



How do Educational Leaders become effective curriculum leaders?

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ABSTRACT: Effective curriculum leadership is a central responsibility of educational leaders seeking to improve teaching and learning outcomes. This paper examines how educational leaders become effective curriculum leaders by integrating this key component into their administrative leadership practice. Educational leaders in the 21st century primarily focus on meeting state and federal accountability mandates as their main responsibility as an administrative leader. These high-stakes accountability systems, based on standardized testing, significantly increase stress and pressure on educational leaders. Therefore, this impacts his/her leadership practice in the school to improve the teaching and learning process. Administrative leadership in schools must include curriculum leadership as a key component of his/her practice. Effective curriculum leaders possess a deep understanding of curriculum design, alignment, and assessment, as well as the ability to support teachers through coaching, collaboration, and professional development. This knowledge will help the educational leader become an effective instructional leader. This writer seeks to explain why educational leaders must include curriculum leadership as part of his/her administrative duties and obligations. The evidence shows that curriculum leadership is a key role for school administrators. Curriculum leaders can promote effective practices as instructional leaders and reduce academic achievement gaps.

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Additionally, the development of relational trust and a positive school culture enable leaders to influence instructional practices and sustain continuous improvement. Ultimately, effective curriculum leadership emerges from a combination of theoretical knowledge, practical skills, and reflective practice. Educational leaders who prioritize collaboration, equity, and evidence-based decision-making are better positioned to implement high-quality curricula and enhance student achievement.

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INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to answer the question “Why educational leaders (school principals) do not include curriculum leadership as a key component of his/her administrative leadership responsibilities? This writer contends that administrative leadership duties go beyond personnel, budget, physical plant, or implementing school policy. The school principal must exert expertise in the different dimensions of educational leadership: instructional leadership, community leadership, strategic leadership, ethical and political leadership, and administrative leadership. Ironically, this writer postulates that most educational leaders do not consider curriculum leadership as part of his/her administrative duties.

It is clear that with the inclusion of curriculum leadership as an administrative duty, the principal can effectively exert his/her role as an instructional leader. Educational leaders cannot be effective instructional leaders, unless these leaders are good curriculum leaders. This writer defines curriculum leadership as the process of demonstrating expertise in activities associated with the planning, designing, implementation, and evaluation of the school curriculum. This curriculum leader must inspire and motivate teachers to implement the written, taught, and learned curriculums effectively to impact student academic achievement.

Unfortunately, the literature on the role of the principal as a curriculum leader is surprisingly limited with very few sources. Most experts who have examined school leadership have focused unduly on the principal as a leader of instruction, ignoring the role of

curriculum leadership (Glatthorn, Jailall, Jailall, 2017). This writer suggests that becoming a curriculum leader is the most important role of the administrative leader in order to raise student academic achievement.

BACKGROUND

When the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) federal education legislation was signed into law in 2002, it dramatically changed the educational landscape. It transformed the nature of school leadership and accountability and redefined school leaders' roles, responsibilities, and authority. NCLB institutionalized the notion that school leaders in the twenty-first century must be strong curriculum and instructional leaders whose work must produce high-achieving students who are college or career ready as a major goal of the education system (Glatthorn, A., Jailall, J., & Jailall, J., 2017). NCLB spurred the redirection of leaders from management of schools to the leadership of schools, including a focus on curriculum and instruction (Murphy, 2002). A school leader's role as a curriculum leader has become more and more important because of the accountability movement, since No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, and budget cuts at all levels (Finkel, 2012).

Currently, Every Students Success Act (ESSA), ensures that the focus remains on principals as curriculum leaders. At the same time, it will make some changes in accountability, giving states more responsibility for deciding how to measure school progress and how to fix low-performing schools. As long as high standards, strong accountability, and reduction of achievement gaps among subgroups drive the education agenda, the role of the school principals as curriculum leaders will remain in the spotlight (Glatthorn, A., Jailall, J., & Jailall, J., 2017).

School principals need to check that the school curricula cover the contents of the mandated statewide testing at all school levels (Ediger, 2014). Wiles (2009) claimed that school curriculum leadership is shared among principals, assistant principals for curriculum, team leaders, department heads and lead teachers. Weber (2010) listed five reasons for the need of curriculum leadership at school: Curriculum leadership provides opportunities: 1) to clarify curriculum issues; 2) to develop and empower future leaders; 3) to support continuous improvement; 4) to establish learning goals; 5) to improve alignment.

Van Deventer and Kruger (2003) assert that school principals as internal change agents are expected to facilitate and implement curriculum changes mandated by education authorities. Huber and West (2002) posit that a principal is most often cited as the key person in school development, either blocking or promoting curriculum changes, acting as change agent, and overseeing the processes of curriculum growth and renewal. School principals play a significant role in developing, organizing, implementing, and evaluating school curricula to ensure that the curricula meet all the students' needs. School curricula need to be challenging enough to engage students in the learning process and motivate them to meet high levels of academic achievement (Roelke, 1996).

According to Leithwood & Riehl (2003), the idea that the principal provides a nexus of innovative ideas, resource acquisition, and empowerment continues to hold a prominent place in policy and practice. Curriculum leadership, then, is also about cultivating relationships with those stakeholders who can contribute to the school climate and encourage learning (Gabriel & Farmer, 2005; Hoerr, 2005). Effective leaders are visible on a regular basis; they communicate their vision and goals in a clear and timely manner; they listen to staff members and are mindful of their needs, wants, and concerns (Gabriel & Farmer, 2005).

Curriculum leadership is a significant driver in improving academic achievement. The curriculum leader is directly involved in the design and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices; it is his/her knowledge of instructional strategies, current research, and application of student achievement data that gives shape to instructional programming (Copland & Knapp, 2005). Sanders and Sullins (2006) contend that curriculum leadership demands a broad set of transformational skills that, used interchangeably, support, challenge, and influence staff. Marzano, Walters, and McNutty (2005) found that principal leadership is significantly correlated with student achievement. To be effective, curriculum leaders need to facilitate professional dialogue, distribute or share responsibility, value the input of their colleagues, make strategic use of staff members' special skills, and form leadership teams to build strong support systems (Donaldson, 2007; Marzano, 2003; Marzano et al., 2005).

Challenges

Several problems confront school administrators interested in performing this role. The first is lack of clarity about its nature. Principals seem to encounter problems when trying to understand definitely what being a curriculum leader means. Principals have expressed uncertainty about the specific nature of curriculum leadership, often suggesting that curriculum is a district concern, not a school issue. Principals do not seem to be receiving much help from the experts in understanding curriculum leadership. Principals have difficulty finding the time to become curriculum leaders (Glatthorn, A., Jailall, J., & Jailall, J., 2017). Potential factors that hinder instructional leadership include role variety, lack of adequate expertise in curriculum and instruction, professional norms, expectations of the education system (Hallinger, 2012; Murphy et al., 2016; Wanzare and Da Costa, 2001),

Hattie (2008) identified the quality of the curriculum as one of the ten factors influencing student achievement. The best teaching methods, when used to deliver poor content, result only in a great deal of mislearning. Abundant evidence suggests that the principal plays a key role in determining the overall effectiveness of the school. Teachers can work with the principal collaboratively in accomplishing vital leadership functions. Hord and Hall (2015) conclude that strong leadership on the part of the principal plays a key role in determining the extent of curriculum leadership.

Skills

Curriculum leadership involves a careful balance of instructional and administrative leadership responsibilities. The role is multi-faceted and complex, embedded not only in the formal trappings of authority (as supervisor of faculty) but also in functions that cut across a number of roles affecting student achievement, including professional development, professional accountability, and curriculum development (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995).

According to Wiles (2008), the most effective curriculum leaders embrace the dynamic role and go beyond the expected responsibilities. They establish new directions, align people and resources, motivate participants, and aid school improvement processes (Wiles, 2008). In this sense, strong leadership at the curriculum management level is also inclusive, embracing work that is carried out collaboratively with individuals at different levels of the system and with different purviews over instruction (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Effective curriculum leaders are proactive and analytical, conscious of emerging issues and concerns related to personnel. They pinpoint problems through effective questioning, monitor the effectiveness of school practices, and prioritize and coordinate plans of action with staff members (Gabriel & Farmer, 2005; Marzano et al., 2005). Strong curriculum leaders take responsibility for their own behaviors and distribute leadership responsibilities to colleagues who

embrace the vision and goals of the school or district (Blase & Blase, 2000). In so doing, educational leaders create the conditions that maximize the actions of all stakeholders by mobilizing effort along multiple pathways that lead to student, professional, or system learning

(Copland & Knapp, 2005).

Effective curriculum leaders must have a keen ability to monitor the progress of instruction and analyze achievement data to determine ongoing solutions to issues related to academic achievement (Danielson, 2006). They focus on specific, high-yield instructional practices; use assessment data to improve student learning and teacher practices; and remain vigilant about adapting programming to changes in demographics, legislation, and/or research trends (Fullan, 2009; Gabriel & Farmer, 2009). They also strive for continuous self-improvement in the field, continually adding to their knowledge base of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices to ensure school programming is aligned to the latest educational research so that the school or district's instructional goals are within reach (King, 2002).

Curriculum leaders are arguably the most powerful influence on the performance of school faculty (Donaldson, 2007; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Effective curriculum leaders are focused on enhancing teacher quality at all stages of the staff development process, including hiring, mentoring, evaluating, et al., and do so by establishing clear criteria for professional growth and by applying differentiated approaches to the support and assessment of faculty (Danielson, 2001). The effective curriculum leader also provides extensive staff development, regular opportunities for teacher collaboration, and encourages the formation of professional learning communities that lead to transformation from within (Copland & Knapp, 2005; Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001; Patterson & Patterson, 2004). They work alongside teachers in adult learning activities such as study groups, school visits, and examinations of students. They

also model exemplary practices for others, helping faculty and staff develop needed pedagogical skills and understanding (Ackerman & MacKenzie, 2006; King, 2002).

In order to foster instructional improvement, curriculum leaders must efficiently manage relevant school operations, including staffing, budgeting, and compliance matters. Curriculum leaders monitor organizational performance, modify organizational structures that may undermine effective practice, and provide systems thinking to addressing concerns that connect administrative procedures to student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004). Strong managerial skills allow all the other dimensions of schooling to aid the improvement of student learning (Knapp et al., 2003).

To be an effective curriculum leader, a school principal needs to be knowledgeable about past and present curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (Glasper, 2018). Glatthorn and Jailall (2009) also addressed that "strong, intentional leadership in curriculum development is a necessity for strong instructional leadership" (p. 188). Other daily initiatives a school principal could take to be an effective curriculum leader include: learning from other school leaders; making time for classroom observations; and creating open dialogues with parents and staff (Adkins-Sharif, 2019).

A principal as school curriculum leader will exert strong leadership to support the school dynamic curriculum by helping staff and any curriculum workers contemplate and select a curriculum design to suit the student needs (Dufour, 2002; Ediger, 2014; Garner & Bradley, 1991; Lee & Dimmock, 1999). To serve as an effective curriculum leader, Shellard (2002) has pinpointed that a principal must have skills in observation, analysis, improvement of teaching, learning theory, and approaches to instructional planning. Their curriculum leadership skills could be improved by professional development (Boston et al. 2017; Townsend et al. 2018).

Cole-Foppe (2016) studied the teachers' perceptions of school principals as curriculum leaders.

The findings of the study indicated that teachers perceived principals to have devoted insufficient amount of time in school curriculum matters. The school principals in the study also concurred that they could have done more in their role as curriculum leaders. Cardno (2003), identified the factors that militate against the principals' curriculum leadership role were those of high administrative workloads and external agency demands. Alsaleh's study (2019) also disclosed that school principals' curriculum leadership role was hampered by centralized government structure.

However, Kleidon (2018) and Ng et al. (2015) found that principals felt that they were not well prepared to serve their roles as curriculum and instructional leaders even though they had received some training. In the study of Naidoo and Petersen (2015), principals mainly interpreted their roles and functions as school principals to be purely managerial. The findings of Sasson's study (2016) indicated school principals were only moderately involved in instructional leadership activities. Shaked (2019) also reported that school principals demonstrated limited direct involvement in curriculum leadership.

CONCLUSION

I posed the question "Why educational leaders (school principals) do not include curriculum leadership as a key component of his/her administrative leadership responsibilities?"

The evidence shows that curriculum leadership is a key role for school administrators.

It can be suggested that educational leaders do not understand the importance of their role as curriculum leaders. The inclusion of flexible Title II-A funds for school leadership in Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA) signaled a policy shift toward recognizing the importance of effective leadership, second only to classroom teaching, in student success (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). School leaders' focus on teaching and learning provides the greatest influence on student learning (Robinson, 2008). This focus, often referred to as instructional leadership, includes a variety of leadership tasks such as defining the school's mission, managing the instructional program, and promoting a positive learning climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985).

Educational leaders need to include curriculum leadership as part of their administrative leadership obligations. This will empower educational leaders to effectively embrace their role as an instructional leader. A great curriculum leader can promote effective practices as instructional leaders. Despite the importance of instructional leadership, research suggests principals spend little time directly engaged in the improvement of instruction (Shaked, 2018). I strongly recommend educational leaders to embrace their role as curriculum leaders as part of their administrative duties.

The leadership of a principal is crucial for school effectiveness, second only to the role of the classroom teacher and the quality of the curriculum (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004). The role of the school principal is positioned to reshape a school's culture (Deal & Peterson, 1998) and to increase achievement. Research suggests that improving student learning in schools depends on strong leadership, as evidenced by findings that school leadership through interactions with teachers accounts for one quarter to one third of the total school effect on student achievement (Hallinger & Heck, 1996).

To help educational leaders to become curriculum leaders, I recommend school leaders to develop professional learning communities (PLC) in their schools as part of their curriculum leadership role. This will help school leaders impact directly on the teaching and learning process for the entire school community. The PLC concept represents an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve (DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2010). Creating a PLC will always require a collective effort, but the fate of that effort will depend to a large extent on the leadership capabilities of the principal. Highly effective principal can have a "dramatic impact on overall student achievement in a school" (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 10), and principals play the key role in creating the conditions that determine whether the PLC process will flourish or perish.

One structure for meaningful collaboration is the community of practice or professional learning community. Members of school communities of practice collaborate with the goal of supporting their work toward instructional improvement. As the name implies, communities of practice examine their own practice: they analyze data related to their work to inform their planning and decisions; the dialogue results in learning that builds coherence and capacity for change.

As a regular and natural part of their ongoing operations, communities of practice in schools that embrace continuous improvement scrutinize their practices explicitly, collectively, and publicly. The school culture supports a willingness to question practice and learn from errors – a willingness to open and explore the gap between the ideal and the actual (Wiggins, p.6) The process recognizes the ideal, the desired outcome, and continues with the collection and examination of data to reveal the actual. The PLC process provides a vehicle for focused interactions between principals and teachers. The PLC process also provides a vehicle that allows principals to execute a number of the responsibilities of school leadership in an integrated and focused fashion.

The key effectiveness of the process is using it to inform principals and improve their professional practice rather than ranking them. One of the biggest impediments to improving schools is the unmanageable number of initiatives pursued by the central office (DE) and the total lack of coherence among those initiatives. The transformation from traditional schools to PLCs does not require the pursuit of multiple initiatives simultaneously, but it does demand fierce resolve, tremendous passion, and relentless persistence. Rallis & MacMullen (2000) outline a set of activities that make up the inquiry cycle:

- identifying the problem of practice
- establishing outcomes for which the school accepts responsibility
- articulating the theory of action
- identifying important questions concerning student learning
- taking action
- evaluating (conducting mindful analyses of the data in light of the desired outcomes, and interpreting information in light of the school's purpose)

-reflecting and starting cycle again

Use of the cycle, which begins and ends with questions of evaluation, is crucial to improving practice. The cycle repeatedly frames and examines problems of practice, chooses actions to address the problems, assesses effects of these actions, and then reframes the original problems of practice. This approach is rooted in the core assumption that student outcomes are improved through collaborative, inquiry-based processes around teaching and learning, and that leaders facilitate these processes. The inquiry action process entails explicating what actions are taken, why, and to what effect – and then learning from and acting on that knowledge. The framework must be lived; an inquiry-minded, action-oriented principal believes, knows, shares, and acts the framework within the school's communities of practice. The collaborative, inquiry-action cycle is grounded in the belief that successful leaders for instructional improvement cannot operate in isolation.

Because the work of teams should advance the fundamental purpose of the school high levels of learning for all students – the goals set by each team should be SMART goals.

Therefore, effective SMART goals for teams will focus on concrete evidence of student learning. Achieving the goal may require a multitude of activities, projects, and tasks, but they represent the means to an end, not the end itself. PLCs are fixed on students acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions vital to their success, and therefore SMART goals established by collaborative teams must call both for gathering evidence of student learning and acting on that evidence. A skillful administrator/manager can assign people into meaningful teams, create schedules that provide them with time to collaborate, and guide teams in creating acceptable norms and SMART goals. It takes effective leaders, however, to help teams clarify their purpose and priorities, focus on the right work, and continuously improve their effectiveness.

The PLC work will center on four critical questions:

1-what is it we want our students to learn?

2-how will we know if our students are learning?

3-how will we respond when students do not learn?

4-how will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient?

It is not unusual to see a huge gap between the intended curriculum established by the state or district and the implemented curriculum taught when teachers close their classroom doors (Marzano, 2003).

In a professional learning community, educators are committed to helping students acquire the same essential knowledge and skills regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned.

A guaranteed and viable curriculum is a basic tenet of the PLC process. When structured in specific ways, a guaranteed and viable curriculum can greatly enhance the design of SMART goals. Myriad day-to-day activities take the principals away from the important work of instructional leadership because these activities need administrative detail and attention to ensure the overall effective management of the school. The principal must be able to promote continuous learning and development of teachers who are challenged to teach students to higher standards of accountability.

As the instructional leader of the school, the principal is the “teacher of teachers” In this capacity, it is the duty of the principal to provide a program in which instructional supervision, professional development, teacher evaluation, and any other activities (e.g. peer coaching and mentoring) are unified in purpose and intent – teacher learning, growth, and the development – to ensure that students get the absolute best from their teachers.

This writer can conclude based on the literature that administrative leadership duties go beyond personnel, budget, physical plant, or implementing school policy. The school principal must consider curriculum leadership as part of his/her administrative duties. This inclusion of curriculum leadership will help educational leaders impact student academic achievement and promote a school culture and climate of collaboration and improvement of the teaching and learning process as a true learning community.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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