



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver



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What's a Principal to Do...



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Successful principals are not only life-long learners; they are also constantly on the look out for areas of instructional practice that are not well understood or not yet being consistently used in classrooms across the school. Administrators participating in an instructional leadership series were asked to take a broad look at practices across the school they were charged with leading, to identify patterns and trends, and then to take action to guide staff members forward. They shared their discoveries, positive and not so positive, with their peers at the next session. Their stories are summarized in the paragraphs below.

When You Want to Promote Deeper Learning?

Aaron reported that he had been reading a lot about “deeper learning” and had heard some teachers using the term, but suspected that there was not a widely-held understanding across the staff. He facilitated a faculty meeting focused on deeper learning by asking staff to individually define the term in writing. Some folks began writing immediately while others had pensive looks on their faces. After table group interactions and a full group discussion, he realized that, as he suspected, the teachers were all over the map. He then provided a definition of the term as “a set of student outcomes that includes not only robust core academic content but also higher-order thinking skills like analytic reasoning, complex problem solving, and teamwork.” Finally, Aaron noted that it also includes special emphasis on applying knowledge to real-world circumstances and novel problems. Fully realizing that the definition might be seen as a lot of verbiage, he concluded the session by asking staff to share ideas about how to transfer this definition into realistic classroom learning experiences. Aaron also reported that he knew this was only the beginning of discussions around this mindset and that he would

have to be purposeful in keeping the term alive throughout the building. To that end, he planned to make it the norm to note and celebrate movement toward widespread inclusion of deeper learning opportunities.

When You Want to Ensure Fresh Opportunities?

Richard explained that he asked administrative team members to visit multiple classrooms and come up with a quote that captured what they observed about the teaching and learning process. One team member shared this quote: “On any given school day, the majority of students in the United States and many other countries experience the same kind of schooling as their parents – and even their parents’ parents. And yet, today’s students live in a world that looks vastly different. The voices demanding that we move our education system far beyond its 20th century roots grow louder every year.” Richard noted that there was a moment of silence after she had spoken. As the administrators reflected on the quote, they were in agreement with their colleague’s message, and that much-needed change was necessary in their school. Richard, realizing that there was much work to be done in this school to which he had recently been assigned, said to his colleagues that day: “We begin today to give our kids what they deserve, improved learning experiences. Let’s roll up our sleeves and get started.” To us in the session he said: “Stay tuned.”

When You Want to Promote Technological Balance?

Isabel explained that one of the school’s initiatives was the integration of technology into the instructional program; She stated that she believed that the use of technology should not be an add-on to a lesson but an integral part of a student’s learning experience. Isabel found that as she visited multiple classrooms each day, there seemed to be a “PowerPoint fixation” across the school. She put herself in the place of a student who moved from room to room experiencing one more PowerPoint presentation. She also found that some teachers simply read what was projected on a screen rather than using slides to supplement and enhance a presentation. She set a goal of discussing the topic (in a diplomatic manner) in more depth in future small group meetings. Isabel was also resolute about keeping the focus on meaningful technological integration in classroom learning.

When You Know Novice Teachers Need Extra Support?

Eileen revealed that she considered one of the most important things she should do as a principal was to focus attention on the newest staff members, most of whom were first year teachers. Although she visited many classrooms during her learning walks, she spent more time in the classrooms of these staff members. She said that experience had taught her that these individuals were excited but nervous, inspired but inexperienced so needed a special kind of support. After all, she noted to nodding heads, “Many of them ‘don’t know what they don’t know’.” Additionally, they were not familiar with the school culture and who the key players were. As a strong advocate of a well- thought-out mentoring program, Eileen had assigned the most successful teachers to work with new hires. Eileen also knew how



important it was to watch carefully for the “almost withdrawn” individuals who never reach out for support but, in fact, may desperately need extra guidance and growth-producing feedback.

When the Personal Touch Is Missing?

Andy shared that he spent time moving around his elementary school classrooms looking for examples of personalized learning. Although faculty meeting discussions during which personalized learning was defined as a “diverse variety of educational programs, learning experiences, instructional approaches, and academic support strategies that would help to meet the learning needs of individual students” had been held, in his travels through classrooms he was a bit discouraged when he saw minimal evidence that this construct was being addressed. There was still a predominantly uniform approach to treating all the students in the same way. In follow-up discussions he asked teachers about how they were putting the new initiative into practice. Some staff members showed confusion about the meaning of personalized learning as well as a feeling of being overloaded with other initiatives. Andy wisely used the data he had gathered to plan his own “personalized learning sessions” with selected faculty members in order to help them put personalized learning into practice.

When You Want to Recognize and Celebrate Increased Inclusivity?

Marlene was especially pleased and proud about what she learned during her classroom visits. She isolated specific times over a two-week period exclusively for uninterrupted classroom visitations. One of the school’s goals was an emphasis on cultural awareness and inclusivity. In room after room, Marlene noticed teachers spending extended time with selected individuals, an emphasis on incorporating more students in class discussions, teachers providing specific examples that represented the diverse student population, and teachers’ voices that demonstrated a caring positive attitude about learning. She also noted specific emphasis being placed on heterogeneous small group interactions in learner-centered settings. Marlene found herself so pleased with her observations that she added additional time to her walk-through schedule and wrote “I noticed that...” cards to individual teachers in recognition of their fine work. She recognized and celebrated this great work with staff at the next faculty meeting, complete with balloons and festive decorations.

When You Discover Archaic Practices?

As a new principal in his building, Antonio was interested in learning about teaching and learning practices being used across the school. He spent several hours on consecutive days visiting every classroom. Although he found some exciting and insightful plans being implemented, he also learned that some teachers were still locked in to archaic practices. Specifically, Antonio saw examples of students copying definitions from the back of their



textbooks, students being given reading assignments without any look fors, or purposeful directions, and round robin reading during which selected students were clearly uneasy and embarrassed since they stumbled over their assigned section. He also saw examples of teachers grading homework as well as only minimal efforts to provide growth-producing feedback to students about their work. He determined that he needed to set aside time for future classroom visits in selected classrooms and to schedule conferences with individuals to learn how they were, along instructional decisions.

When You Decide Faculty Meetings Should Be Optional?

Leslie encountered several team meetings that were occurring during her learning walks so she decided to stop in before moving on to classrooms. She was pleased to hear that teams had developed meeting protocols that were an essential team practice, and, as a result several of the meetings flowed nicely. One team was discussing data from a common assessment that led to several important understandings by team members. Because Leslie had developed a sense of trust with faculty, another team shared that “one size fits all” faculty meeting were not always a good use of time for all staff. As a result, Leslie had subsequent discussions with other groups and made a decision that faculty meeting outcomes and agendas would be published in advance and teachers could decide on whether or not to attend. She knew it was a daring decision on her part but she said she wanted to be the type of leader who listened to input from staff. Every faculty member is responsible for the content shared at the meetings, however they chose to follow up. Those who do not attend are expected to spend time working on future plans either individually or with teammates. She concluded her presentation by saying, “Time would tell whether or not this was a good decision.”

When You Want to Build Trust and Lead Change?

Barbara was a high-energy individual who made her expectations for her staff clear and specific. Changes were occurring throughout her district, and she had read a great deal about how to be a change agent; she shared that her goal was to exemplify the qualities of flexibility, patience, intentionality, confidence and communication, all of which were important qualities a change agent should possess. She knew that change was difficult for many individuals but with great deliberation, she knew she had to remain steadfast to make her school the best it could be. She understood the importance of building a strong sense of trust with her teaching staff if her school was to move in the right direction. Upon personal reflection, she concluded that she had been somewhat negligent about being visible in her building, and that trust could only be achieved through improving personal relationships. She is pleased to have used the assignment the principals had been given to not just be a change agent for her staff, but to make changes in her own behavior as the school leader.



As I wrote about the stories from these instructional leaders, I was reminded of my own career as a principal. I recalled the many times that fellow administrators shared an idea that changed my belief system as well as inspired me to introduce new ways of thinking throughout the school. I will be forever grateful to my colleagues, and I hope that today's leaders continue to share ideas that will improve their own and their colleagues' effectiveness as instructional leaders.

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