

# Educational Leadership

February 2009 | Volume 66 | Number 5 **How Teachers Learn** Pages 62-68

## High-Leverage Strategies for Principal Leadership

*Richard DuFour and Robert J. Marzano*

**By promoting teacher learning in collaborative teams, a principal is far more likely to improve student achievement than by focusing on formal teacher evaluation.**

Research on the principalship has consistently described the most effective principals as *instructional leaders*, an image that has the principal "hip-deep in curriculum and instruction" (Hallinger, 2007). We advocate for a new image. If the fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure that all students learn at high levels, then schools do not need instructional leaders—they need *learning leaders* who focus on evidence of learning. When principals make the transition from instructional leaders to learning leaders, they move the conversation from "What was taught?" or "How was it taught?" to the far more important questions of "What was learned?" and "How can we use evidence of learning to strengthen our professional practice?"

This shift in focus will affect the day-to-day work of the principal in significant ways, particularly when it comes to the formal teacher supervision and evaluation process. The process that most school districts use is grounded in the assumptions of traditional bureaucracy: Supervisors must monitor and inspect subordinates' work to ensure that it meets standards. Thus, principals should conduct both frequent classroom walk-throughs and lengthier classroom observations to gather information on inputs: Are teachers presenting the correct content, using good instructional strategies, incorporating varied levels of questions, providing specific feedback to students, engaging students in content, and so on? A second, more benevolent assumption driving this process is that this direct observation of instruction will improve individual classroom teachers, one teacher at a time, and thereby improve schools.

We believe that both of these assumptions are flawed.

### The Truth About Classroom Observation

Principals should indeed devote considerable time to observing the classrooms of teachers new to the building to provide those teachers with support, assist in their orientation to the school, and communicate what the school values. We recognize that there are benefits to principals meeting with individual teachers to discuss curriculum and instruction and that the classroom supervision process provides a venue for that discussion. We also understand that most districts and states require some kind of periodic formal classroom observation of teachers.

Nevertheless, we submit the following hard facts that we contend represent the norm both for formal teacher evaluation processes and classroom walk-through procedures as most districts currently practice them:

- Although one of the stated purposes of teacher evaluation is to identify and remediate unsatisfactory performance, it is *extremely* rare for a teacher to be designated as unsatisfactory because of his or her classroom teaching. For example, Illinois has more than 130,000 full-time teachers in its public schools, but only two teachers each year, on average, are dismissed for incompetence ("Protecting Mediocre Teachers," 2005). The odds are far greater that a tenured teacher would be struck by lightning during his or her lifetime than found to be an ineffective teacher.
- Although another stated purpose of the teacher supervision process is to improve teaching, this process is unlikely to bring about changes in veteran teachers' practices. In fact, teachers who receive an evaluation they consider negative are unlikely to be receptive to the feedback. They are far more likely to attribute a poor evaluation to personality conflicts with the principal or to the principal's subjectivity than to weaknesses in their instruction. After all, previous principals found them to be satisfactory, if not exemplary.
- Middle and high school principals could not possibly have sufficient content expertise in all the different subject areas to provide a valid assessment of a teacher's instruction. Although they may focus on general teaching strategies, they would be hard pressed to determine the rigor, relevance, or clarity of the content taught in courses ranging from foreign languages, to advanced calculus, to construction trades.
- Even if a principal is able to help an individual teacher develop or improve an instructional strategy, the change does not necessarily improve the school because individual development does not guarantee organizational improvement (Elmore, 2006; Fullan, 2007; McCauley & Van Velsor, 2003; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).
- The hours that principals devote to formal teacher evaluation and walkthroughs contribute little to the overall improvement of a school. When the Teaching Commission (2006) examined ways to improve schools through improved teaching, it dismissed teacher evaluation as "arcane and ineffective" (p. 16). Principal evaluation of teachers is a low-leverage strategy for improving schools, particularly in terms of the time it requires of principals.

Assume that a well-intentioned principal devotes 120 hours each year to classroom walk-throughs, pre-observation conferences, formal observations, post-observation conferences, write-ups, and conversations associated with teacher evaluation. This is a conservative figure, requiring the principal to devote fewer than four hours each week to the task. If the principal divides his or her time equally among a staff of 40 teachers, each teacher would have the benefit of three hours of the principal's time annually.

## Student Learning: The Criterion for Professional Interaction

Now assume that same principal dedicates those 120 hours to working with teachers as they develop their capacity to function as members of high-performing collaborative teams. Working with staff, the principal

- Creates schedules to ensure that teams meet at least one hour every week.
- Creates structures to ensure that collaborative team time focuses on issues and questions that directly affect student learning, such as "What evidence do we have that our students are acquiring the knowledge and skills we have agreed are most essential to their continued success?"
- Provides teams with the training, support, resources, tools, and templates they need to become effective in this new structure. He or she solicits staff insights regarding obstacles to collaboration and ideas for removing those obstacles.

For example, one of the authors (Marzano, 2003) has drawn distinctions between the intended curriculum (what someone has determined should be taught); the implemented curriculum (what is actually taught); and the attained curriculum (what students actually learn). His analysis of research led him to conclude that one of the most powerful strategies schools can employ for improving student learning (the attained curriculum) is to ensure that what is taught in their classrooms (the implemented curriculum) is both guaranteed (that is, students have access to the same essential learning regardless of who is teaching the class) and viable (that is, the curriculum can be taught in the amount of time available).

When principals merely present teachers with a copy of state or provincial standards or the district curriculum guide, they have done little to promote a guaranteed and viable curriculum. Teachers can and do interpret standards differently, assign greatly different priorities to various standards, and follow radically different pacing. In fact, in most schools, what actually gets taught when the door is closed varies dramatically from teacher to teacher.

Effective teachers will recognize that one of the first steps a school can take to help all students learn is to ensure that those who are called on to teach them can answer the question, "What is it we want our students to learn?" with a consistent voice. This means that principals will support collaborative teams of teachers as they engage in collective inquiry and build shared knowledge regarding the learning that is most essential for their students by providing teams with the following:

Time for collaboration embedded into the routine workweek.

- Resources to examine curriculum, such as state or provincial standards; district curriculum guides; recommendations of organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics; assessment frameworks that clarify how students will be assessed on district, state, provincial, and national assessments; analysis of student performance on past assessments; examples of rubrics that specify the criteria to be

used in judging the quality of student work; and recommendations and standards for workplace skills.

- Vertical articulation with teachers in the next higher grade level or course to identify the knowledge and skills those teachers have specified as essential for students entering their grade or course.
- Criteria for examining the relative significance of the standards. For example, Reeves (2002) suggests that teams consider a given standard using the following criteria: (1) Does it have endurance? Will we expect the students to retain the knowledge and skill over time? (2) Does it have leverage? Will proficiency in this standard help students in other areas of the curriculum? (3) Does it develop students' readiness for success at the next level? Is it essential for success in the next unit, grade level, or course?

## Collaborating on Common Assessments

As a learning leader, the principal can also promote an intensive focus on student learning by calling on teams of teachers to create common assessments, including common rubrics. Once again, the principal would need to help teams build shared knowledge by providing them with concise information regarding the qualities of effective and balanced assessment practices.

Several questions guide this work:

- How will your team monitor the learning of each student on a timely basis?
- Do your common assessments reflect the characteristics of quality assessments that we have identified?
- How are we using the results from assessments to support students who are experiencing difficulty?
- What criteria are the members of your team using to assess the quality of students' work?
- What evidence do you have that members of your team apply the criteria consistently?

The last two questions—regarding assessment criteria and evidence of consistent application of these criteria—are particularly powerful in translating a general standard into the specific criteria that demonstrate proficiency.

For example, a team that asserts it is committed to helping students learn to write "a good persuasive essay" must be prepared to define the elements of a good persuasive essay; distinguish among essays that are good as opposed to great, fair, and poor; and practice applying the agreed-on indicators of quality until they can provide students with consistent and precise feedback (that is, team members establish interrater reliability). The rubrics that result from this team dialogue have typically been used for performance-based assessments such as writing. However, one of the authors (Marzano, 2006; Marzano & Haystead, 2008) has developed a generic scale that can be applied to any content area (see fig. 1).

Figure 1. Generic Scale for Developing Common Assessments (with customization for a science unit on heredity)

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Score</b><br><b>4.0</b>  | <b>In addition to a score of 3.0, in-depth inferences and applications that go beyond what was taught.</b><br>For example, describing how a genetic disorder (such as cystic fibrosis) can be passed from parents to offspring when the parents are healthy.   |   |
|   | <b>Score</b><br><b>3.5</b>   | In addition to 3.0 performance, partial success at in-depth inferences and applications that go beyond what was taught. |
| <b>Score</b><br><b>3.0</b>  | <b>No major errors or omissions regarding any of the information and/or processes (simple or complex) that were explicitly taught.</b><br>While engaged in tasks addressing principles of heredity, the student demonstrates an understanding of important information, such as<br>Distinctions between asexual and sexual reproduction (risk of mutation, energy requirements, similarity of offspring to parent, processes involved). For example, explaining how asexual and sexual reproduction differ in their effect on potential mutation of offspring, describing which type of reproduction has a greater risk of mutation and why the risk is greater.<br>The effect of heredity on organisms (traits, diseases, and genetic disorders). For example, describing how a trait such as body type can affect the lives of the members of a family across generations. |   |
|   | <b>Score</b><br><b>2.5</b>   | No major errors or omissions regarding score 2.0 elements and partial knowledge of score 3.0 elements.                  |
| <b>Score</b><br><b>2.0</b>  | <b>No major errors or omissions regarding the simpler details and processes.</b><br>Recognizing and recalling specific terminology, such as egg, sperm, genetic mutation, offspring, organism, reproduction, heritable characteristics.<br>Recognizing and recalling isolated details, such as<br>Half the genes come from each parent in sexual reproduction.<br>Heritable characteristics determine an organism's likelihood to survive and reproduce<br><b>But major errors or omissions regarding the more complex details and processes (score 3.0 elements).</b>   |   |
|   | <b>Score</b><br><b>1.5</b>   | Partial knowledge of the score 2.0 elements but major errors or omissions regarding the score 3.0 elements.             |
| <b>Score</b><br><b>1.0</b>  | <b>With help, a partial understanding of some of the score 2.0 elements and some of the score 3.0 elements.</b>  |   |
|   | <b>Score</b><br><b>0.5</b>   | With help, a partial understanding of some of the score 2.0 elements but not the score 3.0 elements.                    |
| <b>Score</b><br><b>0.0</b>  | <b>Even with help, no understanding or skill demonstrated.</b>   |   |
| <i>Source: Adapted from workshop materials by Marzano and Associates, 2007, Centennial, CO: Author.</i> |  |   |

To illustrate, assume that 9th grade science teachers have agreed to teach a unit on heredity

and have come together as a team to develop common assessments. (Figure 1 shows how the generic rubric can be customized for such a unit.) The teachers start by identifying the content that students would need to master to meet the unit's objective, which they classify as score 3.0. The team then identifies score 2.0 content (the simpler details and processes regarding the topic) and finally score 4.0 content (applications and inferences that go beyond what is directly taught).

With a common scale in place, teachers can not only develop common assessments but also develop their own assessments that are still comparable from teacher to teacher. Assume that the science team agreed that students must understand three key concepts regarding heredity. One teacher might design a written assessment that involves traditional items for score levels 2.0, 3.0, and 4.0, whereas a second teacher might use an oral assessment in which she simply asks students to describe their understanding of the concepts taught. Even though the teachers use different types of assessments, the achievement of a student receiving a score of 2.5 in the first teacher's class would be comparable to the achievement of a student receiving a score of 2.5 in the second teacher's class.

## The Principal's Role

Now imagine that the principal monitors the ongoing work of teams by asking them to submit the products that flow from their collective inquiry and collaborative dialogue—products such as the guaranteed and viable curriculum, pacing guides, common assessments, analysis of results, plans for improving on results, and so on. The principal also meets with each team quarterly to review its work. Together they examine the content, pacing, assessments, and, most important, the evidence of student learning from the assessments.

As a result of this collaborative team process, each member of the team becomes more certain regarding what students must learn and how students will demonstrate their learning. Multiple times throughout the year, each team member receives evidence of his or her students' learning and is able to consider the extent of their learning compared with that of the other students attempting to achieve the same standard. The team is able to identify students who need additional time and support to become proficient, and team members are able to help one another address concerns and build on their teaching strengths revealed by the achievement data.

If the team is struggling in its efforts to help students learn a particular skill or concept, the principal can provide team members with the necessary training and support to address the problem. For example, a 2nd grade team that is experiencing difficulty in teaching the concept of regrouping in mathematics could seek the principal's help in securing a mathematics expert to demonstrate specific strategies for teaching that skill.

Which of these strategies—observing and evaluating individual teachers, or building the capacity of collaborative teams—is more aligned with the ideas that a school is committed to

learning rather than to teaching, that educators must work collaboratively and collectively to help all students learn, and that evidence of student learning should be used as part of a continual improvement cycle? Which of these strategies is more likely to be effective in persuading teachers to reexamine their practice: a judgment about instruction following a single classroom observation or walkthrough, or clear evidence that their students did not learn compared with similar students who did? Which strategy is more likely to result in precise, content-based, instructionally focused discourse? Which strategy reflects more of a commitment to widely dispersed leadership based on expertise rather than authoritarian leadership based on position? Which of these strategies promotes the ongoing, job-embedded collective learning that represents best practice in professional development? Most important, which of these strategies is more likely to have a positive effect on student and adult learning?

## From Supervision to Capacity Building

This shift in focus will create new time demands on principals. Asking teacher teams to become accountable for clarifying essential curriculum, establishing consistent pacing, developing frequent common assessments, and using results from those assessments to inform and improve their individual and collective results means that principals have a reciprocal responsibility to provide teams with the time, structures, training, resources, and clarity of purpose to help them succeed. But time devoted to building the capacity of teachers to work in teams is far better spent than time devoted to observing individual teachers to ensure they are demonstrating the right moves in the classroom.

If a principal makes supervision a primary strategy for improving teacher effectiveness, teachers will have a limited opportunity to improve because principals will have limited opportunities to evaluate them. However, members of high-performing collaborative teams will have an opportunity to improve continually as they meet each week with colleagues who share their content or students.

To those who argue that teacher supervision is necessary to hold teachers accountable, we contend that there is little evidence to support that claim. On the other hand, there is abundant evidence that organizing people into teams in which they work together to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable is a powerful structure for promoting individual and collective accountability. The repeated message from the research is that improving student achievement across a school requires more than competent individual teachers.

The collaborative team structure becomes even more powerful when team members provide one another with ongoing evidence of progress toward their shared goal. Fullan (2008) contends that the transparency of team members sharing evidence of student learning through common assessments creates an inescapable, positive pressure that represents one of the most powerful tools available for school improvement. As Elmore (2006) found,

teachers have to feel that there is some compelling reason for them to practice differently, with the best direct evidence being that students learn better; and teachers need feedback from sources they trust about whether or not students are actually learning what they are taught. (p. 38)

The same teacher who may be dismissive of a principal's recommendation to incorporate a new instructional strategy cannot disregard repeated evidence that his or her students are not being as successful as other similar students in acquiring knowledge and skills the teacher agreed were essential, as demonstrated on multiple assessments that he or she agreed were valid.

## A Better Use of Time

Although the demands on and expectations of principals have increased dramatically over the decades, little has been removed from their plates. It is time to reduce or remove low-leverage/high-time tasks—such as teacher supervision and evaluation—from the principalship. If principals devote less time to supervision of teaching and more time to working collaboratively with teams in examining evidence of student learning and strategies for improving on those results, they will be far more likely to fulfill their primary responsibility of helping more students learn at higher levels.

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