REFORM TALK
Comprehensive Regional Assistance Center Consortium–Region

"The Realities of Principals' Work"

(Parts of this article are adapted from Peterson, K. (1998). "Realities and Reform: Living with the Daily Realities of Principals' Work.")

Introduction

As district, state, and local policymakers consider trying to improve their schools, they are increasingly finding that effective principals are key to success. Principals are central to school improvement (Deal & Peterson, 1998), restructuring (Newmann & Associates, 1996), and school effectiveness (Levine & Lezotte, 1990). They help promote change, lead reforms, and support good teaching. Recently major reform groups, researchers, and policymakers have rediscovered the importance of principals in leading schools. It is clear that good school leaders help motivate and manage the school. But as we expect more and more from principals, it might be useful to understand and appreciate their worklives. In this article we consider the question: What are the daily work realities of school principals?

The Daily Realities of Principals' Work

Principals, like other managers, face a work day that is characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation (Mintzberg, 1973; Deal & Peterson, 1998). Successful school leaders must blend and balance leading and managing in the daily flow of nonstop activity (Deal & Peterson, 1994).

Brevity

The principal's day is spent in a welter of hundreds of brief tasks, many lasting under a minute. An hour has upwards of 50-60 separate interactions with students, parents, custodians, and teachers. The flow of interactions is nonstop, hectic, and often unpredictable--a student breaks his arm, a teacher needs a VCR for a day, a local newspaper calls about the new state test scores.

Variety

A day filled with hundreds of short tasks (upwards of 2000 during the school day) is busy, but principals' tasks are also enormously varied. Principals confront social, cognitive, and emotional variety. One minute the principal is talking with a 5 year old and the next a 63 year old. The next moment a minister wants to chat about "character education" followed by a parent who excitedly

wants to review the procedures for cheerleader selection. Principals must engage in complex strategic planning as well as routinely keep track of soda machine funds. The variety of tasks adds complexity and excitement to the day, but it also is draining and challenging as the principal advances through the minute-by-minute changes in activity.

Fragmentation

Like other managers (Mintzberg, 1973), school principals are central problem solvers of the organization and are constantly bombarded by issues, concerns, and dilemmas. They are expected to address the continuous flow of issues and so live in a fragmented, interrupted work schedule. Upwards of 60 percent of the day is spent responding to the demands, needs, and problems of staff, students, parents, and superiors. Principals are expected to be central problem solvers of the school and this means they are constantly interrupted. Fragmentation in their work causes stress and the need to make decisions rapidly, yet carefully.

Blending Management and Leadership

The needs of the organization also require principals to both manage and lead. As managers they ensure that the basic routines of the school--the schedule, the budget, the process of education--move forward smoothly and in a coordinated fashion. But schools also need leadership, from teachers, but especially from principals. As leaders, principals motivate, provide vision and direction, and shape a school culture that is deeply committed to student learning. In their daily work principals must be "bifocal," managing the routines of the school and leading it forward through their vision and values (Deal & Peterson, 1994).

In sum, principals worklives are hectic, varied, complex, and fragmented. But through this myriad of activity, decision making, problem solving, and motivating, the successful principal ably fosters a well run organization that has an abiding commitment to students. By understanding the daily realities of principals' work, educators, board members, and local stakeholders may be able to support and acknowledge the key role of principals in their schools.

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