



Just for the ASKing!

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's focus is on how principals can foster a sense of self-efficacy and professional growth of the teaching staff.

We Are All in This Together



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

A few weeks ago as I was catching up with a friend of mine whom I had not seen for some time, I asked her about her recent teaching experiences. She explained that she was teaching algebra I and algebra II to special education students in a local high school. It was evident from her description that she was dedicated to her job. She explained that as she worked with her students, she encountered frustrations and struggles but ultimately most of her students successfully passed the statewide test given at the end of the school year. As she spoke, she talked about how she never gave up on her students, and how she used an ever-changing and extensive repertoire of strategies to reach each student. I saw the pride in her face, but at the same time I sensed a little disappointment. Although she felt that her ultimate satisfaction as a teacher came from the achievement of her students, she shared with me that she had not had a visit to her classes by an administrator **for seven years**. I was incredulous and wondered how this could happen. Although it was a requirement for teachers in her school district to be formally evaluated every five years, she had transferred schools and her name had been inadvertently dropped from the list of teachers to be evaluated. She, a very competent and professional educator, who had encountered and overcome significant obstacles as she worked with her students, had not had the opportunity to engage in educational dialogue with the administrative instructional leaders in her schools. When I asked her how she felt about being “overlooked,” she said that she just wished that somebody knew how much she cared and how hard she worked.

As I work with teachers, I have learned that there are mixed feelings about visits by administrators to their classes. In schools where the administrator is rarely seen by teachers or students, the sudden appearance of the administrator can be viewed as threatening, causing nervous apprehension on the part of the teacher. Teachers have told me that their first thought when the administrator appears is, “I must have done something wrong.” On the other hand, in schools where administrators are highly visible on a regular basis, teachers are less nervous and actually welcome the opportunity for administrators to see them “in action” with their students.

I recently read some research findings that concluded that in schools where principals visit classrooms more

often, the student achievement is higher. In addition to being highly visible, it is important for the administrator to be seen as a “positive influence” in the classroom rather than viewed as there simply to “inspect and judge” what is going on. As a principal, I looked for opportunities during my classroom visits to interact with students, to explain to students why the method their teacher was using helped them learn, or to model an instructional strategy. Practitioners in the field of education know that if we want students to be successful, we “pat them on the back” by recognizing what they do well. The same rules applies to teachers; we should let them know then they are doing a good job, when they are diligently working to help their students grow in knowledge and skills, and when they are constantly searching for ways to improve learning for their students.

Principals often hear that their primary role in a school is to be the instructional leader. And yet something happens in the day-to-day life of school administrators that sidetrack them from this responsibility. Some administrators often put off visits to classrooms because they feel that they must document the visit as part of a teacher’s evaluation, and that they must stay for an extended period of time in order for the visit to be worthwhile. I have spoken with administrators who firmly believe in the value of **walk-throughs** as a practice to help them build relationships with their teachers and students, and to help them in the supervision and evaluation process. A **walk-through** is an informal, brief classroom visit (five to ten minutes) to a number of classrooms that enables an administrator to gain a better knowledge about instruction across the school. Administrators who engage in this practice have reported that they have a “better feel” for what is happening in their building, that they have gotten to know their teachers and students in greater depth, that they feel that their appearance in the classroom is seen as a positive occurrence on the part of teachers, and that they are truly living out their role as the instructional leader. **Walk-throughs** also give administrators the chance to acknowledge, either verbally or in a brief written note, the good instruction they observed. In the event that the observer sees a classroom that needs improvement, he or she should not rush to judgment but should return to that classroom for a longer visit, and then determine what the next step(s) should be.

In order for administrators to be instructional leaders, they must also be able to conduct intelligent conversations about instructional issues. Keeping up with the best instructional practices requires time and dedication. How often do we order educational books or subscribe to educational journals only to let them fill up our bookcases or sit in stacks on our office tables. There are certain practices administrators can adhere to that will help them in their role as instructional leader. Here are a few suggestions:

- Distribute a journal or magazine article to members of the administrative staff and spend some time at administrative team meetings discussing reactions or responses to the article
- Give copies of recent articles to teachers and ask them to be prepared to participate in “table talks” at the next faculty meeting
- Have department chairs schedule regular appointments with an administrative staff member to discuss the latest curriculum and instructional meetings they attended and share anything new in their particular curriculum area
- Ask teachers to model good instructional practices at faculty meetings
- Set up book clubs where teachers are encouraged to discuss the latest educational publication; administrators can model the importance of staying current in the field by being a participant in such a club
- Encourage staff members to meet with administrators to share new ideas they have learned or are trying in their classrooms

Most teachers in our schools are dedicated professionals who are doing an admirable job. Many of them carry out their responsibilities day after day without feedback or affirmation. It doesn’t have to be that way. Administrators should free themselves from their offices and see firsthand the jobs their teachers are doing. One of my fondest memories as a principal was reflecting on a day when I was completely immersed in the

work of the school – teaching and learning. Rides home on those afternoons were especially satisfying because I knew I worked in a good place with good people doing good work, and I was confident that my teachers knew I felt that way.

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