

Connection Statement: Effective School Leadership

Jeaniene Thompson

University of Missouri-Columbia

Connection Statement: Effective School Leadership

ISLLC Standard Two: Educational leaders have the knowledge and ability to promote the success of all students by promoting a positive school culture, providing an effective instructional program, applying best practice to student learning, and designing comprehensive professional growth plans for staff.

Synthesis of Literature

Key factors leading to student success in schools are strong relationships and supportive environments (Murphy, Beck, Crawford, Hodges, & McGaughy, 2001). Furthermore, research by Hattie (2009) suggests that school leaders who “promote challenging goals, and then establish safe environments for teachers to critique, question, and support other teachers to reach these goals together” (p. 83) have the most effect on student outcomes. An effective instructional leader keeps student learning at the forefront, holds high expectations for students and teachers, and not only provides effective and practical professional development for teachers, but creates a supportive and collaborative environment that improves practice. I will address these issues in this connection statement.

Instructional leaders need to have a strong foundation in the practice of learning. School leaders well versed in the dimensions of learning—theory on how the brain works, how students acquire and retain knowledge, how students are motivated, as well as the emotional, social and environmental issues that each student brings to the classroom (Illeris, 2006)—must be able to encourage teachers to use this information in implementing new approaches to learning.

Effective school leaders promote a climate where learning is a priority. Instruction should center on the student, their beliefs, interests, and the prior knowledge they bring to the classroom (Murphy & Alexander, 2006). School leaders must create an environment where students believe there is a purpose to what they are learning, that they have a voice in not just

student organizations and extra-curricular activities but in the academic areas as well, and where there are resources available that make the curriculum engaging and purposeful (Murphy et al., 2001). Curriculum must be relevant, current and of high quality.

An effective school leader recognizes classroom teachers who not only use a variety of student-centered instructional strategies such as project-based learning and cooperative learning, but those who are able to use instructional strategies effectively (Bottoms, n.d.). Regardless of the strategies employed, effective instruction occurs when the learning objectives are clearly identified, students understand the criteria that determine success, teachers effectively model the objectives, then check and re-check for understanding, then provide closure that ties it all together (Hattie, 2009). School leaders should not only encourage, but make time for new or inexperienced teachers to visit classrooms of those teachers who excel in the area of instruction, and who use a variety of instructional strategies, as evidenced by successful student achievement in those classrooms.

According to Murphy et al. (2001), schools where time is allowed for teacher collaboration—to discuss instructional strategies, prepare common curriculum, discuss classroom management issues and student concerns, and reflect on their work—create a “strong climate that influences expectations and student performance” (p. 182). School leaders must advocate for time during the regular school day for teachers to collaborate, not only with members within their own disciplines/departments/teams, but also with teachers from other disciplines as well. This collaboration time must be on a regular recurring basis, not just during special early release days or once or twice during a semester. School leaders also need to provide the means and training by which good collaboration occurs. It is one thing to give teachers time to collaborate, however, without proper and effective direction, many teachers feel

threatened by the very idea of collaboration and are unable to recognize it as the valuable resource it should be to improve student learning. “Positive collegial relationships are particularly important when schools are involved in change activities such as implementing innovations” (Murphy et al., 2001, p. 178).

A commitment must be made by school leaders to provide high quality, research-based and student-centered professional development. Professional development can take shape in many forms; however, in order to have commitment from teachers the professional development must be valuable, relevant and practical. Further, professional development should be driven by school-specific goals and planned together by teachers and leaders within the school (Murphy et al., 2001).

Application of Knowledge

Several years ago the Columbia Public School began an initiative stemming mainly from NCLB legislation that directed school districts to “close the achievement gap”. Assessment for Learning (AFL) has as its main goal that assessment *for* learning improves student achievement and that all students can learn. Concepts and strategies taught and implemented through the AFL program are based on research about how the brain works, how we learn, and how we're motivated to maximize learning (Stiggins, Arter, & Chappuis, 2006). For three years, I served as a Hickman High School representative on the district's AFL team, being trained in AFL concepts and strategies. After training, each school was allowed to establish its own implementation plan to train all building teachers in effective assessment strategies. Hickman High School has remained committed to the AFL concepts and continues to provide professional development in AFL strategies with an emphasis on training new teachers in the building.

Instructional leaders who focus on learning place a high priority on professional learning communities within their schools. This can be done by “creating structures for regular staff interaction about learning and teaching issues, and by modeling or facilitating participation in professional communities that value learning” (Knapp, 2006, p. 20). Prior to the beginning of the 2008-09 school year, CPS district administration approved a pilot plan whereby Hickman High School would implement discipline-specific collaboration time into the school work day. The schedule was modified and for the past two years, Tuesday’s has been dubbed “late start day” where students begin school an hour later than normal. This time is now being used to form what we are now calling professional learning communities. The first Tuesday of the month is reserved for interdisciplinary collaboration focusing on building-wide issues and goals. Last year the time was spent focusing on addressing issues such as student behavior and grading practices. All other Tuesdays are reserved for discipline-specific collaboration with a focus on identifying essential objectives, creating common assessments and reflective practice. The first year went fairly well, however, year-end evaluation led current administrators to reflect on the effectiveness and benefits of the collaboration time. A lack of training on how effective professional learning communities operate was identified and as a result many teachers and administrators attended summer workshops and learned strategies that are now being implemented in both the interdisciplinary and disciplinary collaboration teams.

Professional development that provides continuous opportunities for growth and development, that strengthens content as well as student-centered instructional strategies is imperative (Bottoms, n.d.). Our school administrators are also committed to providing quality professional development for faculty. The district has scheduled professional development days that are identified as building specific. Each school is able to develop their own professional

development opportunities based on the needs in their respective buildings. At Hickman, our principal is committed to quality professional development that reflects the needs of Hickman faculty and has charged a sub-committee of members of the Interdisciplinary Council (made up of department chairs) to identify those needs. As a member of that sub-committee, our time was spent surveying faculty, determining areas of greatest need, and identifying “experts” within the building and the district to provide the training. Our goal was to provide sessions on a variety of topics to meet the diverse needs of a very large faculty. As a result, during a professional development day in November, Hickman faculty will have the opportunity to choose three sessions to attend from over ten being offered. Topics range from adolescent behavior, assessment for learning strategies (specifically for new teachers), developing and using clear learning targets (AFL), community resources for students and families, strategies for addressing achievement disparities in the classroom, special education resources, and various technology related sessions. Through the direction of our principal, the committee worked hard to listen to faculty and provide quality sessions that will be practical and teacher-specific.

Reflection

This is but the beginning of my journey. As I struggled through writing this paper, I realize how much I have learned in such a short time but also how much I have yet to learn. I can say that after only a half semester of coursework, I have a new appreciation for my current principal and believe he truly exhibits instructional leadership as defined throughout our reading. Because of his encouragement and confidence in my abilities, I have accepted several new responsibilities to increase my leadership opportunities at Hickman High School. With these new opportunities I will be able to incorporate and cultivate the concepts learned through this course.

Prior to the beginning of this school year I accepted the position of department chair for the Business and Computer Department. In this role, I serve as a liaison to administration, prepare department budgets, manage textbook purchases, work closely with administrators to create the annual master schedule, mentor faculty, monitor collaborative teams, etc. In addition, I serve on the Interdisciplinary Council (IDC), made up of all department chairs. The administrative tasks are the easy part of the position. The focus of my future growth is in developing my intrinsic leadership abilities.

I am fortunate in that our school leader has provided an environment conducive for developing teacher leaders. For example, our IDC meetings are academically focused beginning with an annual book study. This year we have begun reading *How to Strive as a Teacher Leader* (Gabriel, 2005).

Rather than dictate what will be offered during our building professional development days, a sub-committee of the IDC works closely with faculty to present professional development that centers on best practices and student achievement. As a member of this sub-committee I will continue to draw from my knowledge gained in this program to be a contributing member of the committee.

Our school leader has high expectations for both teachers and students. Through our school's work with AFL and professional learning communities, teachers are in the process of identifying the essential learning objectives for each course and writing "student-friendly" clear learning targets. During our weekly collaboration activities, it is a constant struggle to convince a somewhat reluctant and "experienced" faculty the value of the AFL principles.

It is difficult at this point to write a connection statement about what effective school leadership means. I will continue to watch for and emulate good leadership practice in my school and look forward to continuing the educational journey.

References

- Bottoms, G. *What school principals need to know about curriculum and instruction*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board. Retrieved October 15, 2009 from http://www.sreb.org/programs/hstw/publications/pubs/01V51_WhatSchoolPrincipalsNeedtoKnow.pdf.
- Hattie, J. A. (2009). *Visible learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. New York: Routledge. (Chapter 6).
- Illeris, K. (2006). *How we learn: learning and non-learning in school and beyond*. New York: Routledge. (Chapter 3).
- Knapp, M. S., Copland, M. A., Plecki, M. L., & Portin, B. S. (2006). *Leading, learning, and leadership support* (CTP Research Report). Seattle, WA: University of Washington Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy. Retrieved August 10, 2009 from <http://depts.washington.edu/ctpmail/PDFs/Synthesis-Oct16.pdf>.
- Murphy, J., Beck, L. G., Crawford, M., Hodges, A., & McGaughy, C. L. (2001). *The productive high school: Creating personalized academic communities*. Thousand Oaks: CA. (Chapter 8).
- Murphy, P. K., & Alexander, P. A. (2006). *Understanding how students learn: A Guide for instructional leaders*. Thousand Oaks: CA. (Chapter 3)
- Stiggins, R. J., Arter, J. A., Chappuis, J. and Chappuis, J. (2006). *Classroom Assessment for Student Learning*. Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Service.