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# INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOLS

The argument is quite simple. Student achievement is the goal. To realize that goal, students need to be provided with high quality instruction. Teachers provide that instruction but, alas, they aren't equally good at it. Even if they were, a collective push toward a common vision would increase the power of everyone's individual efforts. Therefore, someone needs to lead the charge, so to speak. Someone needs to set the school's direction and make sure everyone is focused on instruction. Someone needs to monitor the quality of that instruction and to provide, personally or through others, the professional development actions that will increase the effectiveness of all staff and especially of those whose quality of delivery leaves something to be desired.

## Whose Job Is It?

There are three contenders – sometimes, more accurately, conscripted volunteers – for the role of that 'someone'. Recognizing that "in an avalanche, no single snowflake feels responsible", let's winnow the panel of job applicants.

Teachers are often touted, somewhat facetiously, as the instructional leaders of their classrooms. While that doesn't meet the job description of instructional leadership at the school level and can therefore be easily dismissed, relatively new school-based roles such as 'teacher leader' or 'instructional coach' look promising. Whether that promise will be realized will be based on, at the very least, sustainability (teachers who aren't attached to a class full of students are expensive) and cultural/contractual agreements (Should we openly recognize that some teachers are better than others and put those teachers in a position of authority over their less able colleagues?)

Superintendents are at an even further remove from instructional leadership than are isolated classroom teachers, yet I know of districts that have deliberately given the title 'Superintendents of Student Achievement' to a group of administrators. While it can be argued that boards of education, through their superintendents, do set and monitor the instructional direction of their districts, leadership at the school level must, by its very nature, be the responsibility of someone who is *in* the school.

Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, meet the successful applicant for the role of instructional leader – your school principal.

## Is the Job Getting Done?

Provincial and system level leaders reading this article will wonder why it took three paragraphs to come to the obvious conclusion. Beleaguered principals will sigh and wonder, yet again, if their job could ever be accomplished by mere mortals.

It's not that principals don't want to be instructional leaders; they know that "being an instructional leader is the most consistent leadership process found in academically high performing schools."<sup>1</sup> They also know that any suggestion that most are already fulfilling this role is exaggeration verging on mythology.<sup>2</sup>

One study of 45 principal leaders cited the results of several larger studies, then listed their own top ten barriers.<sup>3</sup> In all cases, the two greatest impediments to fulfilling the role of instructional leader were lack of time because of management duties and community expectations, and excessive paperwork, often related to Special Education.

Others write that those who choose the administrative career path are deliberately choosing "to de-emphasize teaching and learning in their careers";<sup>4</sup> that as their knowledge of teaching becomes outdated, they gravitate more and more toward doing what they feel comfortable doing (paperwork and management) and visits to classrooms become increasingly rare.

## What's it Going to Take?

Stephen Covey tells the story of a college instructor filling a jug with large rocks, smaller rocks, pebbles, gravel, sand and water, then asking his students what this says about time management. He dismisses suggestions that it's always possible to fit more items on the agenda, stressing instead that if the large rocks (priorities) hadn't been placed first, they wouldn't have fit.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the reason, instructional leadership responsibilities are seen as pebbles, gravel or sand – tasks to be squeezed into a day if time allows or, better yet, to be delegated to others. If we take seriously Jane Gilbert's call for school personnel to be knowledge producers and Kasandra Churcher's urging that teachers be researchers (see articles on pages 4 and 64, respectively, in this issue), we can see opportunities to redefine the role of the school principal so that it truly is that of prime learner. Or we can continue to spout the rhetoric while simultaneously burying principals with paperwork and assessing their effectiveness according to whether they can keep parents from phoning us. The choice is simple. What's it going to be? |

KAREN HUME IS CURRENTLY ON LEAVE FROM HER SCHOOL BOARD AND IS WRITING AND SPEAKING ABOUT EDUCATION. MORE INFORMATION IS AVAILABLE AT [WWW.KARENHUME.CA](http://WWW.KARENHUME.CA)

## Notes

- 1 Clete Bulach, Diane Boothe and Winston Pickett, "Analyzing the Leadership Behavior of School Principals." Available at <http://cnx.org/content/m13813/latest/>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 "Administrators as Instructional Leaders: An Iowa Perspective." Available at <http://sai-iowa.org/adminasinstruct.html>
- 4 Elaine Fink & Lauren Resnick (2001) "Developing Principals as Instructional Leaders". Phi Delta Kappan. Available at [www.lrdc.ptt.edu/hpic/Publications/FinkResnick.PDF](http://www.lrdc.ptt.edu/hpic/Publications/FinkResnick.PDF)
- 5 Stephen Covey, Roger & Rebecca Merrill, *First Things First*, (Toronto: Simon & Schuster, 1994).