Super Heroes or SAMs? A Change in Practice for a New Kind of Educational Leader

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July 30, 2008

Introduction

A universal belief is that good principals create and sustain dynamic efforts for school reform, and without them, schools would not succeed. School success is, therefore, dependent on school leadership. But there is growing fear that the principal's increasing responsibilities and the ability to lead are becoming unrealistic, and school success will suffer in the wake of the leader's overwhelming role.

The Multiple Demands and Job Expansion of the Leader-Manager

Historically, the principal's role was typically that of manager, which included the responsibilities of maintaining safe schools, overseeing the budget, completing and submitting reports, complying with regulations and mandates, coping with teacher and student behavior issues, and dealing with parents (Portin, Shen, & Williams, 1998). Although being a good manager was once sufficient, the expanding job has necessitated the emergence of a new leader and the focus has shifted from accountability for how resources are expended to include accountability for student achievement (Cooley & Shen, 2003).

Effective schools research in the 1980s essentially gave birth to the connection between the school leader and school success. Recent studies of successful schools continue to connect strong school instructional leadership to higher student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Although the need for instructional leadership exists, the conflicting demands and encompassing tasks have dramatically impacted the role of the principal (Chirichello, 2003; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). The expanding role and layering of responsibilities (Duffie, 1991; Portin

et al., 1998) generally involves mediation of complex issues, addition of regulations and mandates to follow, new accountability policies to enact and procedures to implement, greater staffing challenges with highly qualified teachers, deeper professional development to evaluate, additional fund-raising and grant-writing to pursue, engagement of school community activities and after school or before school programs to supervise.

Due to the increased level of responsibilities, the principals' job extends to 60-80 hours per week which includes supervision of weekend and evening activities and (Cushing, Kerrins, Johnstone, 2003; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Ferrandino & Tirozzi, 2000; Pierce, 2000; Yerkes & Guaglianone, 1998). In 1995 the Association of Washington School Principals (Portin et al., 1998) conducted a statewide survey of their membership to determine the changes in the educational environment and their influence on work life of principals. Over 90 percent of the respondents reported an increase in the scope of their responsibilities. More specifically, 83 percent indicated increased interactions with parents, 77 percent said they had greater numbers of students requiring services, and 81 percent said there had been a substantial increase in managerial responsibilities. Approximately 90% of the principals in this study indicated they spent more hours in their job now than they did five years ago. Many of the principals reported feelings of frustration and were less enthusiastic about their jobs.

<center>Prioritizing Responsibilities & Creating Tension</center>

The number of managerial and instructional responsibilities is becoming more frustrating and more challenging. The time devoted to all aspects of the job creates a tension caused by a limited amount of time (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). As Darling-Hammond, La Pointe, Myerson, and Orr (2007) contend, "They must be

educational visionaries and change agents, instructional leaders, curriculum and

assessment experts, budget analysts, facility managers, special program administrators,

and community builders" (p.1).

Principals are concerned about the growing responsibilities for both manager and

instructional leader and note the increasing amount of time spent on managerial tasks

versus instructional leadership tasks (Shen & Crawford, 2003; Worner & Stokes, 1987).

Principals believe the instructional role, more than the managerial role, influences student

learning (Leitner, 1994) however, day-to-day managerial operations usurp much of the

time (Cunard, 1990; IEL, 2000). In fact, principals are spending less than one-third of

their increasing work week on curriculum and instructional activities (Cooley & Shen,

2003; Eisner, 2002; Goodwin, Cunningham & Childress, 2003; Schiffe, 2002). Most

school leaders did not become principals to be managers and see these roles as a

disconnect (Donmoyer & Wagstaff, 1990; Goodwin et al., 2003; Portin et al., 1998). If

the importance of academic accountability is increasing in our schools, the principals

need to be spending more time with instructional responsibilities. Clearly, instructional

leadership is a priority honored more by its ranking than execution (Worner & Stokes,

1987). The increase in principal responsibilities and the incongruence between what a

principal wants to do, has the skills to do, and has the time to do, creates serious

consequences for the future of the school leader.

<center>Consequences of the Job: Principal Shortages</center>

Several reports suggest the future pool of qualified principal candidates is

shrinking (Cushing et al., 2003; Ediger, 2002; Goodwin et al., 2003; IEL, 2000).

Principal shortages are common around the country and increasing retirements coupled

with job complexity, changing demographics, teacher shortages, rising standards, and

greater demands for accountability have led to increased numbers of administrative

vacancies nationwide (Cooley & Shen, 2003; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Many

principals are retiring at a younger age because they feel their jobs are not doable. In

Washington, nearly 15 percent of the total number of principals left their jobs at the end

of 1999-2000 school year (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003), similarly, in Vermont

one in five principals retired or resigned in 2001.

Recent national surveys of principals reveal that nearly half of all urban,

suburban, and rural school districts reported shortages of interested candidates wanting to

take on the principalship role (IEL, 2000). A survey by the Association of California

School Administrators (ACSA) found 90 percent of districts reporting shortages in high

school principal candidates, and 73 percent reported shortages in elementary principal

candidates (Bell, 2001). A similar survey in Indiana in 1999 indicated 72.9 percent of the

responding superintendents described the pool of candidates from which they had hired

principals during the previous three years, as much smaller than in previous years and

defining a shortage. Therefore, many positions went unfilled for a variety of reasons

including: insufficient compensation, job complexity and demands, lack of support, time

commitment, stress, and a shortage of qualified candidates.

The shortage of principals and the growing complexity of the job have become

problematic. It is inferred that the shortage is an unintended consequence of changes in

the principalship (Goodwin et al., 2003). At a time when many deem a strong connection

between instructional leaders and higher student performance, this pattern is viewed as a

critical concern (Donaldson & Hausman, 1999). There has been a great deal of focus on

school reform and the influence of the principal, yet few resources have been available to assist the school leader; the resulting job is overwhelming.

<div align="center">Viable Reform Solution: School Administration Manager</div>

Districts have been exploring various solutions (Cushing et al., 2003; Grubb & Flessa, 2006) to the leadership dilemma regarding declining numbers of candidates, lack of time and increasing job responsibilities. These approaches include the use of released time and assignments distributed to other faculty and staff. The message from this study is clear: the principal cannot do the job alone. Principals cannot execute the job single-handedly (Leithwood et al., 2004; Spillane, 2005); they rely on the contributions of others. Elmore (2000) believes that in knowledge-intensive environments there is no way to perform the many complex tasks without distributing the leadership responsibilities. Distributing the leadership responsibilities is about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, and holding people accountable to the common goal. Distributive leadership models may include: teacher-leaders, principal-teachers, assistant or associate principals, co-principals, or management or services coordinators (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Management or services coordinator is a model that is becoming more familiar in many districts across the nation with noted success relative to the principal's efficiency and student achievement.

In 2002 the Wallace Foundation began support for a project called the Alternative School Administration Study (ASAS) in Louisville, Kentucky. Guided by Mark Shellinger, author and project coordinator, this project examined the use of principal time and the conditions that prevented school leaders from making instructional leadership their priority. The project is a strategy or process referred to as School Administration

Managers (SAMS) and designed to restructure the role of the principal, originated from

the need to assist principals to work more effectively and more efficiently. By

reorganizing the work day of the principal, instructional leaders had more time to work

directly with teachers and students on instructional issues. The premise of the program is

to change the current practice of the instructional leader, by freeing up some of the

management time to increase the time for instruction. In turn, this new structure should

result in stronger organizations with improved classroom instruction, greater student

engagement, and improved student achievement.

When the project began in Kentucky, principals were working an average of 10

hours a day with approximately 67%-87% of that time spent on management concerns,

with only 12.7%-29.7% spent on instructional issues. The time-use studies in these

schools demonstrated that once principals were given guidance on how to shift their

priorities away from managerial tasks, they were able to spend more time on instructional

tasks. Three years after adopting the ASAS program, principals in the Louisville schools

spent over 70 percent of their time on instructional issues and student achievement rate of

gain increased (Shellinger, M. 2005).

In addition to the achievement data, responses from surveys of parents, students

and teachers demonstrated a dramatic improvement in the visibility and interaction of the

principal. One year after the implementation of SAMs, almost 50 percent of the students'

perception of the principal's role focused on supervising instruction, which is nearly eight

times the number of students who had a similar perception before involvement with the

SAM project. Similarly, 45 percent of parents recognized student achievement as the

primary role of principals compared to only 6 percent a year earlier. Teachers'

perceptions mirrored those of the students and parents with almost 80 percent of the

teachers noting that their principal was more engaged in instruction with the involvement

of the SAM program.

The results in Kentucky have piqued the interest of educators nationwide. The

Wallace Foundation now supports replication of the SAMs process in nine states (Iowa,

Illinois, New York, Georgia, Delaware, Texas, Missouri, California) through the

National SAMs Project and the continued work of Director Mark Shellinger. The

National SAM Project is charged with establishing a structure in each participating state

to support SAM expansion.

<center>Iowa's SAM: Overview</center>

At the start of the 2007-2008 school year, four Iowa public school districts with

10 principals and 10 SAMs had incorporated SAMs at the elementary, middle school and

high school levels. By the end of the 2007-2008 school year, ten more principal/SAM

teams were added for a total of 21 teams in seven districts. For districts interested in

participating in the SAM project, there are three requirements: (a) to collect baseline and

annual data describing the use of the principal's time, (b) to conduct daily meetings for

the SAM and the principal, and (c) to hold monthly meetings with the SAM, the principal

and the SAM Coach. Districts must agree to faithfully and successfully abide by all

requirements.

The Iowa SAM sites are coordinated by School Administrators of Iowa (SAI), a

Wallace Foundation grantee and overseen by Troyce Fisher and Carol Lensing of SAI.

Lensing also serves as the lead trainer nationally for SAMs Time Change Coaches.

Baseline and Annual Data

Initial data documenting the principal's time was collected by trained outside observers using Time/Track Analysis © who shadowed the principals for a period of at least six hours a day for five days, collecting and coding the data of the actual instructional and managerial behaviors in five minute increments. The data are used by the SAM and principal during daily conversations as benchmarks for future behavior changes. Using TimeTrack©, the SAM periodically tracks and monitors the principal's use of time and compares this data to the earlier baseline data. Such monitoring helps the principal develop more efficient time management behaviors. After a year in the program, trained observers will again collect and code the data to measure the principal's use of time and to compare to the original data.

Daily Meetings and Review of Instructional and Non-Instructional Activities

Daily collaboration between the principal and the SAM is imperative for strengthening communication and improving the principal's efficiency. Reflecting on their time/task information, principals work to increase the time they spend as instructional leaders. Daily meetings include: review of monthly goals, discussion of the previous day's specific activities and incidents, tracking the principal's use of time spent on instructional and on non-instructional issues, calendar items and future plans.

 SAMs in each district may operate somewhat differently, performing tasks specific to the unique school situation. The managerial tasks delegated to the SAMs will be contingent on many factors such as the personality, talents, previous experiences, leadership style, and educational background of both the SAMs and the principals. The educational background and previous training of the SAMs varies, while the building

principal must be a fully licensed administrator. In addition, responsibilities are

determined by the number of students in a building, the grade level of students, the types

of programming available in the building, and special projects in the building such as

construction or fund-raising.

Tasks generally classified as instructional and dealing with educational issues

may involve: student work and supervision; employee supervision; observation and walk

throughs; feedback; parent conversations; decision making committee work;

teaching/modeling; professional development; planning, curriculum and assessment, and

celebration. Management tasks are those dealing with the non-instructional issues:

student discipline and supervision, employee discipline and supervision, office work,

building management, parents, district meetings, and celebration.

Monthly Conversations

Meetings are held monthly with the SAMs, principals and the SAM Time Change

Coach to review data; discuss progress, needs and challenges that have surfaced; or plan

for future activities. The Coordinator is responsible to keep in close contact with the

SAMs and principals and to assist other districts beginning to implement the program.

Year One of Implementation

A three-day training session in the fall of 2007 marked the beginning of the

project for the 10 principals and their SAMs. After several months of implementation of

the SAM project, an electronic survey was sent to participating principals in the early

spring and initial impressions were gathered regarding the early impact of the SAMs

project. The survey, consisting of six open-ended questions, asked about the decision to

undertake the project and how their work life had changed since the SAM began in their

buildings. Qualitative information was collected from the principals regarding major

tasks assigned to the SAM, noticeable changes in the school's operation and in the

execution of their job, and potential gains for the future with continued participation in

the SAM program. Seventy percent of the principals responded to the survey.

      The responses were received from principals at the elementary, middle

level and high school level with 71% having been involved with the SAM project for 6-7

months, while one principal had been involved 8-9 months. The majority of principals

(67%) had enrollments between 400-599 students and approximately 57% of the

principals had between 7-10 years of administrative experience.

Responses indicated the initial decision to inaugurate the SAM project was made

by both the superintendents (86%) and principals (86%) in the districts, while over half

(57%) said the boards of education also had involvement with the decision. Reasons for

participating in the project centered on refocusing the principals' responsibilities in order

to spend more time on instructional tasks and less time on management and ultimately to

improve student achievement. One principal stated, "Our Superintendent saw this as a

great opportunity to help Principals focus on student achievement and to remove many of

the management tasks off our plate."

Prior to their involvement with SAMs, principals found little time for classroom

instruction. The most time-consuming and stressful part of their fragmented day dealt

with attempting to satisfy everyone's needs while negotiating complicated discipline

issues, leaving limited time for instructional visits. "Probably the most stressful part of

my day was the daily grind of trying to balance instructional leadership with ongoing

student/staff issues that occurred. The day was a series of starts and stops. There was no

flow to the day. I basically went from one fire to the next…"

With less than a full school year into the program for most principals, many

(57%) indicated that there had been changes in the building's operations and in their roles

as principals:

"We definitely have noticed a change in attitudes towards the principal's role and

involvement in the school. I would also say that the principal's day has vastly changed. I

know that I now live by my daily schedule."

"I have at least doubled my time on instructional tasks over a 4-month period…I

talk to students about what they are doing in the classroom. I am aware of student issues

related to frustrations in the classroom. Most importantly, I have changed my thinking.

My focus is an instructional leader."

"Instruction and staff development is an improved focus for our staff as a result of

the SAM taking on tasks that free up the Principal's time."

"Paperwork and phone calls I am not bothered with."

"I am doing less discipline."

The tasks for which SAMs were frequently responsible were: discipline;

transportation; athletics; administering of standardized testing; office procedures and

paper handling; supervision of students, classified staff; facilities issues; development of

the schedule; and communication with parents. Approximately 86% of the respondents

reported that SAMs were instrumental in handling student supervision and discipline,

while over 40% noted SAMs were responsible for both the supervision of staff and office

work.

Most of the principals (67%) hoped to gain increased student performance with the continued involvement in the SAMs project. Others indicated (43%) greater time in the areas of planning, curriculum, instruction and assessment and professional development. One administrator responded:

> To create a culture of continued adult growth helps enhance the learning experiences that each student receives at our school. This improvement creates a learning community where all students experience success and growth while feeling connected to our school.

Looking To the Future with SAMs

Results of the project have been favorable, and reactions from students, teachers parents and administrators have been positive. In the fall of 2008, data collectors will shadow the principals again gathering comparison data to the baseline data. Academic gains will be reviewed using Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and Iowa Test for Educational Development (ITED) scores. The programs, however, will have been in operation for only a year and little may be derived from this early analysis. The initial reaction has been a selling point for other districts; the number of principal/SAM teams is growing with the potential to reach 25 teams at the end of the 2008-2009 school year.

In addition, the Wallace Foundation has also contracted with Policy Studies Associates (PSA) to study implementation to inform further expansion across the country. PSA's report will be issued in June, 2009 and will be a useful tool for Iowa and other participating states as they assess their progress and look to the future.

Conclusions

The job of the school leader demands restructuring. Rather than continuing with the "superhero" image that is clearly unrealistic, the school leader structure needs to change. Typical responses to the need for change have included either a focus on recruitment of strong leaders capable of magically balancing myriad tasks or demanding preparation programs prepare the candidates for jobs that are becoming impossible (Grubb & Flessa, 2006). Such recommendations ignore the real problem and divert the discussion from the possibility of restructuring the principal's practice.

Ultimately, districts must reexamine the responsibilities of the principal, narrow the focus of the role, and restructure the job. Building leaders need to be relieved of some of the management tasks that pull them away from their primary instructional responsibilities. They need assistance and support if they are to meet the expanded expectations of their job. Providing a school with a SAM and having more time to spend on curriculum, more time for quality communication and less time spent on paper work -- might well improve student achievement. Although the results of this new structural relationship are pending further exploration and research, principals can change the use of their time; time is not a barrier to quality instructional leadership.

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