

The Principal's Role: "Less" is Prerequisite for "More"

More than a year ago Lynn Olson (2000) reported that eleven school leadership improvement initiatives were beginning. The policy makers addressing our current school leadership crisis include state legislatures, governors, business leaders, foundations, universities, professional educational administration organizations, school districts, and the Interstate School Leaders' Licensure Consortium. I welcomed this news until last month, when I read reports from two of these task forces.

In the preface to their interim report, *Leadership for Student Learning: Reinventing the Principals*, (School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative, 2000) the authors write,

Being an effective building manager used to be good enough. . . And principals still need to do all those things.
But now they must do more. (p. 2)

Less than one page later, the same writers bemoan the fact that the pool of qualified principal candidates is shrinking:

Principals increasingly say the job is simply not "doable." They are retiring younger and younger. At the same time, school districts report a shortage of qualified candidates for the job. (p. 3)

Similarly, *Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn* (National Staff Development Council, 2000) proposes that:

Not only must school leaders perform what Richard Elmore (2000) calls the "ritualistic tasks of organizing, budgeting, managing, and dealing with disruptions inside and outside the system," today's instructional leaders must be able to coach, teach, and develop the teachers in their schools. They must be steeped in curriculum, instruction and assessment in order to supervise a continuous improvement process that measures progress in raising student performance. They must build learning communities within their schools and engage the broader school community in creating and achieving a compelling vision for their schools. (p. 1)

Evidently we have embarked on another round of exhorting principals to do more, be more, and be held accountable for more. As Yogi Berra would say, "It's *deja vu* all over again." In so far as these reports call for principals to become instructional leaders, without also making policy recommendations that narrow the job description and reduce the managerial expectations held for principals, they are a disservice to principals and the prospects for improved school leadership. It is time we stop insisting that principals be both super leaders and super managers.

The excerpts, above, and the tone of these reports should lead all of us to ask, "Why are policy makers continuing to define the principal's role in such a way that few people

want the job (Hurley, 1994), and even fewer can be effective in it?” Do they really think it is possible for over-worked principals to do more?

The purpose of this essay is to argue that we must break with our history of imploring principals to become “Superleader.” Instead, we must move in the opposite direction. A prerequisite to improved school leadership is for policy makers to define the principal’s role more narrowly, not more broadly. Accompanying this change in direction must be a strong effort to reduce the expectations that have grown up around the principal’s role – expectations of teachers, coaches, advisors, parents, superintendents and school board members.

My argument starts with a review of recent efforts to improve school leadership. You will not find this history elsewhere. The only way you would hear from others who share my perspective is if you talked with the principals who are too busy to talk with you. Therefore, I argue on their behalf.

A Brief History

In the early 1980s we studied effective schools. One of the findings of these studies was that an effective principal is a key to school effectiveness. This led scholars to ask, “What makes an effective principal?” The answer to this question gave us the effective principals literature, which lionized a few principals, whose beliefs and behaviors were presented as models of school leader effectiveness. The implication was that these models and descriptions could be used by superintendents who hire and evaluate principals, and by professors as they revise principal preparation programs.

All these “portraits” (Lightfoot, 1983) suggested that instructional leadership is the primary concern of effective principals. Nowhere did we read that effective principals were those who maintained and stabilized their schools, even though this is often the principal's primary job. In fact, many of the so-called “effective instructional leaders” reported that they could not perform their leadership duties without the stellar managerial work of a colleague, usually an assistant principal.

Recently, a few scholars have broken with the assumption that principals ought to be the central school leadership figure. Smith and Ellett (2000) criticized me for offering a “principal as symphony conductor” metaphor to guide the preparation of principals. They prefer school leadership metaphors that promote leadership across all levels of the school. Similarly, Katzenmeyer and Moller (1996) argue that teachers ought to share instructional leadership responsibilities in their schools.

This is not the place to discuss whether a multiple school leader perspective is better or not because it is clear that, as policy makers search for improved school leadership, they are looking in the principal's office. Susan Traiman, director of education initiatives at the Washington-based Business Roundtable, is quoted as saying, “Virtually everyone I talk to is focused on leadership at the school level in terms of the principal, and at the district level in terms of the superintendent” (Olson, 2001).

Apparently, we are examining the principal's role in a way we have not done since the 1980s, when the effective principals literature expanded the principal's role to include an emphasis on instructional leadership. Unfortunately, we failed to understand that accomplishing this would require a significant reduction in managerial expectations. Had we realized this, maybe more principals would be their schools' instructional leaders, today. Instead, twenty years later, we are still facing a school leadership crisis.

I conclude this historical review by describing the successful implementation of three American public school programs over the last thirty years. Taken alone, each program has significantly expanded the principal's role. Taken together, they represent a piece of the patchwork of managerial responsibilities that continue to dominate principals' work.

First, since 1974, special education programming has become a large part of public school life. These programs serve approximately ten percent of public school students, and special education regulations require the principal's involvement in several processes, including the diagnosis and programming of exceptional students. Second, the establishment of girls' sports teams has doubled athletic programming in middle and high schools. Third, the explosion of school safety concerns means that principals must develop and enforce new sets of school security policies. These are just three of the public school programs that have increased principals' managerial responsibilities. With the successful implementation of each, principals must hire and supervise more people, make and enforce new policies, and provide support for the program and all the auxiliary activities – special parent groups, fund raising drives, etc.

While we have expanded programming, have we reduced the principal's role in other areas? Have we adequately increased the resources needed by principals to provide the leadership and support expected by the public? My experience, and the experience of principal colleagues is that we have not. Instead, in the face of ever-expanding responsibilities, policy makers are renewing exhortations that principals do even more.

Maybe we have reason to be hopeful because one of the eleven initiatives identified by Olson (2000) is the State Action for Education Leadership Project, sponsored by the Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation (Olson, 2001). States will compete for \$50,000 planning grants, and up to fifteen states will be awarded \$250,000 grants "to revamp their laws, policies, and practices for educational leadership" (Olson, 2001, p. 17). Of their six grant awarding criteria, the fifth is, "Re-thinking the conditions under which school leaders work"(Olson, 2001, p. 17). Unfortunately, the other five criteria are based on the premise that principals need to do more at the same time they need to become better leaders, so my hope is tempered. If the State Action for Education Leadership Project establishes its fifth criterion as a prerequisite for other efforts to improve school leadership, the funds provided by the Wallace-Reader's Digest Foundation can provide much needed resources to improve school leadership.

A Strong Warning

My point may seem simple or obvious; therefore, I offer a strong warning to all who agree with me. It will be difficult to convince policy makers to change direction because influential people in our own field continue to promote the premise that principals ought to do more, be more, lead more. If history repeats itself, we will find some of our greatest opponents inside our field, not outside it.

First, much of what is written by the experts in our field is a disservice to principals and the prospects for improved school leadership. Even though we know that principals' work is demanding, we ignore this as we repeatedly suggest that principals must possess an increasingly larger range of skills and knowledge and be responsible for everything in the school (Thomson, 1993).

Second, many school administrators are proud of their ability to confront an enormous range of challenges and spend long hours working in their schools. I have known some whose pride borders on a martyr complex that does little to foster realistic school leadership policies and expectations.

Third, our own professional organizations have promoted the "principals must do more approach" for many years. At a regional professional conference eight years ago, while we were imploring principals to behave like those in the "effective principal" portraits, I asked a National Association of Secondary Schools Principals (NASSP) executive what his organization was doing to improve principals' work conditions. He responded that the effective principal findings informed us of what it takes to be effective, and the NASSP stood for preparing principals to be like those in the literature.

Fourth, educational administration professors have not adequately described the contradiction in today's principal preparation programs. Most aspiring administrators are practicing teachers. They know parents and teachers expect principals to maintain and stabilize schools, not lead them. When these teachers attend graduate classes at night, they compare what they are taught about "leading" to their principals' work, which is dominated by "managing." Their school experience has taught them that leadership from the principal is rare. Only after we provide working principals with additional resources and fewer demands will we be able to effectively prepare aspiring principals for school leadership?

In their suggestions for revamping principal preparation programs, the authors of *Reinventing the Principalship* (School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative, 2000) demonstrate an ignorance of this point. They begin by emphasizing that "the purpose of the programs is to generate strong leaders for student learning" (School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative, 2000, p. 10). Later, they recommend: "Closer partnerships between principal training programs and local school systems are also needed to link training with the hands-on experience in leadership for student learning and collaborations with effective principals" (School Leadership for the 21st Century

Initiative, 2000, p. 10). They fail to see that linking principal preparation to the school site is likely to decrease, not increase a focus on instructional leadership.

Evidence to support my description of the managerial nature of principals' work is found in their very next sentence. "Overwhelming majorities of elementary school principals say the factors that add the greatest value to their success are on-the-job experience as principal (97 percent) and experience as a teacher (89 percent)" (School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative, 2000, p. 10). This finding suggests two things. First, principals learn most of their role on-the-job because most of their work is managerial. Second, they learn little of practical value in pre-service and in-service programs because these programs focus on leadership.

Those of us who teach educational leadership programs experience this conflict each semester. Our graduate students consistently ask us to teach them to skillfully prepare budgets, schedule busses, keep the building attractive, and stay out of the newspaper. Improving pre-service and in-service programs for principals will not improve school leadership until we first eliminate the managerial responsibilities and expectations principals face daily in their schools.

To put my argument in another perspective, the Interstate School Leaders Consortium has established six standards (School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative, 2000, p. 11), and I am proposing that we eliminate the third one -- "ensuring management of the organization, operations and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment." This is revolutionary, but it is a prerequisite to improving school leadership. We don't expect CEOs of hospitals to be responsible for all these functions. Industrial plant managers are not held responsible for the attractiveness of their facilities. We must re-think our managerial expectations for principals if we expect them to become more effective leaders.

It will be difficult to convince policy makers to question the assumption that principals can do more, be more, lead more because our profession has rarely retreated from new challenges. Nevertheless, the only hope for improving school leadership is for all educators to insist that states increase the resources devoted to leading schools and to define the principals' role more narrowly, not more broadly. Only then will aspiring school leaders seek the principalship. Only then will the principal role be a perfect fit for those who possess leadership potential and who are too wise to believe they can be "Superleader." On the other hand, if we don't change our assumptions about the principal's role, our current focus on the principalship (Olson, 2000) will become another lost opportunity.

References

- Hurley, J. C. (1994). *Become a principal? You must be kidding!* International Journal of Educational Reform, Vol. 3. No. 2/April, pp. 165-173. Lancaster, PA: Technomic Publishing Co.
- Katzenmeyer, M. and Moller, G. (1996) *Awakening the sleeping giant*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.
- Lightfoot, S. L. (1983). *The good high school: Portraits of culture and character*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- National Staff Development Council. (2000). *Learning to Lead, Leading to Learn*. Oxford, OH.
- Olson, L. (2000). *Policy focus converges on leadership*. Education Week on the Web, January 12, 2000.
- Olson, L. (2001). *Grant program aims to nurture school leaders*. Education Week, Vol. XX. No. 16, January 10.
- School Leadership for the 21st Century Initiative. (2000). *Leadership for Student Learning: Reinventing the Principalship*. Institute for Educational Leadership: Washington, DC.
- Smith, W. and Ellett, C. (2000). *Timely discussions, but wrong metaphor for school leadership: A response to Brent and Hurley*. Teaching in Educational Administration Newsletter. Division A, American Educational Research Association. Vol. 7. No. 1, April.
- Thomson, S. (1993). Editor, *Principals for our changing schools: Knowledge and skill base*. Fairfax, VA: National Policy Board for Educational Administration.