Core Function → School Leadership and Decision Making

Effective Practice → Focus the pricipal's role on building leadership capacity, achieving learning goals, and improving instruction

Indicator: The principal models and communicates the expectation of improved student learning through commitment, discipline, and careful implementation of sound practices. (5082)

Explanation: The evidence confirms that the neediest schools and teaching staff require a principal who not only manages the day to day operations but who is more importantly an effective agent of change. Such principals achieve enduring change by constantly keeping student achievement at the heart of all they communicate and act upon. These leaders expect and model high expectations for all in the school community; students, staff, parents and community.

Questions: What evidence will the district seek to determine that the principal is more than a day to day operations manager and is truly an effective change agent? How will the district support the principal in a change agent role? How will the district grant to the principal the autonomies and flexibilities needed to effect change? What processes will the principal employ to ensure all improvement processes are student centered? How will the principal communicate the vision for change to all key stakeholders? How will the principal sustain changes in their setting?

Research Brief:

Although much of the research in educational practice revolves around the technical aspects of the job – standards, instructional methods, assessments, and evaluations – there is a parallel focus on less tangible qualities, such as vision and values. As a principal, one of the most significant responsibilities is both the establishment and enactment of a vision for the school. This can be a shared responsibility with staff and stakeholders, according to some schools of leadership, but ultimately, the principal is the keeper and the champion of the school's ideal culture and practices. Consequently, it is the duty of the principal to not only espouse those values but to demonstrate them in his or her own behavior as well (Lucas & Valentine, 2002; Marks & Printy, 2003; Murphy, 2007).

Principals Must Model Behaviors and Practices in Line with the Vision

Elmore (2000) notes that:

> Most leaders in all sectors of society are creatures of the organizations they lead. Nowhere is this more true than in public education, where principals and district superintendents are recruited almost exclusively from the ranks of practice. … One does not get to lead in education without being well socialized to the norms, values, predispositions, and routines of the organization one is leading. (p. 2)

It is therefore essential for principals to establish a vision for the school and the values to which all members of the school community will adhere. Yet this vision will not take root without aligned changes in behaviors on the part of staff, students, and the principal. Lucas and Valentine (2002) emphasize the need for the principal to truly live the vision of the school; when the leader models the behaviors that he or she expects to see from others, it provides an example for others to emulate. Murphy (2007) writes:

Effective principals and other school-based leaders articulate the vision through personal modeling and by communicating with others in and around the organization. … They demonstrate through their actions the organization's commitment to the values and beliefs at the heart of the mission as well as to the specific activities needed to reach goals. (p. 73)

Lucas and Valentine (2002) found this to be true; modeling expected behaviors not only clarifies how teachers and students should act, but it also can lead to the empowerment of teachers in their practice and informal leadership roles. The findings of their study demonstrated that leadership modeling appropriate behaviors was significantly related to having a culture of teacher collaboration and collegial support. Schools with principals who were committed to and demonstrated organizational values were better able to establish a learning community among the staff that was focused on student achievement and had a strong sense of shared leadership (Lucas & Valentine, 2002; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Hipp (1996) found, in her study of teachers' self-efficacy, that having a principal who led by example was related to improved self-efficacy in teachers. When a principal acted consistently with the school vision and values, teachers felt more secure and supported; they were also more willing to pursue their own professional learning, take instructional risks, and speak to colleagues in an honest and appropriate way when their leader had modeled these behaviors for them.

It must be noted that effective principals, by modeling the behaviors they hope for and expect from every member of their school community, are also holding up a mirror to their own practices. Elmore (2000) writes that, "Leaders must lead by modeling the values and behavior that represent collective goods … leaders should expect to have their own practice subjected to the same scrutiny as they exercise toward others" (p. 21). By making themselves vulnerable to the same expectations as everyone else in the school building, principals are reducing the level of "bureaucratic controls" that Elmore (2000) insists are detrimental to school improvement efforts (p. 31).

The Need to Balance Culture and Instructional Responsibilities

With so many assigned responsibilities, a principal must be able to balance his or her duties as a manager and those as an organizational change agent (Marks & Printy, 2003). It is of course a primary responsibility to ensure that the school is not only physically but psychologically safe for all of its community members; being highly visible throughout the school and managing student behaviors is a large part of this. Murphy (2007) writes that an essential part of principal modeling is "personally enforcing discipline with students," which leads to a true sense of shared responsibility and a genuine feeling of support for teachers (p. 80). Hipp (1996) found that teachers in schools with effective and appropriate means of managing student behaviors, as well as a strong sense of school culture and shared values, had higher ratings of self-efficacy and were more amenable to change.

While it is critical for principals to establish and maintain a positive school culture, they must also remain active in the instructional side of the work and empower their teachers as experts and leaders. Marks and Printy (2003) quote Glickman (1989) in saying that, "the principal is not the sole instructional leader but the 'leader of instructional leaders'" (p. 371). Elmore writes that principals should guide improvement processes "and provide direction for them, since most of the knowledge required for improvement must inevitably reside in the people who deliver instruction, not in the people who manage them" (p. 14).

Yet by remaining involved in the process of curricular and instructional decisions, observations, and growth, principals demonstrate the importance of teaching (Murphy, 2007). It also places value in the teachers themselves, as the principal cannot fully carry out his or her vision for the school without a teaching staff that is talented, successful, and collaborative (Lucas & Valentine, 2002). By providing teachers with the appropriate resources, supports, opportunities, and models, principals are actively encouraging the growth of their staff and students (Marks & Printy, 2003, Murphy, 2007).

References and Resources

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