The Changing Shape of Leadership

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform's work with principals, superintendents, and other educators yields insights into the collaborative leading and learning going on in today's schools.

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Terry, the superintendent of a school district of 63,000 students, is meeting today with the district's Instructional Leadership Team. In addition to Terry, the team includes the chief operating officer, the deputy director of teaching and learning, three deputy superintendents, the chief financial officer, the equity officer, the director of human resources, and nine principals who serve as cluster leaders in the district. The team meets twice a month and spends most of its three-hour meeting discussing the teaching and learning work of the schools. This week, the group is focusing on closing the achievement gap between students of color and their white peers.

To set the context for its own learning, the group has invited Ron Ferguson, a Harvard researcher, to start the meeting with a 45-minute presentation summarizing current research findings. After this presentation, Terry poses an essential question to the team: How does what we learned today tie in with our district’s focus on high school reform? The discussion generates a number of suggestions for using district resources (including a recently awarded grant) to implement strategies to improve relationships between high school teachers and students.

Sarah, the principal of a 550-student elementary school, has changed the content of weekly staff meetings dramatically since the early years of her tenure. Instead of announcements and reminders, today’s meeting focuses on the teachers’ upcoming visits to one another’s classrooms. Sarah begins the session by asking teachers to write a focus question for their peers to guide their observations during the visit. One 2nd grade teacher writes, "When you observe my classroom, what evidence do you see that students are receiving instruction that meets their individual needs as learners?"

In groups of four, the teachers talk about what they'll be looking for and how to collect evidence. They review the schedule for visits and decide when they will meet afterwards to give feedback to the teachers being observed. Sarah briefly reviews the agreed-on guidelines for giving and receiving feedback and reminds the teachers that the overall purpose of these
visits is to improve teaching and learning by focusing on what students are doing in the classroom. After the visits, she will meet with teachers to discuss their experiences. Next month, she will share what they have learned at a meeting of principals who serve as her critical friends group.

Does this kind of collaborative adult learning happen in real schools? The Annenberg Institute for School Reform is working with principals, superintendents, and district leaders across the country who are proof that it does.

During the past five years, Institute staff members have collaborated with several urban school districts to help them design and implement professional development programs that support the learning and professional growth of their administrators. This collaboration features professional learning communities of principals and district leaders who meet regularly to address issues of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This work enables us to witness first-hand how leaders are rethinking their leadership functions, roles, and practices and provides examples of how leadership for learning benefits both adults and students in schools and districts that are serious about implementing change.

**How Has Instructional Leadership Changed?**

The roles of principals, superintendents, and other education leaders have expanded during the past decade to include a larger focus on teaching and learning, professional development, data-driven decision making, and accountability (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000). With leadership for student learning as the priority, instructional leadership might simply be described as "anything that leaders do to improve teaching and learning in their schools and districts."

This view implies that instructional leadership may look different in different communities—and, in fact, it does. For example, in a school or district with a significant number of students performing at levels below identified standards, leadership might focus on examining student achievement data to identify areas of weakness and using those data to improve classroom instruction. Conversely, in a school community with a perceived tradition of success, leadership may need to challenge the status quo, promoting such ideas as peer observation to ensure that teaching practices enable all students to learn at high levels. An unsafe school environment that hinders teaching and learning may require that instructional leadership focus first on advocating for improvements in the physical plant.

These examples demonstrate the range of challenges that today's administrators face. In dealing with any of these challenges, effective instructional leaders keep the focus on improving teaching and learning and on gathering evidence of student achievement that demonstrates this improvement.

**What Do Today's Instructional Leaders Do?**

In our work with effective instructional leaders, we have observed a number of ways in which today's principals, superintendents, and other education leaders work differently than their predecessors. Here are a few of their essential tasks.
Lead Learning
Today's principals and superintendents are learning leaders: They participate in regular, collaborative, professional learning experiences to improve teaching and learning. They work alongside teachers in adult learning activities—study groups, school visits, and examination of student work. They recognize their own need to develop a broad knowledge base in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, and they seek ongoing professional development activities to achieve that goal (Educational Research Service, 1999).

One middle school principal in Houston, Texas, and her staff attended a six-week professional development series focusing on student writing across the curriculum. She now meets weekly with small groups of teachers to look at student work samples and discuss how the work reflects improvement in writing.

Focus on Teaching and Learning
Instructional leaders maintain and model a focus on improving teaching and learning by helping teachers improve their instructional practices and by making student achievement the highest priority. Terry, for example, identifies a key part of his role as superintendent as being "unequivocal about the focus on teaching and learning." Under his leadership, principals in the district recently read a book on teacher evaluation and supervision in preparation for one of the biweekly meetings in their K–12 area. The discussion centered on the question, What should we look for when we visit classrooms? Later, the area superintendent met with each principal to discuss ways to use classroom observations to inform professional development opportunities for teachers.

Develop Leadership Capacity
Today's education leaders devote significant time to developing instructional leadership capacity in others in their schools or districts. By distributing responsibilities for getting the work done among teachers and staff members other than the principal or superintendent, they tacitly but clearly acknowledge that every member of the school community has the "potential and right to work as a leader" (Lambert, 1998). In short, leadership resides with the whole school community rather than solely with those who hold formal positions of authority.

Distributing leadership in this way goes beyond merely delegating responsibilities for tasks; it provides regular opportunities for everyone in the school community to share what they are learning about their own practice. School or district staff members gradually take on a variety of roles, including coach, facilitator, or participant, to reflect the purpose and content of the work. One principal in a large New England district, for example, starts by facilitating weekly collaborative meetings, gradually transfers the facilitator role to teachers, and then becomes a participant in the meetings.

Create Conditions for Professional Learning
The new generation of instructional leaders actively create conditions that encourage professional learning communities. Current research findings show that schools that function as learning communities produce higher levels of student learning (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996;
Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). A professional learning community has been defined as "an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they [educators] work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. xii).

To develop this community, instructional leaders provide regular opportunities for educators to work together on issues of teaching and learning. They allocate time during the school day for conversation and study about effective practices. They model their commitment to their own professional learning by participating in small groups of colleagues who give and receive feedback on their performance.

**Use Data to Inform Decisions**

In the current context of performance standards and accountability, instructional leaders know they must develop the skills to collect and use data from a variety of sources to inform school improvement decisions. They work with parents, school board members, and other interested groups to share and interpret achievement results about what students are learning, areas that need improvement, and plans for improvement efforts.

Some districts work with research divisions from nearby universities to develop and use electronic tools to disaggregate achievement data and get detailed, ongoing information about student performance. Thus, as teachers evaluate their curriculum and instruction, they can answer such questions as How are all 3rd graders who have been in our school since kindergarten doing in reading comprehension? Trends in student achievement can guide district-level planning; for example, results on the Massachusetts state assessments, showing that Boston high school students had made significant gains in English and math, told the district that its focus on improving instruction in these content areas had been successful.

**Use Resources Creatively**

Instructional leaders make creative use of all resources—people, time, and money—to support school improvement. To make time for teachers to work together, instructional leaders come up with strategies to add to, borrow from, or rearrange the daily schedule. Their focus on improving learning drives every conversation about budget development and every decision about how to use existing resources. One district reallocated funds to provide math coaches in its schools by making the tough choice to cut central-office departments.

**How Can We Recognize Instructional Leadership?**

Without question, the current climate of reform has changed the role of education leaders. Today’s instructional leaders function in a constantly changing environment and serve students with greater and more diverse needs than ever before. Yet, they are expected to lead their schools to show marked improvements more quickly and with fewer resources at their disposal. They are expected to improve the quality of teachers; maintain safe schools; and turn staffs, parent groups, and business partners into communities of learners. Under the watchful eyes of their parent and business communities, these leaders are challenged to lead and to learn simultaneously.
There is no litmus test for the presence of instructional leadership, nor is there a definitive list of its characteristics or behaviors. In places where instructional leadership truly exists, it becomes an integral, almost invisible, part of how a school community works, lives, and learns together.

The behaviors and activities of leaders outlined here offer a variety of lenses through which to look for evidence of instructional leadership. The presence of authentic instructional leadership can be witnessed in the everyday acts of people who take responsibility for improving teaching and learning in the entire school community, and its effectiveness will be revealed in a variety of measures of student achievement.

References


