

FOCUS ON: LEADERSHIP & MANAGEMENT

Calif. District Makes Instructional Leadership a Priority



Don Jones, standing in back at right, the principal of La Mirada High School, takes part in an observation of instruction at his school.

Four principals tiptoe out of the 1st grade classroom at La Pluma Elementary School, easing the door shut behind them. They've just watched a teacher's lesson, and now it's time to critique what they saw.

In the open-air hallway, they form a small circle with a University of Washington coach who is helping them build instructional-leadership skills. The head of the university's principal-leadership program is also there, as is La Pluma's principal, the district superintendent, and the administrator who oversees elementary schools. All nine watched the lesson, and are now ready to discuss it.

"OK," says Jan Kaneko, the coach. "What did you see in there? Based on what we know about 'shared reading,' what were the strengths of the lesson? What would be good next steps for this teacher?"

This recent morning huddle is part of the work by the Norwalk-La Mirada school district to transform the principals of its 29 schools into leaders of instruction, rather than managers of school buildings. Policymakers nationwide increasingly see the shift as crucial for academic achievement, but relatively few districts have taken concrete steps to help principals make it.

The district of 24,000 students on Los Angeles County's southeastern edge sought the help of the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership four years ago, when the district began focusing intensely on improving literacy. The partnership's theory is that teachers can improve instruction best when they have principals who know how to recognize good teaching and help them build those skills.

Level of 'Discomfort'

In the hallway circle, the principals, each of whom oversees her own school in the district, venture their observations. It's good that the teacher kept returning to areas of weakness for the students, says one. But the story she chose was too easy for 1st graders, says another. The text also didn't match the teacher's lesson objectives, says a third. They all agree that the teacher touched only on superficial plot points, instead of plumbing the real meaning of the story.

As they talk, a consensus emerges that the teacher—and perhaps others at the school—could benefit from learning more about how to choose texts that are well matched to lesson objectives and students' skills. La Pluma Elementary Principal Michelle Green makes a mental note to design staff-development sessions around that topic, and to provide concrete, constructive feedback to the teacher to help her improve her work.

As the day progresses, the group watches teaching strategies in four classrooms, debriefing after each one. Over bagels, they distill the take-away lessons of the day: Teachers need more help on selecting texts, and on understanding the distinctions between literacy strategies such as shared reading and guided reading.

As part of the district's partnership, coaches from the Center for Educational Leadership help Norwalk-La Mirada staff members with both literacy instruction and leadership skills. Each month is punctuated by large-group training, classroom walk-throughs, and small-group coaching. The center has developed a rubric that measures principals' mastery of 13 aspects of instructional leadership; it shows the district's principals making progress.

Stephen Fink, a former assistant superintendent in Washington state who is now the executive director of the center, said both principals and teachers endure "a certain level of discomfort" when they commit to learning pedagogical skills together, with colleagues watching.

But the payoffs can be significant. As he watched the small group of elementary principals dissect teaching at La Pluma recently, Mr. Fink noticed their growth.

"These principals are far more collectively precise about what they see than they were even last year," he said. "Last year, they would not have noticed that the text doesn't match the lesson objective. If leaders can't get this precise about what they see and what the next steps should be for a teacher, they can't provide meaningful feedback."

Gaining Credibility

Learning that precision has been a valuable part of the training for Yvette Cantu, who is the principal of Eastwood Elementary School and participated in the recent walk-through at La Pluma.

“My feedback is no longer just, ‘Oh, that was wonderful, thank you for letting me observe,’ ” she said. “It’s much more specific and aimed at helping them now, like, ‘Great. Of the three things we talked about, you’ve got two in place. What more can I do for you?’ ”

Honing the ability to define and guide strong instruction builds principals’ educational credibility with teachers, said Norwalk-La Mirada Superintendent Ginger Shattuck, who spent two decades as an elementary teacher and principal in the district before becoming its superintendent.

“What I saw before [the leadership training] was dedicated, hard-working operational managers, but they did not have the skills to make a difference in the classroom with their teachers,” Ms. Shattuck said. “Their ‘next steps’ were weak. Their evaluations were of limited help.

“Teachers would become disillusioned,” she said, “[and think] ‘He doesn’t know what I’m doing.’ They wouldn’t take the principal’s feedback seriously because it was too global. Building credibility in instruction was hard for them.”

Observing in classrooms has helped Ligia Hallstrom provide her teachers with professional development that matches their needs. She visits at least four classrooms a day in her own school, as well as classrooms at other middle and high schools each month with a cadre of principals as part of her training.

“Finally, professional development has a rationale and a goal,” said Ms. Hallstrom, the principal of the district’s Los Alisos Middle School. “For instance, I’ve noticed lately that my teachers are struggling with how to manage their students’ independent reading, and that they are weak on questioning kids about what they read. So we can focus [training] on that.”

The observation-and-feedback loop can build trust, respect, and collegiality between principals and teachers, said Laura Williams, the president of the 1,100-member Teachers Association of the Norwalk-La Mirada Area. As a career teacher, she was none too happy at the prospect of having her own principal—let alone groups of principals from other schools—walk into her classroom to watch her at work. But her attitude changed.

“I didn’t used to feel like my principal was my educational leader,” she said. “They were more just running the school operations, like a maintenance kind of person. Then I really saw we could collaborate. We could have professional talk and be peers.”

‘Prime Time’

It was important that top district administrators consulted the teachers’ union from the start in implementing the leadership-training program, Ms. Williams said. They agreed, for instance, that observations would not be used for teachers’ annual evaluations, but only for ongoing learning.

Not that there weren’t bumps along the way. Early on, Ms. Williams said, a few principals embarrassed teachers by sharing their classroom observations about their teaching—names included—in staff seminars. A few corrected teachers in front of their students. And a couple worked their observations into teachers’ evaluations.

“We had to clean that up,” said Ms. Williams, whose local union is an affiliate of the National Education Association.

It’s also been tough for principals to break away from their duties to spend time in classrooms. To help them, the district created “prime time,” a two-hour chunk of daily time the principals know they can use to visit classrooms, putting off phone calls and appointments for later, with the district’s blessing.

“We actually tell them, go ahead and leave a message on your voice mail telling parents, ‘Hi, I’m not being rude, but I have to call you back later—I’m with your kids and their teachers right now,’ ” said Ms. Shattuck, the superintendent.

Ms. Green, the La Pluma principal, said having other principals walk through her classrooms and share their observations helps her see patterns in what her teachers need. It has also changed the culture of teaching in her building, she said.

“Before, it was, ‘Why are you coming into my classroom? Do I have to let you in? I’m going to call my union [representative],’ ” she said. “Now it’s, ‘Why aren’t you coming to my class? We’re going to be doing something really great.’ ”

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