

THE PRINCIPAL

Chapter 8 of *Educational Change at the Local Level*

By Michael Fullan

Effective principals attack incoherence.

— Bryk et al. (1998)

Forget about the principal as head of the school for a moment and think of her or him as someone just as buffeted as the teacher is by wanted or unwanted and often incomprehensible changes — and, what is more, *expected to lead these very changes*. Change is only one of the forces competing for the principal's attention, and usually not the most compelling one. Yet some principals are actively engaged as initiators or facilitators of continuous improvements in their schools. The principal is in the middle of the relationship between teachers and external ideas and people. As in most human triangles there are constant conflicts and dilemmas. How the principal approaches (or avoids) these issues determines to a large extent whether these relationships constitute a Bermuda triangle of innovations.

The Complexity of Leadership

There are at least four ways in which school leadership is complex: (1) the changes we are seeking are deeper than we first thought; (2) as such, there are a number of dilemmas in deciding what to do; (3) one needs to act differently in different situations or phases of the change process; and (4) advice comes in the form of guidelines for action, not steps to be followed.

First, then, is the realization that what is at stake is “reculturing” schools, a deep and more lasting change once it is attained. Any other changes are superficial and non-lasting. For example, one can increase scores on standardized achievement tests in the short run with tightly led and monitored changes. However, as Bryk and associates warn:

There is a growing body of case evidence documenting that it is possible to raise standardized test scores quickly under high stakes accountability systems based on standardized tests...However, there is also some evidence that these effects may not generalize beyond the specific accountability instruments and may not persist over time...[test scores improve] without undertaking the fundamental change necessary to achieve effects that are more likely to persist over time. (Bryk et al., 1998, p. 354)

Win the battle and lose the war, because the results are neither deep (what is learned is not transferable) nor lasting. These types of superficial learnings are not what Gardner (1999), Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (1999), and other cognitive scientists are talking about when students really come to understand and apply what they learn; they aren't the kinds of changes that will help disadvantaged students move forward, as Oakes and associates (1999) confirm. For this level of reform we need new learning cultures where many teachers are working in a concerted way both inside and outside of the school — something that requires sophisticated school leadership.

Second, developing learning communities is not a dilemma-free process, and once established, they are intrinsically problematic. This is what makes them valuable as adaptive learning environments. Day and Associates talk about several enduring tensions and dilemmas faced by the teachers' effective school head in their study, including balancing and integrating "internal versus external change demands," deciding on the boundaries and occasions of "autocracy versus democracy," finding "personal time versus professional tasks" with the latter becoming more and more consuming, and "development versus dismissal" in working with staff who are not progressing.

Also difficult is deliberately valuing differences of opinion and even dissent. It is a mistake for principals to go only with like-minded innovators. As Elmore (1995) puts it: "[S]mall groups of self-selected reformers apparently seldom influence their peers" (pg 20). This strategy just creates an even greater gap between the innovators and others, which essentially becomes impossible to bridge. It is counterintuitive, but effective, "to respect those you wish to silence" (Heifetz, 1994). Incorporating naysayers in complex times is necessary because they often have some valuable ideas and criticisms, and you need them for implementation, but how do you know when you are going too far in this direction?

Third, we are beginning to find out that effective leaders combine different leadership characteristics depending on the phase of the change process or on circumstances over time. To turn "failing schools" around you need assertive leadership; schools on the move need facilitation, coaching, and assistance; more fully developed professional communities need a greater scope for participative problem solving (see Boyle, 2000).

NOTES

The fourth way in which leadership is complex pertains to the realization that it cannot be captured in a checklist. We can provide guidelines for action but no definitive list of steps. It is always the thinking leader who blends knowledge of local context and personalities with new ideas from the outside who is going to do best. Our own recent set of six guidelines for principals is a case in point.

1. Steer clear of false certainty (there is no ready-made answer out there to the “how” question).
2. Base risk on security (promote risk-taking but provide safety nets of supportive relationships).
3. Respect those you want to silence (incorporate and learn from dissenters).
4. Move toward the danger in forming new alliances (“out there” may be dangerous, but you need external partners).
5. Manage emotionally as well as rationally (work on your emotional intelligence, don’t take dissent personally).
6. Fight for lost causes (be hopeful against the odds).

In short, the principal’s role has become decidedly more daunting, more complex, and more meaningful for those who learn to lead change, and are supported in that role.

CALIFORNIA PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

Inherent in these standards is a strong commitment to cultural diversity and the use of technology as a powerful tool.

Standard 1

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

- Facilitate the development of a shared vision for the achievement of all students based upon data from multiple measures of student learning and relevant qualitative indicators.
- Communicate and implement the shared vision so that the entire school community understands and acts on the mission of the school as a standards-based educational system.
- Leverage and marshal sufficient resources to implement and attain the vision for all students and subgroups of students.
- Identify and address any barriers to accomplishing the vision.
- Shape school programs, plans, and activities to ensure integration, articulation, and consistency with the vision.
- Use the influence of diversity to improve teaching and learning.

Standard 4

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

- Incorporate information about family and community expectations into school decision-making and activities.
- Recognize the goals and aspirations of diverse family and community groups.
- Treat diverse community stakeholder groups with fairness and with respect.
- Support the equitable success of all students and all subgroups of students through the mobilization and leveraging of community support services.
- Strengthen the school through the establishment of community, business, institutional, and civic partnerships.
- Communicate information about the school on a regular and predictable basis through a variety of media and modes.

Standard 2

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

- Create an accountability system of teaching and learning based on student learning standards.
- Utilize multiple assessment measures to evaluate student learning to drive an ongoing process of inquiry focused on improving the learning of all students and all subgroups of students.
- Shape a culture where high expectations for all students and for all subgroups of students is the core purpose.
- Guide and support the long-term professional development of all staff consistent with the ongoing effort to improve the learning of all students relative to the content standards.
- Promote equity, fairness, and respect among all members of the school community.
- Provide opportunities for all members of the school community to develop and use skills in collaboration, leadership, and shared responsibility.
- Facilitate the use of appropriate learning materials and learning strategies which include the following:
 - students as active learners, a variety of appropriate materials and strategies, the use of reflection and inquiry, an emphasis on quality versus quantity, and appropriate and effective technology

Standard 5

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by modeling a personal code of ethics and developing professional leadership capacity.

- Demonstrate skills in decision-making, problem solving, change management, planning, conflict management, and evaluation.
- Model personal and professional ethics, integrity, justice, and fairness and expect the same behaviors from others.
- Make and communicate decisions based upon relevant data and research about effective teaching and learning, leadership, management practices, and equity.
- Reflect on personal leadership practices and recognize their impact and influence on the performance of others.
- Encourage and inspire others to higher levels of performance, commitment, and motivation.
- Sustain personal motivation, commitment, energy, and health by balancing professional and personal responsibilities.
- Engage in professional and personal development.
- Demonstrate knowledge of the curriculum and the ability to integrate and articulate programs throughout the grades.
- Use the influence of the office to enhance the educational program rather than for personal gain.
- Protect the rights and confidentiality of students and staff.

Standard 3

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

- Monitor and evaluate the programs and staff at the site.
- Establish school structures, patterns, and processes that support student learning.
- Manage legal and contractual agreements and records in ways that foster a professional work environment and secure privacy and confidentiality for all students and staff.
- Align fiscal, human, and material resources to support the learning of all students and all groups of students.
- Sustain a safe, efficient, clean, well-maintained, and productive school environment that nurtures student learning and supports the professional growth of teachers and support staff.
- Utilize the principles of systems management, organizational development, problem solving, and decision-making techniques fairly and effectively.
- Utilize effective and nurturing practices in establishing student behavior management systems.

Standard 6

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

- View oneself as a leader of a team and also as a member of a larger team.
- Ensure that the school operates consistently within the parameters of federal, state, and local laws, policies, regulations, and statutory requirements.
- Generate support for the school by two-way communication with key decision makers in the school community.
- Work with the governing board and district and local leaders to influence policies that benefit students and support the improvement of teaching and learning.
- Influence and support public policies that ensure the equitable distribution of resources, and support for all the subgroups of students.
- Open the school to the public and welcome and facilitate constructive conversations about how to improve student learning and achievement.