

What School Principals Need to Know about Curriculum and Instruction

by Gene Bottoms

Educational accountability has changed nearly everything. Superintendents and local school boards no longer can be satisfied with principals who simply place teachers in the classroom, provide textbooks and get students to attend school. Increasingly, schools and school leaders are being judged on their progress in teaching most students to the standards that only the “best students” were expected to meet in the past. This means that future school leaders must have in-depth knowledge of curriculum, instruction and student achievement.

What do school leaders need to understand about curriculum and instruction?

- School leaders need to understand the “big ideas” that should be taught in the core curriculum. They do not need to be experts, but they should know enough to determine whether students are being taught the body of knowledge, the understandings and the skills that they are expected to learn in the core curriculum. Also, school leaders must have a grasp of the knowledge, skills and understandings that students need to gain from career/technical courses and electives.
- Leaders should know enough about state and national standards in academic courses and elective fields of study (such as fine arts and practical arts) to help teachers identify the most important standards. In other words, leaders need to know that “covering everything and learning nothing” does not work. They need to be able to help teachers identify the things that students should learn in greater depth.
- Leaders need to know how to distinguish between a regular language arts course and a college-preparatory/honors language arts course. Students in college-preparatory courses are expected to do more reading and produce higher-quality work. Leaders should end course leveling and get the faculty to teach most students the key concepts from the college-preparatory curriculum.
- Leaders must understand literacy. Reading, writing and speaking are “learning tools” that are essential across the curriculum in academic courses, fine arts courses and the practical arts. Leaders should be able to recognize whether teachers are advancing students’ literacy skills and requiring students to use these skills to learn in all courses.

- Leaders need to know what students are supposed to learn and the standards they are supposed to meet in determining whether teachers' exams and assessment guides are appropriate to measure high school and middle-grades work.
- Leaders need to know enough about assessment to be able to lead teams of teachers who are working together to develop grading guides and common exams. Assessments can help teachers measure their own effectiveness as well as the amount of student learning.

What do school leaders need to know about instructional practices?

- School leaders should have a working knowledge of research-based, student-centered instruction, such as the Socratic method, project-based learning, cooperative learning, research studies, integration of technology into instructional strategies, and integration of academic and career/technical studies. They need to understand the conditions that will enable teachers to use these methods.
- Leaders must be able to recognize whether teachers are using instructional strategies effectively.
- They should know how to help teachers learn new instructional methods, how to gauge the amount of time it will take for teachers to master new techniques, and how to “network” teachers as they implement new approaches.
- They need to understand the amount of time it takes to plan effectively. Good instruction requires good planning. Teachers who are expected to teach higher-level content to more students need time to devise ways to connect what they are asking students to learn with what these students have learned or experienced in the past.
- School leaders should know enough about teaching and learning to be able to identify teachers who are doing the best job of raising student achievement. Why do students learn more in these teachers' classrooms? Exemplary teachers can deliver “model” lessons and invite other teachers to observe instruction in the classroom.
- School leaders must understand the school and classroom conditions that contribute to higher expectations. They need to be able to recognize whether such a “culture” exists in a classroom and to assist teachers (through mentors or other approaches) to expect more of students.

What do school leaders need to know about organizing a school for greater student learning?

- It may be necessary to create small “learning communities” in which teams of teachers from the core academic subjects and fine arts or practical arts work together to teach a group of students. Leaders should be able to build an organizational structure that will allow teams of teachers to connect what they are teaching and to develop ways to make learning more meaningful to more

students. This type of school reorganization, which emphasizes the belief that it is possible to teach more students at a higher level, is particularly effective in low-performing schools. It tends to energize young teachers and create opportunities for new leaders to emerge.

- Leaders need to be able to create an organizational structure that promotes higher achievement. They can assign a team leader, a department chairperson or an interdisciplinary leader to head each team of teachers. Team leaders should be teachers who have “bought into” the concepts of higher standards, better teaching and more advanced learning. Principals need to meet continuously with their team leaders to sustain the focus on curriculum, instruction and student learning.

What do school leaders need to know about supporting teachers with continuous opportunities for growth and development?

- Effective leaders provide opportunities for teachers to strengthen their subject-matter knowledge while learning new research-based, student-centered instructional strategies. The best staff development combines content knowledge and instructional methods.
- Certain experiences will help teachers change their beliefs about whether students can learn advanced materials. Successful principals arrange for teachers to talk with employers about workplace requirements, to interview former students who had to take remedial courses at colleges and universities, and to visit schools that teach advanced materials to all students. If teachers do not have such experiences, they may not understand the need to change and may not realize that they can teach more students to higher standards. Outside experiences can deepen teachers’ subject-matter knowledge and suggest ways to connect classroom activities to the real world.
- School leaders must decide that all students will be taught at a higher level. Until then, some teachers will never understand the importance of teaching advanced content to most students. Once the decision is made, principals should make it possible for teachers to learn new instructional strategies designed to involve students in learning.
- Successful leaders know the value of providing a “mentor” for each new teacher during the first three years. These leaders assign the “best” teachers as mentors and schedule a series of “learning experiences” for new teachers. Too many high schools — particularly low-performing schools — fail to support and encourage new teachers during their induction period. As a result, teacher turnover at these schools is high.
- School leaders must be willing to make follow-up an integral part of staff development. Teams of trained teachers should be allowed to try new strategies, refine their skills and share their knowledge with other teachers.

How can school leaders balance the pressing need for ongoing school improvement with the heavy demands of non-instructional issues and emergencies?

- Many non-instructional situations are the result of low-quality instruction and the school's inability to teach all students equally. Successful principals lead teams composed of assistant principals, team leaders, department heads and others who share a common point of view on raising student achievement. The principal should focus the staff on the important things: teaching challenging content, engaging students in learning and constantly seeking ways to raise achievement. Principals cannot delegate the tasks of creating the vision and maintaining the focus. They must perform the vital function of communicating the school's goals to teachers, students, parents and the community.
- School leaders need to know how to delegate effectively and to involve school teams in an over-all effort to change what is taught, how it is taught and what is expected of students.
- Leaders need to understand how to use data to promote higher standards and the viewpoint that "effort matters." Leaders who make data-driven decisions can produce powerful changes. Teachers who have access to disaggregated data will have a difficult time arguing with the numbers. However, the leadership preparation programs at many universities contain traditional statistics courses that fail to address data collected from real classrooms or to focus on student assessment, school attendance, dropout rates, college entrance test results and program evaluation.
- Many strategies are available to improve instruction: raising expectations, providing demanding content, planning staff development, forming study groups and promoting team participation in conferences. School leaders must be the "chief learners" and the models for higher performance. It is not enough to know "what works." Leaders must know what is needed now and what will be needed in the future to make continuous improvement.

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