Instructional Leadership: It Isn't Just for Administrators Anymore!

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Abstract

Instructional leadership is defined as the development and/or exercise of intentionally planned activities by an educator that leads to significant student achievement. It has generally been found within the realm of the school administrator, principal, or headmaster. These men and women have gone through years of administrative training in order to lead their schools and institutions to great levels of academia. This has been their defined role and their domain of influence and power. As classroom teachers take on more accountability for the performance of their students, the role of leadership of the instructional program is shifting, and rightfully so. The four pillars of instructional leadership empower teachers to take a new approach to instruction in their classrooms. In this presentation, attendees from Croatia to Nigeria, from England to Italy will learn how to be instructional leaders in their classrooms and in their schools. Administrators will rejoice when they realize student achievement isn't just their responsibility. They will redefine their role and view themselves as facilitators of instructional leadership with their teaching faculty. Teachers and administrators alike will be asking themselves, "What would an instructional leader do in this situation". When these four pillars are in place and implemented with fidelity and within the framework of the triangle of success, high student achievement will be consistent and pervasive. Whether the educator works in an elementary setting, secondary, or higher education, student success is the common denominator. Regardless of where the future of education is heading, it's going to take instructional leaders to take it there. Now is the time to recognize the four pillars that support instructional leadership efforts in an educational institution. Just as the pillars remain in tack at the Pantheon in Rome since 126 a.d., so these pillars will remain regardless of the changes in education, whether they be distant learning, hybrid delivery of instruction, pedagogical developments, or other 21st century strategies that come from studies on education.

Introduction

For too long, instructional leadership has been part of the job description and responsibilities of school and district administrators. Unfortunately, this has left a large group of talented, visionary individuals out of the leadership process; namely teachers. While this paper does not single out this group, the purpose is to include them along with administration in leading the instructional charge to improve student achievement. After all, that is the main reason for the existence of educational institutions around the world, to educate and to continuously find ways to improve the academic standing of all students. And as educators and researchers explore the future of education in all nations, it behooves us to find ways that are cost efficient, proven effective, and universally applicable. The information presented at this conference all comes back to the content of this paper and is timelessly related to the future of education worldwide. To that end, this paper will focus on the four pillars of instructional leadership that will lead both teachers and administrators in developing strategies and approaches that ultimately and positively impact student achievement. Implementation of these four pillars resides in the spirit of the teacher and administrator. These pillars will be presented within the framework of the triangle of success.

Pillars give a perception of longevity, strength, and support. Coincidentally, instructional leadership embodies these same characteristics. It takes a strong leader, full of courage and vision, to move a classroom or school toward higher levels of achievement. A leader must support the efforts of colleagues, thus creating a team approach toward excellence. The longer an instructional leader is in place, the more knowledgeable and skilled that individual becomes. Hence, the first pillar addresses knowledge and skill. It is absolutely essential for teachers and administrators to have a firm understanding of what is expected of students at every grade level relative to the knowledge and skills identified at those grade levels as essential to preparation for the next level. These grade level expectations are identified in standards designed specifically for each grade level and each subject. By knowing what is expected to be taught and learned, teachers are able to align their instruction to

the standards and administrators are able to track and monitor implementation of the standards. [1]. More succinctly put, Marzano believes there are certain essential and enduring skills and knowledge students should know and be able to do when they leave various educational settings. Naturally, it is up to the instructional leaders present in those settings to determine what that body of knowledge looks like. [2]. Covey believes successful leaders begin with the end in mind. This certainly supports Marzano's work and has been applied with outstanding results. Personally, as a building level administrator, I worked with a core group of teachers to identify what we wanted every child to know and be able to do as he/she excited each grade level and ultimately our school. As a result, parents knew what to expect from their children's teacher and this helped create a working bond between home and school. A broadly stated expectation for this Pillar would be "Instructional leaders know what knowledge and skills students should have when they leave their institution."

I am reminded of a quote by Epictetus, the Roman teacher and philosopher, who said, "Tentative efforts lead to tentative outcomes. Therefore give yourself fully to your endeavor…one day you will build something that endures; something worthy of your potential." Instructional leadership doesn't just happen. It starts with knowledge and skills. Then, the instructional leader chooses to live an intentional life, both personally and professionally. [3] Effective Schools research identifies a correlate of clear and focused mission as essential to student success. This is the crux of intentionality; having a clear idea of where students should be (vision) and focused on making that happen. So what does intentionality look like? There are five simple steps to living an intentional life. First, clearly identify what is needed, then commit to making the necessary changes, followed by creating a list of the "one things" that need to be done to satisfy the need, then begin work on these "one things", and finally, be prepared to revise your list. For example, as Superintendent of Schools, I realized my teachers were not using the state standards to prepare their daily lessons. Planning was done around teacher interest rather than the prescribed course of study. Consequently, our end-of-year test scores were some of the lowest in the state. Problem identified! Now that I knew the reason behind our low test scores, I couldn't let it stay there. I committed to holding teachers accountable to the standards for their grade level or content area. To do this, I listed what needed to happen. First, current copies of the state standards were distributed to every teacher in the district. Second, teachers were asked to cite the standards used in preparation of each lesson. Then, principals were asked to check lesson plans on a regular basis for compliance. Each time I met with principals, I asked them about lesson plans and the prevalence of citing standards. This kept the momentum up, it sent a message to teachers that this was a top priority (the only priority that year), and as a result, 80% of my schools ranked either commendable or superior. A broadly stated expectation for this pillar would be, "Purposeful efforts lead to purposeful outcomes."

Teachers and administrators must go through the process of identifying those three to five beliefs on which they simply will not budge. We call these non-negotiables. This process is essential as it serves as an anchor, a launching point from which school reform or changes can take off with little chance of going backwards. When an entire school identifies, supports, and enforces these few non-negotiables, the teamwork is unstoppable. At my university in the United States, the professors in my School of Education and Psychology have identified four non-negotiables relative to our working relationship with each other and with students. Those non-negotiables that we stand firm on are: a. nurture all students relative to their individual will and choice in preparation for their life's work. We believe students at the age of adulthood are responsible for their futures and who are we to stand in their way and direct them along the same path we took a few decades ago; b. teach and model balance, collegiality, open communication, and respect. In today's global society and interconnectivity, we can find ourselves in a constant state of business that appears good but creates an imbalance in our lives. c. teach and advise from our university's worldview. Students specifically select our university to attend regardless of the higher price tag than public universities simply because they want to be educated with a similar perspective as the university holds. And d. hold firm to integrity at all levels- academic, social, and daily living. A life lived in integrity can withstand criticism and the reputation of the individual is held intact. A broadly stated expectation for this pillar would be, "Stand firm on those non-negotiables you have selected as being in the best interest of students".

It seems almost a given that leadership plays a role in instructional leadership but think about those individuals who are in leadership positions but seem to lack one or more of the pillars presented here. Leadership comes as an empowerment factor when one has the other three pillars as part of their professional persona. What happens next is crucial and frequently needed. When confronted with a situation, no matter what it is, the instructional leader must ask himself/herself, "what would an

instructional leader do in this instance?" Thinking like an instructional leader takes practice. It's different than simply leadership. Managers can lead in the day-to-day operations. But instructional leaders are tasked with leadership that touches the future. At the close of one of my graduate level courses, I challenged the students, all aspiring administrators, to the following: "when circumstances arise, think instructionally not instinctually, think intelligently not emotionally, think about the child not about the adult. Make decisions in the best interest of children and I doubt if anyone would take issue with your decisions. You may actually find it easy to defend a decision based on the best interest of children." A broadly stated expectation for this final pillar would be, "Lead your classroom, your school, your district, as if your own children were in attendance".

Effective leadership is dependent upon the implementation of the four pillars. But in order to have the most impact on high student achievement, it must occur within the framework of what I call the triangle of success. [4] There are three key components of the triangle that deal with total alignment of the instructional program. Each of these components appears on a side of the triangle. This is an equilateral triangle as each side is equally important. With three equal sides, we give equal importance to all three factors. Those factors are the intended curriculum, which can be placed on the initial side (bottom) of the triangle; the taught curriculum that is placed on the vertical side (right side); and the tested curriculum that is placed on the terminal side (left side) of the triangle.

The intended curriculum (initial side) can be defined as the standards that have been adopted for a particular grade level or content area, such as the math standards or science standards. It is essential that teachers use grade-level specific standards when developing their units and lesson plans. This is the "initial" work that needs to be done. Instructional leaders must have a working knowledge of the intended curriculum for effective planning, accountability, and vision-building.

The taught curriculum (vertical) is designed to take students on an upward educational journey, thus the "vertical" designation. But this journey must take place "on the road paved with intentional actions." Instructional leaders must focus all of their energies on the taught curriculum to be sure what is being taught is fully aligned with what the standards are and what is being tested. It is an unethical practice to test students on subject matter that has not been fully presented in the classroom. To this end, instructional leaders are responsible for the delivery of appropriate content in order to advance students through the standards. This is the vertical work of the instructional leader.

The tested curriculum on the terminal side of the triangle is aptly positioned. Assessment is the termination of a unit of study or a course of study. It reflects information the teacher has presented, what the student had an opportunity to learn, and how effective the student is in recalling the information. Because education is all about the acquisition and application of knowledge, and assessment is all about showing what a person knows and can do, all students must end up in the "terminal" having been exposed to a taught curriculum based on the intended curriculum. This is the essence of instructional leadership. This is what the future of education can build upon.

References

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[2] Covey, Stephen. (2009) *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Rosetta Books.
[3] Lezotte, Larry and Snyder, Kathleen McKee (2010), *7 Correlates of Effective Schools,* Solution Tree.
[4] Carter, Lisa. 2009. *Five Big Ideas. Leading Total Instructional Alignment.* Solution Tree.