

CORE FUNCTION	EFFECTIVE PRACTICE	INDICATOR
School Leadership and Decision Making	Focus the principal’s role on building leadership capacity, achieving learning goals and improving instruction	The principal keeps a focus on instructional improvement and student learning outcomes. (57)

Explanation: The principal as instructional leader is confirmed throughout research on school improvement and turnaround as a powerful ingredient. Though instructional planning is typically done by teacher Instructional Teams, the principal provides guidance and support, as well as scheduled time, for the teams to do quality work. The principal visits classrooms, reinforces sound instructional practice, and assists teachers who need help.

Questions: Is your principal viewed as the instructional leader of the school? Does the principal support and guide the work of Instructional Teams? Is the principal visible in classrooms? Does the principal reinforce sound instruction and help teachers who have difficulty?

While principals are well aware of how difficult it is for them to have a direct and demonstrable effect on a school’s student—after all, they don’t regularly provide classroom instruction to students—they do set the conditions for teaching and learning in a school and they do organize opportunities for teachers to develop themselves. According to Supovitz (2013), research indicates that there are three main factors of principal practice that contribute to improvements in teaching and learning: focusing on mission and goals, developing an environment of collaboration and trust, and actively supporting instructional improvement.

Focus on mission and goals. Lambert (2003) portrays the principal as the focus keeper, consistently pointing to improved student learning as the central goal of the school. The principal sets the climate of high expectations for student achievement and sees that teams function effectively. Most schools are trying to do too many things and they end up doing none of them well. High-performing schools have three and not more than five areas of focus (Riddile, 2012). Many researchers see the key task of principal leadership to be setting the broad vision and mission of the organization and linking goals to that mission (Supovitz, 2013).

Develop an environment of collaboration and trust. While collaboration and trust point directly to the cultural heart of the school organization, many studies identify principals as a central shaper of their schools’ culture (Supovitz, 2013). Bryk and Schneider (2002) examined the connections between what they called “relational trust” (the social exchanges in schools defined by respect, personal regard, competence in core role responsibilities, and personal integrity) and school outcomes, including student



achievement. They found that the growth of relational trust in schools “fuels the multiple strands of the school-change process and thereby contributes to improved student learning” (p. 121). Heck, Larson, and Marcoulides (1990) found that higher performing school principals worked collaboratively with teachers to coordinate their schools’ instructional programs and solve instructional problems, while supporting staff development opportunities.

Actively support instructional improvement. Leithwood, Jantzi, Silins, and Dart (1993) investigated how principals developed an instructional emphasis in schools, and found that principals who focused on developing an instructional vision, setting group goals, holding high expectations, and providing individual support for teachers positively influenced school culture and climate.

Blasé and Kirby (2000) identified three leader characteristics as critical to building personal relationships that are conducive to effective reform efforts: (1) optimism, (2) honesty, and (3) consideration. Optimism—defined as the power of non-negative thinking—provides hope during the difficult times that inevitably come with change initiatives. While acknowledging obstacles, the principal never portrays them as insurmountable. Honesty is characterized by truthfulness, but also by congruence between words and actions. Teachers and parents must have a sense that what they are told is accurate and that they are ‘in the loop’ on all major issues. Consideration is a trait that refers to “people orientation” or a concern for people, especially a concern for each person. Considerate principals, for example, express interest in their teachers’ lives (Redding, 2006).

As for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), principals must help all faculty members develop an understanding of the CCSS and provide a timeline for transition (Jenkins & Pfeifer, 2012). Teachers need to understand and embrace the college and career readiness standards in their instructional planning. Principal preparation initiatives rightfully focus attention upon instructional leadership skills, but transition to the CCSS elevates curriculum leadership skills to a new status, and principals need support to assume the mantle of curriculum leadership called for today. Principals may need support in becoming curriculum leaders, such as help in understanding the CCSS, laying the groundwork for the development of a curriculum leadership team in their school, and creating a template for them to use to provide the professional development necessary for taking the first steps in the transition. At some Educator Effectiveness Academies in Maryland, each school’s principal led its team, and each team spent a third of the academy ensuring that team members shared common ground. Principals led the final academy activity by working with their teams to craft school transition plans that focused on school-based, CCSS-focused professional development efforts for the next school year (Jenkins & Pfeifer, 2012).

In an examination of principal leadership in low-performing schools, instructional leadership was one of the most important areas of leadership discussed by teachers in the two schools that moved off probation. “Teachers discussed the instructional leadership of their principals in terms of the vision or direction they provided; the articulation of expectations; the interpretation of the policy and focus on collective action; and the coherence or consistency during these stressful and uncertain times” (Finnigan, 2012, pp. 186–187). In a different school in the study, the teachers expected their principal to



have a vision for the school that would allow it to move off of probationary status, and complained that the principal in place when the school went on probation didn't have a long-term vision for improving the school. Instead, she focused on more immediate strategies of test preparation and targeting students who were performing just below the probation cutoff. Her perceived lack of vision, coupled with what teachers described as an inadequate understanding of teaching and learning, frustrated teachers (Finnigan, 2012).

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