted 42 laws regarding school leadership in the 2010 legislative session alone. "The emphasis on effective school leadership continues to inform national and state discussions about educator effectiveness and school turnaround," the report says, noting that, in addition to the state activity, the federal government has taken a keen interest in leadership through competitive grant programs including Race to the Top (Shelton, 2011, p. 2).

To take advantage of this interest, educators and policymakers at all levels would do well to remember that the crux of the principal's job today is not, as it was in the recent past, to sit at the apex and attend to administrative tasks, but to work collaboratively and unleash potential.

Whether forming a vision for a school or encouraging teachers to help one another burnish their classroom skills, the effective principal is a guide along the path to better instruction. "An instructional leader is someone who first and foremost realizes that the strategies and instructional practices teachers use are the primary mover of student achievement," says Hensley, who was named to head up a new state school turnaround effort in Kentucky after his own success as a principal at a once-failing Louisville elementary school. "These leaders guide their teachers to recognize how significant what they do is to academic performance."

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