

# Instructional leadership

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Instructional Leadership Teresa Hammond Marshall University Dynamic instructional leadership requires a focused leader. A successful instructional leader inspires those who work with them. Leaders in the field of education must facilitate growth, encourage risk, and explore new ideas. The skillful use of collaboration improves education for the students in the school, while promoting professional growth. Dedication to the mission and the vision of the school are the guiding forces for an effective leader. Promoting a Positive School Culture Responsible instructional leadership requires attention to the climate and culture of the school. Instructional leaders who want to facilitate change know an assessment of what is working, what needs improvement, and what needs to change is vital to “ buy in” for all the stakeholders in a school. The first type of assessment is to create interpersonal relationships with those who are involved in the school. Communication is a direct line into the heart of any organization. An astute leader can gauge the climate of a school just by listening carefully to what the stakeholders are saying. Effective communication with the stakeholders is necessary to make positive change in a school. To insure “ buy in” it is wise to have evidence supporting the need for change. Collecting meaningful data is a key element in guiding the process of change. Surveys are an excellent way to collect and organize information pertinent to the success of the school. It is important to remember the survey must be intended for a certain purpose, and the questions must address the needs of the school. Therefore, it is important to have objectivity when designing the survey. A generic survey may not hit the mark, so utilizing the information gathered from interpersonal relationships and researched best practices can help create a reliable and effective tool

for assessing the culture of the school. I feel that each school's culture is like the quilts my grandmother used to make for my siblings and me. She would ask my mother to donate our old clothes, blankets, and bedding, and she would fashion beautifully unique designs from the fabrics of the discarded items my mother had collected. Each beautiful quilt was fashioned for the individual by utilizing that person's clothing, and each had a special significance to the person for whom it was made. School culture is much like those beautiful quilts. The traditions, rituals, routines, ceremonies, and beliefs of a school all work together to make an environment that is unique to the particular school. Working with people who think differently, or have diametrically opposed viewpoints can be tricky and akin to walking in a mine field. The school population where I currently work is drawn from a socially and economically diverse neighborhood. There are families from all walks of life. Many are poor, and some are over-privileged. We have first generation families from all over the globe, and families so rooted in the community they have streets named after their predecessors. There are families who live in public housing projects, and those who live in mansions. Yet, with all the diversity, there is a cohesive and cooperative culture at my school. This can only be attributed to the relationships my administrator has built with parents, students and teachers within our school population. She has a way of finding commonalities among people and pairing them together to accomplish important tasks. She builds on these relationships by praising accomplishments and celebrating success. The positive energy derived from these interactions builds strong foundations for future collaboration. As a principal, I would follow in the footsteps of my principal forging effective

relationships with all the stakeholders in the school. Making connections and networking through established channels such as LSIC and PTO committees is a great place to start. These are foundational organizations that have a clear connection to the school's success. Within the actual school population, it is imperative to create strong professional relationships with the staff of the school. Clearly, creating positive relationships go a long way in making collaboration easier; however, other aspects need to be addressed to affect school improvement and achievement. Schools need a shared vision. This is determined by surveys, communication, data, and examination of need. Schools require a vibrant learning environment where achievement is the paramount factor in decision making. Determining where funding is to be allocated, resources are to be employed, and professional development is focused should all be centered on purposeful teaching and learning (Zepeda, 2004). Creating strong professional learning communities, researching best practices, collaborating in lessons, and reinforcing behaviors with positive and caring attitudes create an environment where the foundation is high expectations and excellence. In order to achieve such a synergistic environment, one must have a singular purpose. That purpose is the inclusion of every individual who walks through the doorway of the school. Students, teachers, parents and community members all are part of the partnership, and must be factored in when creating a positive school culture (Fullan, 2001). At my school we collaborate with our stakeholders by providing opportunities to participate and create relationships within the school. We have celebrations for achieving goals and assemblies for honoring community contributors. We take time to honor those who use their

time to make a better place for us to teach and students to learn. My favorite culture building activity we have every year at our school is our Veteran's Day Celebration. Every child in the school works with the music teacher to learn patriotic songs, the art teacher collaborates with classroom teachers to create art projects centered on the content standards at each level for patriotism, and community members are invited to share their stories of patriotism and duty. The most inspiring part of the celebration is when we have members of the military join us to speak about their role in caring for the lives of the citizens of the United States. We close the ceremony with the playing of taps. This involves students from the local high school band playing a trumpet fanfare to honor the fallen heroes of our nation. The uniting ceremony creates a bond of respect for the dedication and sacrifice of our founding fathers, and those who care for us to this day. Providing Effective Instruction and Applying Best Practice to Student Learning Part of improving education in West Virginia, where I teach, is creating a Unified School Improvement Plan, or Strategic Plan. This plan helps identify all the vital information from the school, such as population, socio-economic factors, race, and special education needs. Test data and other sources of measureable data are examined and disaggregated. Then, using test data and other sources of information, the faculty or Strategic Planning Team work collaboratively to create measurable goals aimed at improving deficits within the identified areas of need. Schools must remember to stay committed to the mission and vision of the school as they create their improvement plans, and consider the purpose of the plan; to serve the learners, not the facilitators (Zepeda, 2004). Once the Unified School

Improvement Plan has been developed, our faculty works together to monitor and facilitate meeting the goals established by the plan. We work in Professional Learning Communities based on the age and development of our students. This plan works well because those who create the plan facilitate the strategies and implement the plan in the classroom. I will use this format for improvement as a principal. Each teacher working on the goals identified in the Unified School Improvement Plan utilizes researched based teaching practices designed to enhance and improve student achievement. Within each classroom every teacher implements differentiated learning strategies. Not every child learns at the same rate or in the same manner, so creating an environment where there are multiple pathways to solutions and strategies to build understanding by connecting new learning to prior knowledge is critical (Tomlinson, 2003). Technology rich environments also foster student learning and understanding. Students today are bombarded with visual imagery; as a result, the way they learn is active and visual. Stimulating interaction and enhanced engagement are the monikers of a technology rich environment (Editors of Edutopia, 2008). Teachers need to have intense training to become effective users and teachers of technology, and as a principal, I think it is highly appropriate and important to develop those skills for the benefit of student learning. Effective instructional leaders are facilitators and partners in education. A wise leader develops leadership skills and fosters growth among the teachers in the school. Initially, setting up effective Professional Learning Communities, facilitating the selection of instructional materials, and fostering camaraderie among educators would be my primary goals. As relationships strengthen

and trust leads naturally to risk taking and exploring new ideas; guiding the development of an evaluative process would be my next step. I feel it is important for teachers to manage their own professional growth. We live in a world where “sit and get” is no longer an acceptable practice for our students, and it should not be a practice for our professional educators. There are multiple ways to evaluate teacher effectiveness, but one of the most effective ways is to guide them in evaluating their own practice. Growth and change do not occur if “buy in” is not achieved. Teachers need to visualize their own potential by understanding their strengths and weaknesses. An effective instructional leader can utilize multiple pathways to help teachers come to understand the need for growth by providing exceptional professional development, educational literature on current trends and practices in education, and by conducting multiple conferences throughout the school year to discuss their practice. An effective instructional leader is present in the classroom, not to monitor or critique, but to learn about individual teaching style and philosophy. After an observation, an Instructional leader should conference with the teacher to assist in identifying how his or her practice can improve. To be an effective leader in this practice is to have a full understanding of the developmental appropriateness of the content being taught to students, and by tracking student growth from year to year. Through this observational process, an instructional leader can learn what the educators in a building need to deliver appropriate instruction. Through conferencing and monitoring student progress, the instructional leader can help teachers by providing opportunities for Peer Coaching and locating professional development to

assist the teacher meet established goals should be the focus of the instructional leader (Zepeda, 2004). As a leader of teachers, I understand the importance of rich and meaningful professional development experiences. As I have worked with teachers throughout the state of West Virginia, I have discovered their need to know more. I think that is why I want to be a principal. I am amazed by the job teachers do on a daily basis. What is even more refreshing is the hunger with which they approach their own professional learning. Understanding this piece of information is critical to the instructional leader. Often, as a teacher in my own school, I perceive a doubt in my sanity from my peers when I approach a professional learning experience with excitement. Design comprehensive professional growth plans For the past four years, I have worked with the West Virginia Department of Education as a facilitator for the Teacher Leadership Institute. Understanding adult learner needs is extremely important. Honoring their need for professional growth and desire for improvement combined with the appreciation of where the adult learner is in regard to their own understanding is vital for successful implementation of an adult learning program. Instructional leaders need to respect and celebrate the learning and honor the courage it takes to come to a place of change. Recently, the State of West Virginia approved the adoption of The Common Core State Standards. In my opinion, this is a very positive change for student learning and teacher effectiveness. The understanding and implementation of the Common Core State Standards should be the focus of professional development. The professional development must relate directly to student learning and engagement. Teachers must address developmental



appropriateness of content, and how to increase rigor. This type of professional development is challenging and creates disequilibrium for educators. As a principal, it is vital to support and encourage growth in teachers. An educator's work is truly God's work. We provide foundations for the uneducated and help them find their way in the world. We must dedicate ourselves to the service of others. Children and adults alike need someone looking out for their best interests. An effective instructional leader can help others achieve more than they ever dreamed they could. I was given support and guidance by a wonderful instructional leader named Clara Jett. Her encouragement has strengthened my desire to follow in her footsteps. In the years to come, I hope I will honor her by being the kind of leader she has been to countless others. Works Cited Editors of Edutopia. (2008, March 16). What works in Education. Retrieved February 1, 2013, from Edutopia: <http://www.edutopia.org/technology-integration-introduction> Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Tomlinson, C. A. (2003). Differentiating instruction in response to student readiness, interest, and learning profile in academically diverse classrooms: A review of literature. *Journal of the Education of the Gifted*, 119-145. Zepeda, S. J. (2004). *Instructional Leadership for School Improvement*. Larchmont: Eye on Education.