Collegiality

Collegiality - A New Way to Define Instructional Leadership By Thomas R. Hoerr

When a parent says, "My child's school is a wonderful school," what that parent really means is that his or her child has had a super teacher, followed by a great teacher, followed by a tremendous teacher. Sparkling facilities and state-of-the-art technology are important, and - to the degree that they enable teachers to do a better job of teaching - they are valuable. But the most important factor in a child's education remains what it has always been: the teacher. When children have wonderful teachers year after year, they flourish, and their parents are delighted with the school.

That's a simple premise, but it has important implications for principals. All principals know that teachers are the most important factor in the educational equation; we learned it in graduate school. We also learned that we are expected to provide the instructional leadership that enables teachers to grow professionally. But - like many of the important things in life - providing such leadership is easier said than done.

Obstacles to Instructional Leadership

During the last several decades, the role of the principal has become increasingly complex as society has made ever-greater demands on the schools. Today there are breakfasts to provide and after-school programs to oversee. There are special programs to coordinate for students at both ends of the academic spectrum. There are anti-gang and drug-awareness efforts, employee unions and neighborhood groups whose needs and interests must be attended to, IEPs and SATs - along with OBE, TQM, and the ADA. Indeed, the list is almost endless.

As schools have taken on a variety of new tasks, educators have come to understand much more about how children learn. And as knowledge of child development, curriculum, and instruction has burgeoned, the profession has become Balkanized. Many of today's teachers have their own areas of expertise and their own professional language. One group of teachers may live and breathe thematic instruction, another group investigates student portfolios and other forms of alternative assessment, "the Reggio Approach" occupies the kindergarten crown, and a committee considers putting in place a school-wide program based on Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. It is simply not realistic to expect an administrator to serve as an intellectual resource or catalyst for all these (and countless other) efforts.

As Roland Barth said in his 1980 book, Run School Run, "The obstacles to the job are the job." But while we administrators can identify the constraints and the roadblocks that keep us from exercising instructional leadership, we cannot let those obstacles stop us. Our task is to find ways to remove or go around them.
The Teacher's Role

Although the principal bears ultimate responsibility for the quality of his or her school, it is both necessary and appropriate that teachers take on some of the responsibility for instructional leadership. This means that the principal will share power. It means leadership teams. It means that teachers will play a part in determining school procedures. It means that teachers will view their roles from a school-wide, not just a classroom, perspective. It means that teachers, working together, will take responsibility for helping their peers learn and grow.

Like principals, however, teachers have obstacles that keep them from serving as instructional leaders. The greatest, of course, is their hectic and isolated workday. Most teachers spend 80% to 90% of their workday in direct contact with students. Planning periods, recesses, or lunch breaks are about their only times away from students. And many of these "free" periods are taken up by a child who needs extra attention or by a parent who can only be reached by telephone at work.

Another obstacle is the fact that most teachers are not trained to help peers grow professionally, and the vast majority of teachers find this new role uncomfortable at first. On those occasions when discussions in the teachers' lounge focus on education, they typically deal with the three C's: children, curriculum, and complaints. Rarely do teachers solicit feedback about their teaching performance from their peers; rarely do they offer help to one another that goes beyond sharing a ditto master or lending a pair of scissors. Teachers are often reluctant to view themselves as "teachers of teachers."

This mindset causes teachers to see themselves as figure skaters who are being scored individually on form and creativity. Instead, they ought to view themselves as hockey players, all playing on the same team and working toward the same goal: a better school.

However, empowering teachers to collaborate on school-wide tasks and to work with one another on becoming more effective requires that a new relationship be forged between administrators and teachers. Implementing this kind of program is never easy. If collegiality has not existed before, resistance is likely to come from all quarters. To some extent, this is understandable: collegiality takes more time; it requires participants to play new roles, and it makes everyone accountable (since everyone is now part of the solution). Still, the benefits warrant the effort. The following factors should be considered in thinking about how to create a sense of collegiality in a school.

1. Time is our most precious resource. Sufficient time must be allocated for collegiality. Whether the time to talk comes during before-school or after-school meetings, at lunchtime, over dinner, at evening meetings, or on weekends depends on a given faculty's availability and preference. When is unimportant. The important thing is that teachers and administrators meet frequently enough and for sufficiently long periods to enable them to discuss their educational philosophies, long-term issues, and ways they can work together. Faculty
meetings are too often perfunctory, covering information that could be disseminated in a school bulletin, or they are held in response to a crisis situation.

Once the time for collegiality has been carved out, someone - perhaps the principal, initially - needs to set an agenda and focus the discussion. Collegiality stems from discussions about students, instruction, and curriculum, and such discussions take significant chunks of time. Fifteen minutes won't suffice.

2. An invitation is better than a command. Change is best viewed as a series of concentric circles, starting small and expanding. Inviting everyone to participate at the start is important. From this beginning, a nucleus of interested teachers will no doubt emerge - people who are willing to take risks, to look at their roles differently, and to get involved with school-wide issues. Complaints about favoritism can be avoided by continually sharing information with the entire faculty and by periodically opening membership in the group to everyone or by forming new groups to address different topics. As participating teachers tell their peers that involvement has been rewarding, others will want to join in.

3. Power shared is power multiplied. But principals need to realize that, if teachers are going to invest their time and energy, they need to be heard and to make a difference on substantive issues. Inevitably, then, some things will be decided in ways that differ from the principal's preference.

The key is thinking through ahead of time which issues are appropriate for collegial decisions and which issues should be resolved by the principal. The final say on teacher evaluation, for example, should probably reside with the principal. But there is no reason why teachers cannot provide the principal with input regarding the criteria used to evaluate them or regarding the evaluation process itself. Similarly, there is no reason why teachers cannot control a significant portion of their classroom budgets, set the agenda for faculty meetings, or provide input into the scheduling of specialist teachers and the use of teacher aides. Once such "administrivia" have been shared, the climate is established for teachers to work with one another on curriculum integration, on teaching higher-level thinking skills, or on observing one another's classes.

4. We practice what we value. When the principal actually takes part in the meetings, he or she demonstrates that collegiality is valued. Delegating responsibility to others is better than hoarding all the decisions, but actively participating in the group is better still. By his or her presence, the principal gives unequivocal testimony to the importance of the task.

Teachers who engage in collegial activities can be supported in a number of ways. Hiring substitutes to free classroom teachers for planning sessions during the school day is one obvious means of showing that teachers' participation and input are valued. Even if substitutes are hired only a couple of times per year, the message is clear. A positive note about a teacher's participation in collegial efforts on end-of-year evaluation forms says too that such activities are valued.
5. Focus on an important issue. Make sure that the issue on which collegial efforts are focused is one that is meaningful to teachers. One way to find meaningful issues is through a reading group. Invite interested teachers to meet weekly to discuss articles or books that all participants have read in advance. Discussing such readings is a good way to begin talking about significant issues in a collegial setting. To keep the tone nonhierarchical and genuinely collegial, find a teacher to chair the meetings.

Another good way find meaningful issues is simply to ask teachers what questions they would like to pursue, what frustrations they are experiencing, and how they would like to see their school change. This is a risky strategy for the principal, but if he or she cannot be vulnerable, the likelihood for sustained change is not strong.

Dramatic change is slow and difficult. But if schools are to excel, faculties must continue to learn and grow with their students. Clearly, a collegial approach that empowers teachers and lets them share the responsibility for instructional leadership holds promise for the future.