

What's A Principal To Do?

When You Can't Do It All, What Are the Highest-Leverage Activities?

by Kim Marshall – *Education Week* September 20, 2006

Try this forced-choice exercise: if a principal wants to improve the quality of teaching and learning in his or her school, which *three* of these will have the greatest impact?

- Observing and evaluating full lessons, preceded by a pre-conference with each teacher and followed by a detailed write-up and post-conference;
- Systematic walkthroughs of the entire school focusing on target areas (for example, the quality of student work on bulletin boards);
- Mini-observations of 3-5 classrooms every day (five minutes per visit) with face-to-face follow-up conversations with each teacher;
- Quick “drive-by” visits to all classrooms every day to greet students and “manage by walking around”;
- Collecting and checking over teachers’ lesson plans every week;
- Requiring teacher teams to submit common curriculum unit plans in advance, and discussing them with each team;
- Having teacher teams use interim assessments of student learning to improve instruction and help struggling students.

Okay, you’re thinking, *all* of these activities are important and principals should manage their time so they do every one of them. But that’s impossible. There’s never enough time for principals to get to more than half of their “to do” list, and even the most heroically hard-working and self-disciplined school leader can’t do justice to all seven.

Hence the forced choice: which of these approaches have the *most* impact on the quality of teaching and the number of students who achieve at the proficient or advanced level? Minute for minute, which are the highest-leverage activities for a busy principal? Each seems plausible and has vocal supporters. In-depth lesson evaluations and write-ups (with pre-observation and post-observation conferences) are widely assumed to be the best strategy for improving teaching and learning. Inspecting lesson plans is a time-honored administrative activity aimed at helping teachers plan more thoughtfully, align instruction with state standards, and teach better. And there’s abundant literature on the

importance of being a visible administrator and getting into classrooms every day, both in systematic walkthroughs and informal visits.

But are these activities the most effective ways to improve student learning? In my fifteen years as a principal, I had increasing doubts about the efficacy of evaluating and writing up classroom “dog and pony shows,” looking at lesson plans that were often works of fiction, and doing walkthroughs and superficial “drive-by” classroom visits that didn’t reveal much about whether observable acts of teaching were producing actual student learning. Research by Mike Schmoker, Douglas Reeves, Robert Marzano, Richard DuFour, and others suggests that only three items on the list give principals the most helpful insights on teaching and learning and get the “engine of improvement” going in their schools:

- *Interim assessments with follow-up* – When teachers teams look at high-quality assessments of student learning (at least every nine weeks), the professional conversation shifts from how good their lessons were (which is usually debatable) to whether students actually learned. *We taught this material, but did the kids get it? Some of them didn't – why not? Now that we know what was confusing and difficult, what are we going to do to fix it? How can we get our students invested in their own improvement?* Exchanges like these are extremely rare in schools, but principals can spark them by having teachers give common interim assessments, scheduling time for teams to meet immediately afterward, holding teachers accountable for looking at the data and student work, having honest conversations about what’s working and what isn’t, and following up to make their teaching even better.

- *Unit planning* – When teachers work together to plan multi-week curriculum units (e.g., the Civil War, the solar system, ratio and proportion), working backwards from state standards, “big ideas,” and unit assessments, the result is more thoughtful instruction, deeper student understanding, and, yes, better standardized-test scores. But this kind of curriculum design is rare; most teachers plan instruction *forward*, one day or week at a time, and write their unit tests and final exams just before students take them. Principals can counteract this natural tendency by providing the training, support, and time for teacher teams to plan units collaboratively, using peer review and robust design standards to constantly improve their work.

- *Mini-observations* – When principals make frequent, unannounced supervisory visits to all classrooms (having a measurable goal is vital; mine was five a day), they are

using an efficient sampling technique and are far more likely to be able to answer several key questions: *Are teachers on track with the curriculum? Do students seem to be learning? Which staff members need closer attention and support? Who deserves special praise?* Conventional, pre-announced teacher evaluation visits and lengthy write-ups often miss the point and contribute little to improving teaching and learning, except in situations where they redirect or dismiss an ineffective teacher. Competent professionals know how ill-informed most evaluations are and shrug them off – a heart-breaking experience for principals who have worked hard to write up their observations. A much better use of a principal’s time is making a few brief classroom visits a day and being sure to catch each teacher within 24 hours for a candid conversation about what was happening, what each “snapshot” says about pedagogy and student learning, and how things are going in general.

Principals who make it their business to focus on interim assessments, unit plans, and mini-observations really know what’s going on in classrooms and have powerful leverage as they work with teacher teams. And building the capacity of teacher teams is crucial. When teachers work together to achieve specific, measurable goals for which members are mutually accountable, that’s truly the engine of student improvement.

How can principals get this engine going? By taking advantage of the synergy that can occur when they work on all three of these activities simultaneously: Looking at interim assessment results drives better planning and teaching and sharpens principals’ mini-observations (one school leader in Newark, NJ says that being familiar with his school’s quarterly assessment results is like “putting on 3-D glasses” when he walks into a classroom). Regular classroom observations keep teachers on their toes and give principals a better handle on whether the team needs additional planning, resources, and intervention. And thoughtful unit planning ensures that everyone knows what’s supposed to be learned and reduces the amount of “random,” off-track teaching.

In short, these three activities are a far more efficient use of a principal’s time than struggling to improve one teacher at a time via lesson plan inspection and infrequent, tedious classroom write-ups, or by cruising around the building seeing a lot and changing very little.

Don’t get me wrong – I’m not saying that these other activities are worthless. Principals *should* walk around their schools to “show the flag;” they *should* take visitors and colleagues on occasional walkthroughs of their buildings to get the overall picture

and look for specific items; they *should* glance occasionally at lesson plans; and they *should* conduct in-depth lesson evaluations when it's necessary and/or the union contract requires it. But principals shouldn't be under any illusions that these activities provide much bang for the buck – except when the dismissal of an ineffective teacher is at stake.

The problem is that many principals aren't spending quality time on the highest-value activities. Why not? Because it's profoundly countercultural in most schools for administrators to pop into classrooms unannounced, ask teams for unit plans, and require teachers to give common assessments and use the results to improve instruction. Many teachers are in the habit of planning at the last minute, have gone for years without authentic conversations with their principals, and have fallen into what Grant Wiggins calls the educator's egocentric fallacy: I taught it, therefore they learned it – and if they didn't, it's because of last year's teachers, neglectful parents, hip-hop culture, and other factors outside my control. Principals who face these challenges have a daunting task that taxes their skills as instructional leaders and takes them outside their comfort zone. It's natural to shy away from things that are difficult and provoke resistance, and many principals (for years, I was one of them) fall victim to creative avoidance. Those myriad daily distractions – and the less difficult forms of supervision on our initial list – provide a ready excuse for not getting to the hard stuff.

But get to it we must. And to do so, principals need strong convictions about what works, incredible self-discipline, and, yes, *courage*. Instructional leadership is all about minimizing activities that don't contribute to teaching and learning and focusing relentlessly on those that do – even if there's some initial discomfort and push-back. This kind of leadership will continuously improve the quality of teaching, promote collegiality and a deep sense of efficacy among teachers, and close the achievement gap that is the shame of our schools.

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