

The Principal as School Leader, Curriculum Leader

By Edward Pajak and Lewis McAfee

The responsibilities of principals as leaders of their schools and as leaders of curriculum are inseparable. Both functions are subsets of the broader responsibility to be an educational leader.

During the 1980s, principals were proclaimed to be the undisputed educational leaders of their schools. Considerable discussion ensued in the literature over whether this leadership was derived more from an individual's expertise or from managerial skills. Others sought to distinguish school leadership from instructional leadership, institutional leadership from instructional leadership, and management from instructional leadership, viewing each as important but separate functions.

Literature concerning the responsibilities of principals in regard to curriculum, however, remains quite limited. The principal's role as curriculum leader is rarely mentioned, despite its obvious relevance to instruction and student learning. Even outstanding principals place somewhat less importance on their involvement with curriculum, we have found,

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than on other aspects of their jobs.

We believe that high school principals can and should be curriculum leaders, although they cannot be realistically expected to possess a high degree of expertise in all subject areas. We further believe that principals can function most effectively as curriculum generalists and need a broad knowledge of curriculum and its organization, along with certain relevant attitudes and skills.

Secondary school principals can provide curriculum leadership, we propose, through decisions about staffing, supervision, scheduling, and the allocation of resources that facilitate the enactment of curriculum at the department level. Finally, we believe that the way in which schools are governed may be the most important component of the secondary school curriculum. Principals should take seriously their duty to be *educational* leaders who model and promote values and behavior that are consistent with life in a democracy.

What Principals Are Not

Oliva (1989) correctly points out that expertise in at least one academic area will enhance a principal's credibility with teachers. Most authors recognize, however, that principals cannot be experts in all curriculum content fields.

Acheson and Smith (1986) use the analogy of a baseball manager's knowledge of pitching and batting to explain the relationship of principals to the curriculum. Although

baseball managers need not have expert knowledge of pitching, fielding, and batting, because they can rely on coaches who are specialists in these areas, managers must have at least some understanding of these elements of the game in order to survive.

The same holds true for principals. They need not be experts in every field of study, but secondary school principals do need a broad knowledge of various academic disciplines.

Traditionally, decisions about curriculum content have been made by curriculum directors at the district office or by officials at the state department of education, usually with some measure of involvement from teachers. This traditional pattern seems to be changing, but the prospect of principals becoming more formally involved in curriculum development is uncertain. One current trend suggests a decentralization of curriculum, with teachers empowered at the school level to make decisions about what students are expected to learn. A competing trend suggests even greater centralization, however, with curriculum and standardized tests being developed at the national level. Obviously, only in the former case are principals likely to gain a stronger voice in matters of academic curriculum content.

What Principals Need To Know

Involvement of principals in curriculum development activities is

difficult because of competing demands on their time. In addition, professional preparation programs for principals typically include only a brief introduction to curriculum. Nevertheless, principals are important because they are in a position to recognize the implications of decisions for other programs or elements of the school's operation.

The literature suggests that principals should have an understanding, as curriculum generalists, of how the curriculum is organized and how learning activities and materials are related to instructional outcomes (Eberts and Stone, 1985; Finn, 1983; Doll, 1992). In terms of curriculum organization, principals should understand the scope and sequence of the curriculum, as well as curriculum design and development (Batsis, 1987; Tanner and Tanner, 1987). Principals should also be skilled at guiding and coordinating local plans and monitoring the curriculum to achieve the goals of the school (Jackson, Logsdon, and Taylor, 1983; Manasse, 1985; Doll, 1992). Of course, such processes are likely to be shaped by forces within the institutional and community contexts (Dwyer and Smith, 1987).

Consistent with the literature, a recent national survey (McAfee, 1990) determined that curriculum was viewed as very important to the performance of their jobs by 298 outstanding principals. However, curriculum was rated as somewhat less important than other job responsibilities, including communication, classroom observation and confer-

ences, overseeing the instructional program, staff development, and service to teachers.

In this same study, outstanding principals agreed that certain knowledge, attitudes, and skills related to curriculum were relevant to the effective performance of their jobs with respect to curriculum. These are listed in Figure 1.

In summary, the literature and our own research suggest that successful principals understand how the curriculum is organized and how learning activities, material, and instructional outcomes fit into that organization. As curriculum generalists, successful principals also shape strategies and coordinate activities to improve the curricular program and monitor the program to ensure that desired outcomes are being attained.

How Principals Can Facilitate Curriculum Enactment

If curriculum is defined as what gets taught, and decisions concerning what gets taught are made by others, then how can principals exert leadership with respect to curriculum? We believe that the answer lies partly in the decisions that principals make concerning routine activities such as staffing, supervision of instruction, scheduling, and selection of materials. These represent the who, how, when and where, and with what issues of school administration.

- *Who.* Principals exert a potentially tremendous influence on the curricu-

Figure 1
Knowledge, Attitudes, and Skills Viewed as Important to the
Principal's Role with Regard to Curriculum

Knowledge of:

- * Child and adult development
- * Curriculum development process
- * Curriculum theory
- * Curriculum models
- * Curriculum research
- * Learning psychology
- * Subject area content
- * Philosophical, sociological, and historical foundations

Attitudes

- * Willingness to address curricular problems
- * Commitment to improving curriculum at the school level
- * Belief in the importance of curriculum
- * Commitment to teacher involvement in curriculum development
- * Belief that curriculum development is an ongoing process
- * Commitment to a balance among content areas
- * Encouragement of teacher awareness of various curricula
- * Sensitivity to the "hidden" curriculum
- * Commitment to improving curriculum at the district level

Skills

- * Encouraging teacher ownership of the curriculum
- * Setting goals and objectives
- * Relating staff development efforts to curriculum needs
- * Monitoring curriculum implementation
- * Articulating curriculum goals and priorities
- * Applying principles of child development
- * Ensuring continuity at different grade levels
- * Assisting teachers in understanding curriculum materials
- * Establishing reasonable time frames for curriculum implementation
- * Establishing curriculum planning teams
- * Limiting curriculum changes to those that are realistic and substantive
- * Integrating content
- * Attending to scope and sequence
- * Piloting curriculum projects
- * Coordinating textbook adoption
- * Adapting and revising curriculum
- * Developing curriculum materials
- * Designing curriculum

lum through the selection, supervision, and training of teachers. The quality of the curriculum is influenced whenever a decision is made about hiring a new teacher. Principals should take time to look beyond whether an applicant simply has the right certification and can direct an extracurricular activity. A teacher's contribution to the curriculum should be of primary concern. Careful consideration should be given to strengths in content and personal skills whenever teachers are hired or assigned.

Principals can also exercise curriculum leadership by letting teachers know that they take the curriculum seriously.

Most high schools are structured into academic departments, with the department chair serving as the resident subject matter expert. Recent research suggests that secondary school departments are key units in determining instructional program excellence. The curriculum is mediated at the department level through decisions about course offerings, faculty assignments, articulation between sections, and tracking of students (Siskin, 1991). Principals can encourage department chairs to stress the importance of curriculum and support them in making it the central focus of department meetings. In other words, principals can rely on academic department chairs much as baseball managers use their coaches.

• *How.* Recent work by Shulman (1987; 1989) and others notes that

supervision and evaluation of instruction has focused in recent years on general principles of teacher effectiveness, while assuming that differences among content areas are unimportant. The central question that has driven much research on teaching and supervision has been "What do good and/or effective teachers do?" Shulman suggests that perhaps more important questions are "What do good teachers of biology know?" or, "What do good teachers of literature know?"

Shulman proposes that both generic principles and content-specific principles of teaching are possible and desirable. An expert teacher, he suggests, anticipates the preconceptions and misconceptions that students typically bring with them to school and knows the types of conceptual representations that work best for communicating content. Being an expert teacher involves more than simply knowing content. It requires knowing how students make sense of content and communicating information to them in a way that students can understand.

If Shulman is correct, then movement away from a strictly generic conception of teaching may be necessary. Sensitivity to content-specific principles would require that principals view teaching within the context and through the internal logic of the particular subject matter being taught when assessing the quality of a teacher's performance.

A very pertinent question for principals raised by Shulman's work

is whether it is possible for someone who is not well-grounded in a subject area to effectively supervise a teacher who is expert in that area. Most secondary school principals are unlikely to be sufficiently expert in all content areas to provide content-specific supervision. It would seem that principals should call on central office subject specialists or draw on the talents of their own faculty for the necessary expertise. The latter option would require greater reliance on academic department chairs or teams of teachers organized around subject area or grade level expertise.

- *When and Where.* Scheduling decisions should also be made with the curriculum foremost in mind. The amount of time that students spend on academic study should be maximized for each daily, weekly, and annual cycle. For example, time set aside for testing and time allowed for changing classes between periods may seriously cut into students' learning opportunities.

Schedules of students involved in "pull-out" programs should be carefully planned and coordinated to ensure adequate exposure to the full range of curriculum offerings. In such cases, principals may need to balance the demands of special and regular education teachers to ensure that student achievement is not undermined by constant interruption.

Both intuition and research support the notion that "time on task" is important for students' academic

success. Principals can increase the opportunities that students have to learn by protecting classrooms from external interruptions. Similarly, principals can increase the time that teachers have to think about and prepare for teaching by finding ways to minimize teachers' noninstructional duty assignments. Principals can also buffer the curricular program from detrimental political and ideological pressures. In this last instance, what does not influence the curriculum may be as important as what does.

The condition and availability of classrooms, laboratories, and gymnasiums can have a substantial effect on the enactment of curriculum. Plans concerning the design and use of the physical plant should include input from teachers to ensure that facilities meet curriculum needs. Arrangements of physical space and time within a school can promote norms of collegiality and experimentation by providing opportunities for teachers to talk and collaborate.

- *With What.* Principals can influence the curriculum by mobilizing resources and distributing them judiciously. The routine task of selecting textbooks may largely determine the pace of instruction and the achievement of students. It should go without saying that learning materials such as maps, lab equipment, textbooks, and computers should be purchased with the curriculum in mind. Skillful management of the instructional budget,

with opportunities provided for faculty input into budgetary priorities, can help ensure that materials selected are appropriate for the curriculum.

The demands of instruction and the structure of schools constrain teachers from establishing and maintaining contacts external to their classrooms. Information is another valuable resource that should be shared with teachers to enable them to fully participate in decisions. Principals can also seek out and acquire additional resources from the community, business, and government agencies to facilitate achievement of curriculum goals.

The Principal as Educational Leader

Most principals do not make key decisions about curriculum. However, principals do set the overall tone within their schools, which has immense direct and indirect influence on curriculum. This tone or atmosphere may make faculty members more open or closed to new ideas. Principals' attitudes appear to have an enormous impact in shaping academic programs and determining the success or failure of innovative curricula.

Connelly and Clandenin (1988) document how curriculum leadership can emerge as a positive expression of a principal's personal philosophy. The principal's philosophy can function as a context for addressing problems and issues, they suggest,

making specific policies unnecessary. The principal's personal philosophy becomes, in effect, a "curriculum for the administration of the curriculum" as it pervades the school and learning environment.

The principal's primary function with regard to curriculum, we believe, is to serve as a truly democratic educational leader. The often overlooked educative function of leadership addresses the central question of "why" with respect to secondary school curriculum and governance.

During the '40s and '50s, the literature of school administration and supervision emphasized an image of the leader as a "democratic educator," a concept derived from the educational philosophy of John Dewey. Leadership was largely viewed as a group function guided by the scientific method. Much of the professional literature promoted broad-based involvement in problem solving and opportunities for everyone—students, teachers, and community members—to exert influence aimed at improving the quality of life in schools and local communities. Leadership was considered educational in the sense that leaders helped prepare others for the responsibilities of life in a democracy. Schools, in turn, were viewed as microcosms and incubators of democratic citizenship.

During the '60s and '70s, however, schools and districts became larger and more complex, curriculum packages were developed by experts

at the national level, and teachers' unions appropriated the tools of collective action. As a result, democratic leadership in schools became less popular because it appeared to be inefficient. Recent world events have dramatized, however, that democracy is actually the most efficient form of governance, especially under conditions of change. Today, the specter of totalitarianism as a rallying point for school reform has been displaced by the challenge of international competition in a global marketplace.

From the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, demands were placed on schools to better prepare students for the work force. We believe that schools continue to have an even more important charge, that of preparing students for citizenship in a democracy.

Principals should recognize, above all, that their most powerful influence on what students learn is determined by the way that their schools are governed. In schools, as in families, students learn by example. We believe that public schools have an obligation to be models and advocates of democracy. Nowhere in education is this responsibility more important than in high schools. By their senior year, many students are already old enough to vote in local, state, and national elections. High schools in a democracy should seek to maximize involvement by teachers in matters of school governance and by students in matters related to instruction.

Principals may be somewhat leery about allowing teachers and students to have more say in "how things are done around here." Of utmost concern is the possibility of losing control and the chaos that could conceivably result. However, we believe that democracy is the best way to prevent such a risk.

People who feel disenfranchised are precisely those who are likely to rebel or express their dissatisfaction in inappropriate ways. We believe that the power and responsibility to change things for the better in schools are not vested in any single individual. When teachers and students are involved in decisions about their school that are important to them, possibilities for improvement are released and increased.

Conclusion

The responsibilities of secondary school principals as leaders of their schools and as leaders of curriculum are inseparable. Both functions are subsets of the broader responsibility to be an educational leader, which should be guided by the overarching obligation of the schools to prepare students for democratic citizenship.

Our society is currently undergoing a major crisis of confidence in its institutions, within a political, social, and economic environment that is characterized by turbulence and uncertainty. Students today must be prepared to accept the social and political responsibilities of local, national, and international

citizenship. They will have to be economically productive and technologically inventive, to be sure. But more important, we hope, their generation will also reinvent and reproduce our democratic political and social institutions.

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Students Voice Opinions About Censorship

Do young people need special guidance about what is OK to read, see, or hear?

The February 1991 Voices That Count youth poll, a program established by AT&T, revealed that 70 percent of the 14,000 students surveyed said they think censorship laws should protect people under 13 years old.

One-third of the respondents said censorship "is disrespectful of children's ability to make judgments about what they read, see, or hear." More than 50 percent said they should have the right to decide any dispute over the suitability of books assigned in school.