Literacy teams: Sharing leadership to improve student learning

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As the United States enters year 3 of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002), the U.S. Department of Education clearly states the expectations for schools. They are embodied in the following components: accountability, commitment, sharing, and leadership. The intent is for schools to focus on reading and bring about improved reading performance for all students (National Institute for Literacy, 2002). Discussions on these federal initiatives, whether in faculty meetings or in school hallways, are never dull. Whatever side of the argument you choose, there is no denying that literacy instruction in U.S. schools is changing.

Initiatives are not concentrating on what and how teachers are teaching; administrators and teachers are being asked to explain what and how students are learning.

Accountability, through annual testing, drives schools and districts to focus on improving test scores. Districts seek the best programs to teach reading and the most effective professional development providers for their teachers’ inservice. Publishers of test preparation materials are geared to provide schools with whatever is needed to improve student scores. This need to look outward for solutions is typical. Someone out there has developed a better program; we just have to find it, so that all of our students make adequate yearly progress. But, rather than looking outside for answers, schools could look within and find that they have many of the solutions already. Schools need to widen their vision beyond accountability and also take commitment, sharing, and leadership into perspective.

The role of principal as leader

The American Heritage Dictionary (2000) defines a leader as “one that leads or guides” and leadership as “guidance,” “direction,” and the “capacity or ability to lead.” Traditionally, the principal is the leader of a school. For the better part of the last century, this leadership role largely meant managing the school. Management encompassed a wide range of tasks, including but not limited to developing schedules, maintaining budgets, meeting with parents and other community groups, and evaluating certified and noncertified staff. In a well-managed school, principals worked in their offices and teachers worked in their classrooms. More recently, there has been a call for principals to serve as instructional leaders in their schools, taking time that was previously spent on managerial tasks to become more involved with the instructional program. Ready or not, principals are being asked to take on the role of change agent in their schools.

Any one person who could provide knowledge and guidance in all areas of the curriculum and still have time to manage a building full of teachers and students would have to be Superman or Wonder Woman. And yet the role of principal as instructional leader has become a widely accepted, somewhat understood, and all too often impractical one.

Changing the vision of leadership

Booth and Rowsell (2002) provided three facets for the role of principal as literacy leader. The
principal can act as instructional leader and supporter of teachers’ needs, but shared leadership is the facet that leads to significant changes in teacher and student performance. Building a system of shared leadership in a school means giving more than lip service to the idea of teachers and administrators sharing responsibilities for student learning. It begins with commitment from every staff member—from the principal to the custodian—that learning is what is valued, and that every effort will be made to keep learning at the center of school activities. Fullan (2002) outlined some characteristics of leaders: They have a moral purpose and work to make a difference with other leaders in a school. They are knowledgeable about the change process and realize that change will create resistance, but they have the tools at hand to help others address concerns and commit to it. They establish and improve relationships with teachers who support change, as well as those teachers who resist it. Leaders recognize that teachers who share information through the social process of engaged discourse achieve personal and professional growth. They provide stability through coherence. Efforts of improvement are targeted, specific, and focused on student learning. With these characteristics in mind, let’s envision a shared literacy leadership team.

What does the team look like?

There is no one model of a literacy leadership team. However, essential members would be the principal, the reading specialist or literacy coach, a primary-level teacher, an intermediate-level teacher, and any resource teachers (bilingual or special education) who work with students across multiple grade levels. The team doesn’t require a teacher from each grade level, but it does require an understanding that information must be shared. Each member of the literacy leadership team is responsible for communicating with other teachers in the building.

A starting point for developing roles and responsibilities is the International Reading Association’s Standards for Reading Professionals (Professional Standards and Ethics Committee, International Reading Association, 2003). They offer a range of categories, including reading specialists/literacy coaches, classroom teachers, and administrators. For some reading specialists, applying these standards might mean revising their role as the special teacher who takes students down the hall to that of the teacher and learner who works closely with other teachers and students. Principals are vital to the literacy leadership team. They play a critical role in organizing and facilitating shared leadership.

How does the team sound?

The sounds of a literacy leadership team can be heard through the “voice” of a firm definition of literacy instruction and learning, one established through a guaranteed and viable curriculum. This definition puts learning at the front of all conversations. Faculty meetings move from committee reports and discussion of field trips to in-depth discussions of curriculum issues, analysis of data, and goal setting for improvement. There is consistency (not to be confused with conformity) in the language of instruction. The expectation is that all students can and will learn. There is no room for preconceived ideas about learners on the basis of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or other factors outside of a teacher’s control.

The literacy leadership team must be the voice of reason and support and take a positive perspective on change. Difficult issues must be discussed at the table, not in the parking lot. Discussions must not only honor each teacher’s level of professional knowledge but also motivate all teachers to study, practice, and refine their craft of teaching literacy.

How does the team act?

The actions of a principal who is literacy leader will always speak louder than words. School walk-throughs (Ginsberg & Murphy, 2002) are a good example of that. The purpose of these unscheduled visits to classrooms is not to evaluate teacher performance but to observe student learning. A walk-through is a short visit, usually no more than five minutes, and a principal might simply observe levels of student engagement or listen in as students hold a small-group discussion. Because the focus is always on student learning, not teacher performance, walk-throughs can establish a sense of shared responsibility for student learning between administrators and teachers. Feedback is an essential
component of walk-throughs and can be in the form of a quick e-mail, or a sticky note left in the teacher's mailbox. Feedback should be specific and constructive, such as "Thanks for letting me see your student discussions in action. They are great thinkers!" or "You have an interesting way of posing questions to students. Would you consider sharing this at our next staff meeting?" Walk-throughs require that principals create risk-free environments where teachers are not afraid to be seen doing a lesson that isn't picture perfect.

Reading specialists can serve as leaders by planning and teaching cooperatively. They can also "substitute" in teachers' classrooms, enabling those teachers to leave and observe other teachers. In addition, reading specialists and other literacy leadership team members might form study groups (Lambert, 2002) around a specific topic or text. Literacy leadership team members can help locate professional reading materials to support the study group as well as facilitate discussions or train others as facilitators. Study groups can meet before school, during lunch, or after school. Meetings can even be held electronically in a chat room on a website.

Schools that develop a framework for shared literacy leadership become collegial communities of instructional practice where learning is the shared responsibility of all members. These are schools where teaching and learning are engaging, motivating, and invigorating. They are the schools that every teacher and student deserves.

References

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