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It's All About Instruction

I have witnessed how education opens doors, and I know that when sound instruction takes place, students experience the joys of new-found knowledge and the ability to excel.

Daniel Akaka

Think About It

How much of your time is allocated for instruction? What is the most pressing instructional issue in your school?

A recent poll conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) found that only 16% of principals' time was spent on instructional issues, while more than three-quarters (78%) was devoted to student supervision or management concerns.

The responsibility for improving instructional quality resides with school principals. Many principals, because of the size or complexity of their schools, find it a challenge to allocate the time to work with their staff, but improving instruction is a key function of school leaders. The principal plays an important role in creating a climate in which conversations about instructional effectiveness are common and part of the everyday operation of the school.

There are many ways that principals can focus the work of school personnel on improving instruction. Most involve establishing a mechanism for teachers to work collaboratively and to have conversations about student learning and about their teaching. There are several tools that principals can use to support this work.

Tools

- Establish norms of collaboration.
- View instruction from a student’s perspective.
- Strategically focus on instruction.
- Close the achievement gap.
- Provide a rigorous learning environment.

Establish Norms of Collaboration

Fundamental to the work of schools is creating a climate in which teachers and other staff are comfortable talking about complex and difficult issues—one in which it is safe to pose tough questions, to question current practice, and to suggest alternatives. Bob Garmston and Bruce Wellman described norms as “skills that become the ‘normal’ behavior in a group” (1999, p. 37).

In some groups the norm is silence. In others it is open, honest dialogue. Garmston and Wellman identified seven norms of collaboration that create a climate characterized by a spirit of inquiry and openness to new and creative ideas.

Seven Norms of Collaboration

- Pausing
- Paraphrasing
- Probing
- Putting ideas on the table
- Paying attention to self and others
- Presuming positive intentions
- Pursuing a balance between inquiry and advocacy

More information about the norms and guidelines for their use are available at the Web site of the Center for Adaptive Schools (<http://www.adaptiveschools.com>).

View Instruction from a Student's Perspective

A second strategy is to gather data to lead instruction by viewing instruction from the perspective of a student. An effective technique for gathering information on the curricular and instructional experiences of students is to conduct a shadow study. Shadow studies involve selecting students at random and following them throughout their day.

The protocol, originally developed by the NASSP, suggests charting the experience of students at five- to seven-minute intervals. This allows the observer to show the ebb and flow of activities during the day. Spending the entire day with a student and documenting his or her experience provides interesting insights into the student experience. Of course, students quickly figure out that something is going on. The best approach is to talk with the student and assure him or her that you are not gathering information about them to report to the office.

Shadow Study Observation Form

Time	Specific Behavior (Five- to Seven-Minute Intervals)	Comments and Impressions

After gathering the data, the information can be used as a springboard to launch conversations at the faculty or departmental level about the experience of students. The patterns that emerge across students and across classrooms can provide helpful guidance to improve instructional quality.

Another way to obtain the students' view of instruction is to conduct focus groups or form a Principal's Advisory Group of students. If students trust you, and they believe that you want to listen to them, students will give

you frank feedback about schools. One of our favorite questions to ask students is, “If you were in charge of the school, what would you change?”

In *Rigor Is Not a Four-Letter Word* (2008), Barbara shares her experience with a student responding to this question. The school had good test scores and used those scores to place students in tracked classes. The principal and faculty believed that all classes were of high quality and were sufficiently challenging for each student. Gabrielle, a sixth-grader in the school, responded, “For people who don’t understand as much . . . [they should] be in higher-level classes to understand more [because] if they already don’t know much, you don’t want to teach them to not know much over and over.”

The principal and teachers were taken aback. They had no idea that students in the school viewed the lower-level classes as less challenging. The feedback from Gabrielle prompted them to reevaluate their curriculum and instruction.

Strategically Focus on Instruction

There are four specific strategies that you can use to focus your school on instructional improvement.

Four Strategies

What principals talk about becomes important. Tell stories about improvement. Focus the conversation. Use staff meetings differently.
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First, *what principals talk about becomes important*. Principals who introduce the idea of improving instruction into their day-to-day conversation with teachers find that it subtly sends a message to teachers about the importance of instruction.

During conferences with teachers following classroom observations, a principal from suburban Hartford asked questions such as, “When you design a lesson what things do you think about? What data about your students’ prior learning do you use to guide your lesson design?” Such questions suggest that teachers should be thoughtful in their planning. Rather than “telling” teachers to do this, the message is conveyed through these structured conversations.

Next, *tell stories about improvement*. A principal in suburban Phoenix told “turn around” stories that described significant changes that occurred in the learning of an individual student. In each case, he linked the students’

success to the efforts of a specific teacher who had either changed his or her instruction or had gone “over and above” to help the student learn.

Third, *focus the conversation*. At the end of one school year, an elementary school principal gave every teacher a copy of *Classroom Instruction from A to Z*. She invited them to read it over the summer and to return in the fall ready to share and use their learning. On the day teachers returned, they organized into study groups of those who had read the book and talked about its implications for their work. Throughout the year, teachers chose one chapter and shared during a faculty meeting how they had implemented the strategies.

Fourth, *use staff meetings differently*. A principal in Oregon converted monthly staff meetings into an opportunity for professional development. Working with the School Improvement Team, he identified topics of interest, located print and online resources, established faculty study teams, and used the time formerly devoted to staff meetings as a time for the groups to meet, develop plans, and prepare their recommendations to the entire staff. After a few months, the groups began to meet on their own at lunch and before or after school. He reported that they were “as enthusiastic as I’ve ever seen them about school improvement.”

Close the Achievement Gap

We cannot conclude our discussion of instructional leadership without addressing one of our most critical challenges: closing the achievement gap. There are two reasons that principals should lead the charge to close the achievement gap. First, it is the right thing to do. Every single child who enters our building deserves the right to learn and have the opportunity to succeed. Second, we are held accountable for closing the gap by the No Child Left Behind Act and by state achievement initiatives.

In *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices* (2003), Belinda Williams identified four needs of students.

Needs of Students

1. Access to challenging curriculum and instruction
2. High-quality teachers
3. High expectations
4. Extra support

The needs are clear; the challenge is how to respond.

Provide a Rigorous Learning Environment

Those needs are best met when you and your faculty provide students with a rigorous learning environment. Let us be clear about our definition of rigor. First, center your attention on quality, not quantity. Rigor is not about increasing the number of homework problems assigned. True rigor does more with less, preferring depth over breadth. Next, rigor is not just for your advanced students. Rigor is for every student in your building. That includes your students who are at risk of failure, your students with special needs, and your students for whom English is not their native language. Finally, the heart of authentic rigor is learning, not punishment. It is about growth and success, not failure. Your focus should be on how you can inspire your teachers to lead their students to higher levels of rigor in a positive, productive manner through expectations, support, and instruction.

“Rigor is creating an environment in which each student is expected to learn at high levels, each student is supported so he or she can learn at high levels, and each student demonstrates learning at high levels.”
(Blackburn, 2008)

Provide a Personalized Learning Environment

It is important that students feel connected to their school. There is strong evidence that when a student has a supportive relationship with a single adult in school, he or she is more likely to stay in school and to achieve at higher levels.

In elementary school, the classroom teacher often serves that function. In many middle and high schools, an advisory or advocacy program is often included. Typically the program consists of a small group of students assigned to one teacher who monitors their progress in school and talks with them about academic and social issues.

Some schools create a more personalized environment by organizing into smaller units. In Chapter M (Managing Schedules), we discuss how one elementary school organized classrooms into multigrade wings. Many middle schools organize into interdisciplinary teams in which every teacher on a team teaches the same students. The teachers work together to create a learning environment that is supportive of their students.

Many large high schools are adopting a small “school-within-a-school” model. Students and teachers are organized into small units, often built on a curricular theme. The goal is to create a more personalized setting in which

students are well known by teachers and to develop a supportive connection with school. Support staff such as school counselors and assistant principals are often assigned to each small school.

These organizational models simply create the potential for a more personalized environment. It is essential that teachers get to know their students well and commit to building personal relationships with each student.

Role of Principals

There are endless suggestions for closing achievement gaps and increasing rigor in schools. Given these challenges, where do you start? Begin by hiring only the most skilled teachers (see Chapter F: Finding the Right People). Evaluate and work with those teachers who are less skillful (see Chapter Q: Quality Teacher Evaluations).

Work with staff through professional development (see Chapter P: Professional Development and Chapter W: Working Together) to identify high expectations and to change behavior so that words and actions convey those expectations. Also work with teachers and district staff to modify curriculum and improve instructional expertise focused on adding rigor and challenge to the program.

Collaborate with community partners to secure additional resources to support the instructional program and before and after school programs for students. Commit to co-curricular programs that support the academic needs of students, and provide support activities that enhance the academic rigor of the school's program. This might include organizing academic games or restructuring the schedule to allow for required remediation or tutoring during the regular school day.

A Final Note

It is easy to get caught up in the endless stream of issues related to school management. However, providing leadership for effective instruction is critical and must take priority. Additionally, creating an rigorous learning environment for all students is important and will help close the achievement gap.

Skills for Principals

- Develop a shared vision of high performance for every student.
- Mobilize staff to achieve the school's vision.
- Work to develop a coherent and rigorous curriculum.
- Create a personalized, motivating, and engaging learning environment for every student.
- Provide appropriate instructional supervision.
- Develop the instructional capacity of teachers and other staff.
- Utilize assessment and accountability systems to monitor student progress.

If You Would Like More Information . . .

Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision for Changing Beliefs and Practices (2nd ed.), by Belinda Williams (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003)

Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools, edited by Pedro A. Noguera and Jean Yonemura Wing (Jossey-Bass, 2006)

Closing the Achievement Gap—Reaching and Teaching High Poverty Learners: 101 Top Strategies to Help High Poverty Learners Succeed, by Tiffany Chane'l Anderson (iUniverse, 2004)

Rigor Is Not a Four-Letter Word, By Barbara R. Blackburn (Eye On Education, 2008)

NEA Foundation: http://www.neafoundation.org/closingthegap_resources.htm

Minority Student Achievement Network—resources for ensuring high academic achievement for students of color: <http://www.msanetwork.org>

The Education Trust provides many resources for closing the achievement gap including research articles and presentations: <http://www2.edtrust.org>

The North Central Regional Education Laboratory, a regional research lab, provides ideas about how to address achievement gaps among students: <http://www.ncrel.org/gap/>