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The educational impact of the assistant principal

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The educational impact of the assistant principal

Abstract

Literature dealing with secondary school administration gives little reference to the educational role or impact of the assistant principal. Reports at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association by Marshall (1984) and Reed (1984) suggest that the role of the assistant principal is fairly ambiguous and oriented primarily to serving an organizational stability function only peripherally related to the instructional domain in schools.

THE EDUCATIONAL IMPACT OF THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

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Literature dealing with secondary school administration gives little reference to the educational role or impact of the assistant principal.

Reports at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association by Marshall (1984) and Reed (1984) suggest that the role of the assistant principal is fairly ambiguous and oriented primarily to serving an organizational stability function only peripherally related to the instructional domain in schools.

Research suggest that the assistant principal role serves a transitional function for individuals moving from classroom teaching to school administration (Greenfield, 1984). This position has evolved in a haphazard method, generally focusing on short-term organizational requirements, such as the need for additional building level supervisors and student behavior coordinators (Hess, 1985).

In order for schools to utilize the assistant principal in their educational scheme, schools must use thoughtful, organized planning to ensure the position addresses long-term objectives, such as upgrading instruction, program evaluations, and staff development (Hess, 1985).

One of the great enduring myths of education is that the position of the assistant principal is a proper and useful training ground for the principalship (Kelly, 1989). The available literature tells us that the assistant principal has performed basically the same kinds of duties ever since the position was created. From a historical prospective, the assistant

principal has been seen as being less well-versed in school administration and management than the principal and thus has been assigned to numerous administrative details (Panyako & Rorie, 1987).

These administrative details generally have the assistant principal looking after the daily operation of the school, maintaining the functions of the organization at some level of efficiency and effectiveness, while the principal acts as the educational leader. More specifically, the assistant principal is usually depicted as looking after professional inservice work, the cocurricular program, building operations and maintenance, and student personnel services, particularly discipline and attendance (Kelly, 1987).

Literature defined the assistant principal position as essentially one of helping the principal, of sharing his load so as to free him to discharge his responsibilities as the instructional leader of the school. The results of this type of methodology leads to a "custodial" orientation which involves accepting and maintaining the roles as they currently exists (Marshall & Greenfield, 1985).

School districts should question whether the above analysis holds true for their administrative staff. Are they supporting the development of a custodial, non-risk-taking, non-instructional leader or are they searching for ways to restructure the training and work of the assistant principal.

The scope and responsibilities of the assistant principal can be extended to include a focus upon instructional and organizational matters

beyond scheduling curricular and extracurricular activities and supervising students (Greenfield, 1985). Doing so could result in a more effective use of the administrative resources available to schools without sacrificing the student supervision and scheduling functions that need to be addressed.

Research suggest that the assistant principal would like increased responsibilities in the areas of instructional leadership, curriculum improvement, advising parent groups, public relations, and the development and interpretation of school policies. A major emphasis was placed on becoming more involved in instructional leadership, especially in the areas of hiring, supervising, evaluating, and the disposition of teachers (Kelly, 1987). It should be emphasized that assistant principals want increased involvement in these areas, not total responsibility (Gorton, 1987).

In 1985, Kriekard and Norton (1987) conducted a study of 263 assistant principals in a six state area attempting to define the role of the assistant principal through competencies. They asked the assistant principals to identify the real competencies of their jobs, those they actually performed in their position. Then they asked the same assistant principals to identify the ideal competencies they should be performing in order to be more effective. Ninety-one ideal competencies were validated by the participating assistant principals.

The findings of their study disclosed the following areas where assistant principals wanted more involvement:

1. Expanded role in working with the principal in the development of educational activities and programs
2. Organization, coordination, and delegation of authority in the area of school management
3. Equal member on district's leadership team
4. Participation in development and interpretation of district policies.
5. Staff evaluations procedures and responsibilities in staff development
6. Professional leadership in school/community relations
7. Development of positive student behavior and attendance

Most assistant principals felt that since they had acquired extensive work experiences and had taken coursework that met or exceeded certification requirements, they were qualified for and wanted to play a larger leadership role in schools (Gorton, 1987).

Historically, the assistant principal was hired to free the principal from tedious, but essential administrative details. However, as school's have become more complex and have taken on more of society's problems, it becomes necessary for schools to develop the role of the assistant principal and utilize their contributions (Paskey, 1989).

The key person to maximize the educational role of the assistant principal is the school principal. The principal should provide assistant

principals with the kind of direction, help, supervision, and nurturing that will increase their instructional leadership role. Assistant principals need to be treated as important human resources, not a person to take care of the "loose ends" principals nor other administrative staff want to do.

Paskey (1989) describes an effective administration as one where the principal views the assistant principal as a partner and where they willing serve as a the key mentor. When a principal accepts this concept, the opportunity for total school involvement by the assistant principal will be provided and their leadership contributions will be strengthened..

As a mentor, the principal can do many things to maximize the assistant principal's school involvement and leadership contributions (Paskey, 1989). Areas needing to be addressed are:

1. Communication of the principal's goals and expectations for the school and for the scope of the assistant principal.
2. Work closely with the assistant principal on numerous leadership and management styles in order to help develop a style compatible with their personality.
3. Lend direction in developing organizational skills.
4. Share their knowledge of staff members strengths and weaknesses with the assistant principal.
5. Community's power structure and perceptions of education
6. Share administrative duties

7. Encourage staying current on educational materials such as curriculum, school management skills, and instructional methodology.
8. Support and project the assistant principal to the staff as an educational partner.

Effective administrators must be instructional leaders as well as managers, but the training of assistant principals seldom prepares them for the role of the principal. They must see their job as being more than that of fire fighter and the principal is the person to accomplish this (McIntyre, 1988). Communications with staff members, parents, and students should describe the joint responsibilities by the principal and assistant principal on the high priority of planning, organizing, and coordinating the operations of the school.

Effective administration requires effective management and leadership, and the assistant principal must be part of this action. They should be placed in charge of some of the school's important projects and, with the principal's guidance and assistance, given the authority to plan, execute, and evaluate school programs (McIntyre, 1988).

In the survey of the assistant principal in Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada (Kelly, 1987), one of the conclusions was the importance of the job description in making the assistant principal position a valid training ground for future principals. Normally the superintendent and/or principal defines

the duties and responsibilities via job descriptors on a district basis. In order for an assistant principal to grow professionally, they need to handle duties not specifically delineated. Whoever writes the job description should make the descriptors general in nature so the duties and responsibilities can be rotated between administrative staff members on a regular basis, allowing for more administrative experiences and an increase in professional development for the assistant principal.

The principal is the key to improving the assistant principalship (Gorton, 1987). The principal's attitude towards the role of the assistant principal determines to a large extent the effectiveness of the position (McIntyre, 1988). If the assistant principal position is to improve, the principal has to be willing to share responsibilities and duties, actively support the position and the persons occupying it through public and private recognition, and see the rich possibilities in the expanded role of the assistant principal.

Assistant principals are bringing just as much educational, academic, and professional experience in school administration to the job as the principal, and in some cases, a higher level of academic training and respectable years of on-the-job experience. Thus the traditional role of the assistant principal does not fit the modern assistant principal (Panyako and Rorie, 1987).

The office now involves many administrative responsibilities and

technical tasks that require special knowledge and training. Assistant principals of the future must be versed in all aspects of school management, ranging from financial accounting, school law, educational and psychological measurement, staff supervision and evaluation, and effective communication with students, parents, and the general public. They must also deal with matters relating to curriculum design and implementation, vocational guidance, and assessment of the unique educational needs of students.

The modern assistant principal must first be thought of as a principal and only secondarily as an assistant to the principal. If assistant principals are to have an educational impact via the assistant principalship, and if that position is to be regarded as genuine on-the-job training leading to a principalship, then changes are needed (Howley, 1985).

Many authors argue that the role of the assistant principal needs to be redefined to include a major organizational responsibility for identifying and solving problems of instructional practice and program articulation and also for guiding and supporting teachers in solving those problems. Greenfield's (1985) argument parallels the spirit of the suggestions made fifteen years ago by Austin and Brown (1970). A number of fundamental changes in the ways schools are organized and administered would need to take place.

Four basic assumptions underlie the successful implementation of Greenfield's (1985) plan. The first assumption is that school participants and organizational superiors need to redirect their focus on instructional and

organizational outcomes instead of procedures and processes.

His second assumption is that to implement successfully a reconceptualization of the assistant principal role, both teachers and administrators would have to acquire new knowledge and skills related to different work responsibilities. This increase in knowledge and skills would shift the relationship and interaction among teachers and the assistant principal.

The third assumption is that the school schedule can be arranged to permit one or more groups of teachers to voluntarily meet with the assistant principal to identify instructional and organizational problems. These groups would along with the assistant principal, analyze those problems and develop, implement, and monitor solution strategies.

The fourth assumption is that the roles of the assistant principal and teachers can be adjusted realistically to permit these new activities and responsibilities to be fully embraced and enacted. These responsibilities must not be "added" to current responsibilities, but the new responsibilities must replace one or more current role activities.

Greenfield's plan would make the role of the assistant principal more central in terms of instruction and to gain valuable experience in the broad range of responsibilities associated with the principalship. An implicit assumption is that the assistant principal can and should play a vital and central role in the instructional and organizational improvement of the school

without sacrificing their role related to monitoring student behavior and will foster organizational stability.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has initiated a career-development training program, funded for three years by the State of California, for new and experienced assistant principals focusing on instructional leadership (Thrust, 1987). The program includes specific job training based on their responsibilities, seminars, and structural field experiences.

An alternative to the assistant principal is developing the role of the associate principal. In Miamisburg, Ohio, administrators concluded that the assistant principal role was not good for the school or the individual. They changed the definition and focus of the assistant principal to that of an associate principal to receive more effective management for the school and enhance the career and professional growth opportunities (Bates and Shank, 1983).

The associate principalship was developed as a position different from the assistant principal in basic administrative role, in responsibility, and in relationship with other administrators in the district. The associate principal shared the same mix of responsibilities as the principal and assumed an equivalent portion of discipline problems, staff evaluations, and supervision of curricular areas.

The associate principals also participated in all major decisions

affecting the secondary program. The relationship between the associate and the principal was synergistic; each dependent upon the other. The associate was included in all districtwide meetings and had a voice or vote equal to that of any other building or central office administrator.

The autonomy created by such a position can enhanced the associate's self-esteem and image with the staff members and parents. Associate principals state that the increased responsibility provided the stimulus to strengthen and increase their leadership and management skills. They felt students, teachers, and community members saw them as knowledgeable school leaders and have become the effective managers their training and experience have prepared them to be (Bates & Shank, 1983).

The associate principalship provides an excellent training ground for the principalship. Only the magnitude of the position was enlarged, not the scope. Acceptance of the expanded role of the associate by district administrators, staff members, students, and parents was dependent upon the superintendent. The superintendent made it clear by written job description and public comments that the associate principal was semi-autonomous and that they were to be treated as an equal member of the district administrative team. The principal, too, conveyed this expectation to staff, students, and parents.

In order for the position of assistant principal or associate principal to operate to it's potential, the principal must be a confident, secure person

who is willing to share duties and responsibilities and who feels comfortable with shared decision-making.

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