Taking the Lead: The Role of the Principal in School Reform

Research tells us that principals are the linchpins in the enormously complex workings, both physical and human, of a school. The job calls for a staggering range of roles: psychologist, teacher, facilities manager, philosopher, police officer, diplomat, social worker, mentor, PR director, coach, cheerleader. The principalship is both lowly and lofty. In one morning, you might deal with a broken window and a broken home. A bruised knee and a bruised ego. A rusty pipe and a rusty teacher.


The job of a principal can indeed be staggering in its demands, particularly in the context of school reform. The picture that Sherman paints of the “new” principal is a far cry from the traditional administrator of decades past. The job has evolved significantly over the last twenty years, and today’s principal is constantly multi-tasking and shifting roles at a moment’s notice. Barbara Trousdale, principal of Ysleta Middle School in El Paso, Texas, thrives on the many demands of her job. “The daily challenge of handling multiple tasks is what I love most about being a principal. Each day provides new experiences and opportunities to be truly creative in solving problems. It allows me opportunities to involve others in problem solving, to model the very behaviors which I hope they’ll repeat with students and colleagues. It is teaching at its best—yes, principals are teachers too!” Focusing on the many roles of the principalship highlights some basic characteristics of effective principals that are especially important for leading a school in the process of implementing a reform program.
The principal as psychologist.

In today’s schools, effective principals are accessible to every student and teacher, acting as a sounding board for both ideas and emotions. In contrast with the stereotypical principal of past generations who was a stern disciplinarian, principals today are more often than not providing support and praise or guiding staff through the inevitable bumps and bruises that come with implementing change in a school. By truly listening to what teachers and students are saying, a principal can continuously take stock of the school culture and use feedback to make reform efforts more effective.

The principal as teacher.

From their own teaching experiences, principals can have valuable insight into the challenges teachers face in the classroom. But they must also position themselves as guides and as models for teachers who, in the face of significant change, have to become learners themselves. Knowledge about research supporting a school’s reform model, an understanding of data utilization, and continuous, intensive professional development are all crucial in establishing the knowledge base necessary to support reform. In A New Vision for Staff Development (Sparks and Hirsh, 1997), elementary school principal Rosie O’Brian Votjek talks about leading a change-focused school: “I served as a facilitator, consultant, instructor, and colleague who assisted teachers in integrating curriculum and using new instructional practices. . . . I promoted different kinds of staff development, but the most important thing I did was ‘walk the talk.’”

The principal as facilities manager.

Although it is not the most glamorous aspect of the job, a principal’s role in overseeing the physical structures of the school is key. Kathy Anderson, principal of Tom Elementary in Haworth, Oklahoma, laughs, “I frequently find myself doing custodial work. Whatever it takes to keep the school running.” A functional school is not enough, though. Researchers have discovered that the physical condition of a school can make a difference in student achievement (Council for Educational Development and Research, 1997). The physical aspects of a school need to reflect the vision for reform: examples of students’ work displayed on the walls, clean, bright spaces that exhibit pride in the schools’ appearance, classrooms that allow for flexibility in different seating arrangements, and adequate resources for both students and teachers.

The principal as philosopher.

A philosopher is often thought of as having his “head in the clouds.” But a principal’s lofty perspective is as necessary to the life of a school as his practicality. Frequently, as Thomas Sergiovanni (1984) observes, “The principal is… the one who seeks to define, strengthen, and articulate those enduring values, beliefs, and cultural strands that give the school its identity.” In helping to shape the vision, a principal must work to include all of the stakeholders throughout the entire change process. This inclusion helps ensure not only the buy-in of the stakeholders, but also an increased sense of empowerment and greater potential for long-term sustainability of the school’s reform efforts.

The principal as police officer.

This role shouldn’t be seen as a mandate for a principal to enforce rules. Rather, principals work to create a safe school environment, to make their presence known by “walking their beats,” and to “keep the peace” through conflict-resolution and mediation. A principal’s skill in promoting healthy, productive interactions among the staff is valuable, particularly in making sure that both negative and positive feedback is heard and considered, effectively giving teachers “power” to participate in decision-making and enact change in the school.

The principal as diplomat.

The standards for school leaders developed in 1998 by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) include two areas that relate to a principal’s role as diplomat: “skills in school governance and collaborative policy formation that demonstrate an understanding of the larger… context” and “effective communication and community relations skills.” Acting as a liaison with the various stakeholders throughout the implementation of a reform program, a principal’s diplomacy often comes into play. Interaction with district personnel and superintendents is crucial in helping to ensure that policies and resources are in place so the school’s internal change climate can flourish.
The principal as social worker.

Many see a social worker’s job as helping children who come from troubled homes or who have other problems. Seen in a broader context, the role of a principal as social worker can encompass work in fostering collaboration with families and other community groups to support students. Another part of the principal’s role as social worker is to establish a safe and comfortable environment, one in which students can grow academically and emotionally, but also where teachers and staff can take risks and stretch professionally within the context of school change.

The principal as mentor.

As a mentor, a principal shares professional knowledge with teachers, but also, according to Liz Melson, a principal at Jefferson High School in San Antonio, “models ‘expected behavior’ for teachers; communicates a willingness to be open, nonjudgmental, yet focused; creates a vision and confidence that there are no insurmountable obstacles to dreams, wishes, and potentials; and advocates for their rights and needs.” In Issues … about Change (SEDL, 1999, v7.2), the value of a nurturing relationship between principal and teacher is explored: “One teacher explained, ‘The principal strongly encourages the teacher to identify and try new things that they feel might be beneficial to the students. When she does this, the teachers feel no threat of failing, for the principal gives them full support under any conditions.’” The role of mentor is particularly important for principals to take on in the process of implementing change, not only because of their instructional experience, but also because they can see the big picture. They are aware of the culture of the school and the issues facing other teachers, particularly those challenges related to reform.

The principal as PR director.

More and more principals are spending significant chunks of their time working in a public relations capacity to ensure commitment from the parents and community alike. As language from the corporate sector filters into the world of education, references to parents and community members as stakeholders and students as clients are becoming more commonplace. This language emphasizes a renewed focus on the learning outcomes for the student. For reform to work, there must be broad-based support for the school’s improvement efforts, and that support will evolve as stakeholders learn about the program and what is happening at the school. Trousdale, who has had significant success in implementing the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence reform model, feels that her role of providing PR for the school is a primary function of her position. “It does no good to do great things and keep it to yourself. I welcome every opportunity to open doors to visitors, and I share the story of our success whenever I can.”

The principal as coach.

Coaches do much more than simply teach team players the requisite skills. They set goals for the team and inspire them to reach those goals. They give team members the knowledge and drive to practice and improve their skills on their own. They make sure the team is working together effectively toward a common objective. They strategize, identifying areas for improvement by looking at the team’s past performance. In much the same way, a principal creates a vision, sets goals, builds a strong team of teachers, encourages skill building and continuous learning, assesses performance by looking at data, and provides inspiration.

The principal as cheerleader.

One of Melson’s mantras is, “Praise, praise, praise.” As in any workplace, recognition of the staff’s accomplishments promotes an effective work environment. SEDL’s Voices from the Field: Success in School Reform (2000) discusses the importance of celebration throughout implementation process. “As implementation progresses, it is important for principals to acknowledge teacher success with celebrations and commendations. Forums such as faculty meetings, PTA meetings, school newsletters, and school board meetings all make excellent places to share good news about teacher success.”

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You're probably thinking to yourself at this point, “It’s too much. How can any one person possibly be all those things?” Well, the good news is that one important role was left out of Sherman’s description—the principal as collaborator. There are many benefits of sharing the responsibility and the rewards of leadership with teachers, administrators, students, parents, and community members.

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The most immediate benefit of leadership as a collaborative effort is that principals not only share the lead, but share the load. However, collaboration of this nature is not merely delegation. C. Cryss Brunner (1999) discusses collaboration versus delegation in a list of tips developed for superintendents. The concept can apply to all leaders, though. In the collaboration process, principals “do not turn decisions over to individuals or groups. Instead, they remain active in the decisionmaking process, giving themselves one vote when the decision is made.” While it can be difficult to trust in the decisionmaking ability of others and to give up some of the power of the position, there is also a kind of freedom in the process. The weight of important decisions is carried more easily by many shoulders.

Another reason that shared leadership is critical lies in its potential for engaging stakeholders, especially teachers, more fully in the reform process. Linda Lambert (1998) explains: “When we equate the powerful concept of leadership with the behaviors of one person, we are limiting the achievement of a broad-based participation by a community or a society. School leadership needs to be a broad concept that is separated from person, role, and a discrete set of individual behaviors. It needs to be embedded in the school community as a whole. Such a broadening of the concept of leadership suggests shared responsibility for a shared purpose of a community.”

Lastly, when shared leadership is “embedded in the school community as a whole,” there is a much greater potential for long-term sustainability of reform. By taking a collective responsibility for leadership, the school’s staff can help prevent a collapse of the reform program in the face of shifting personnel, even through a change of principal. The strength that comes from this kind of collaboration is much like the strength of fabric woven from many different threads. Individually, those threads are easily broken, but as an integrated whole, the cloth is strong and not likely to unravel from the loss of one thread.

The sometimes overwhelming demands of being a principal make the strength that comes from shared leadership a vital resource. And in facing the demands that go along with implementing school reform, strength may be the most important characteristic for a principal to have.

References