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The Role Principal Leadership Plays in Teachers' Responses to the New Teacher Evaluation

by Nina Levorn Hasty



Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, 2001, there have been enormous pressures placed on public schools to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Data from standardized state assessments are being used to examine student growth and to create stronger accountability measures for schools. Educators have had to redefine and restructure their teaching practices, refocusing their efforts on best instructional practices and student improvement. The federal government, states, and school districts are placing increased demands on building principals, who have the challenge to serve as instructional leaders rather than as overseers of their buildings. Principals not only have to concern themselves with the management of the school itself, but also with accountability processes as they relate to teaching and learning.

The Race to the Top program, part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, led many states to enact changes in their teacher evaluation policy. Race to the Top is built on a framework of comprehensive reform comprised of four core areas: adopting rigorous standards and assessments that prepare students for success in college and the workplace; recruiting, developing, retaining, and rewarding effective teachers and principals; building data systems that measure student success and inform teachers and principals how they can improve their practices; and turning around the lowest-performing schools. Also, these changes include adapting more rigorous classroom observation instruments and supporting their use in high-stakes decisions such as teacher promotion, compensation, and dismissal.

Research conducted prior to the enactment of Race to the Top found that leadership, especially

instructional leadership, was one of several characteristics of successful schools. Evidence has also shown that school leaders who are knowledgeable about their district's evaluation process are likely to be successful in helping teachers interpret and adapt to current policies (Burch & Spillane, 2003; Coburn, 2005; Youngs, 2007). Teachers depend on the leadership in their building to support their implementation of effective instructional practices that new teacher evaluation systems are mandating. However, there has been little research on the characteristics of effective principal leadership in the context of new approaches to teacher evaluation. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of principal leadership in educators' experiences with new approaches to teacher evaluation.



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Principal Leadership

Principals who possess content knowledge can provide substantial feedback before and after evaluations to help influence teachers' instructional growth (Youngs, 2007). I believe that teachers need and desire leaders who can support their learning and understand how they and their students best learn. When principals are active participants in the learning and teaching of their staff, this can lead to improvement in teacher practice, thus improving student achievement and communication between the staff.

Commitment to reform, openness to innovation, and involvement in improvement efforts reinforce

to teachers that they have a leader who believes they are worth supporting and are important stakeholders in the educational setting (Burch & Spillane, 2003). Showing that they are committed to reform, principals need to make sure that their teachers have the resources, especially knowledge and supplies, necessary to be successful. When principals are open to innovation, they are likely to value teachers' insights into the curriculum and to provide teachers with the opportunity to share their expertise during staff meetings and professional development sessions (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Principal leadership also helps to foster social trust between principals and staff members, providing a platform for collaboration (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Leaders know that when teachers engage in peer observation and feedback, opening up their knowledge and practice to their colleagues' examination, they are able to learn about their colleagues' teaching practices about and their own practice.

A Tale of Two Principals

In 2012-2013 the Stafford School District began implementing a new teacher evaluation system using the Danielson Framework. I spent time in two elementary schools (Addison and Stukenberry) in the district during that year, observing and interacting with the teachers and principals in order to develop my understanding of the role principal leadership play in teachers' responses to new approaches to teacher evaluation. In order to demonstrate the impact of principals' implementation of teacher evaluation policies, I will discuss my observations of the principals and of teachers' responses in these two schools.

The principals at Addison and Stukenberry elementary schools had to interpret and respond to the new teacher evaluation system in their district where the stakes were much higher than they had been in the past. As they implemented the district's

system, principals had to redefine their roles as leaders, and the principals believed this process would result in improved student achievement.

Todd was a male African-American educator with 23 years of experience, and had been the principal at Addison Elementary for two years. Prior to his arrival at Addison, he had worked as an administrator at both the middle school and elementary school levels, and he had started his career as a third grade teacher.

Sherry, the principal at Stukenberry Elementary, was a female Caucasian and had also been at Stukenberry for two years. She had been an educator for approximately 20 years and had previously served as an assistant principal at both a K-8 school and an alternative high school in the district. She had also served as the district's English Second Language (ESL) director and as the district's Special Education supervisor, and had taught grades 4-5.

How Principals Shared Information about the New Teacher Evaluation System with Staff

The two principals, Todd and Sherry, received information regarding the new teacher evaluation system at summer meetings arranged by the district. Todd and Sherry were provided the same training and materials by the district to assist them with becoming knowledgeable about the Charlotte Danielson Framework (CDF). As leaders in their buildings, their responsibility was to disseminate the materials and their knowledge to the teachers. There were several similarities and some differences in how they prepared their staff to understand the evaluation system.

On the first day of the new school year, the school district summoned all staff members for a half-day mandatory meeting at a designated location on the first day of the new school year. This is where the

superintendent, the human resource director, and other personnel communicated important changes. After this initial district meeting, teachers returned to their individual school buildings for additional staff meetings. Both Todd and Sherry used these staff meetings to share information with teachers about the new evaluation system, and to give teachers the opportunity to ask questions about the evaluation process. Todd, the principal at Addison Elementary, was not as thorough as Sherry, the principal at Stukenberry Elementary, when he took his staff through the district's required evaluation system materials. Even though Sherry and Todd both attended the same training sessions, Sherry deemed it necessary not just to review the materials, but also to analyze with her staff each section of the document in order for them to understand what was inside.

More specifically, Sherry asked the teachers at Stukenberry to discuss what each criterion would look like at each grade level and in special subject classes including physical education, art, and music. Because teachers may be assigned to teach different grade levels or special subjects, they need to be prepared for their first evaluation by reviewing not only the criteria for their current grade or special subject, but for all the grades and special subjects. This is to their advantage, especially if they have to relocate to another school where the principal may not provide their staff the opportunity to schedule their evaluations in advance. However, Todd did not afford his staff this opportunity.

Another topic both principals discussed at the meetings was the scheduling of the observations. Both principals afforded their teachers the opportunity to schedule the day and time of their formal observations in order to provide them a chance to be fully prepared prior to the evaluation.

In the informational meetings, the principals exhibited some differences in how they dispersed the information to their staff. Sherry took her staff through the rankings that they could receive from

the evaluations, and she shared information with them explicitly about the criteria for each ranking. Furthermore, she made them aware of the "district's expectations." I did not observe Todd providing his staff with extensive knowledge of the rankings. Todd advised his staff of the district's expectations; however, the terminology used was "what I will be looking for." One could ask whether he was following the district's agenda or his own personal agenda. Todd's personal regard for his staff was not as clear as Sherry's; she extended herself and her knowledge to ensure that her staff received as much information about the new teacher evaluation system as she could provide.

Another difference between the two principals was how they introduced the components of the walk-throughs the district required. Sherry provided in-depth details about the walk-through process. The district used iPads to record information about teachers gathered during walk-through observations. Software tracked the data collected from each teacher's walk-throughs and generated reports and scores for each teacher. The principals then used the final walk-through score, along with the final observation score, to produce an overall final score for each formal observation. While Sherry provided her staff with this explicit information about the walk-throughs, my conversations with Todd provided little insight as to what he reviewed with his staff beyond than the teacher evaluation materials. When meeting with his staff, Todd did not provide much insight about the walk-throughs nor did he mention that the district used iPads during these brief observations. He also did not discuss the software the district required the principals to use to track the data for the teachers' walk-throughs.

How Principals Implemented the New Teacher Evaluation System

There were similarities and differences in how the principals implemented the new teacher evaluation system in terms of how they scheduled their

observations, the amount of time they reserved to observe each teacher, use of the Danielson Framework materials, and the pre-and post-conferences.

Scheduling/time of the observations. As mentioned in the earlier section, both principals extended the courtesy either to inform the teachers ahead of time when they would be observed, or to provide them the opportunity to select when they would like to be observed within a certain time frame. Their actions indicate that they wanted to provide time to their teachers in order for them to plan an effective lesson that displayed their competence, which could help increase their effectiveness ranking.

The school district dictated how many formal observations of each teacher the principals had to conduct each year. The majority of teachers at Addison and Stukenberry believed that being formally observed twice for a time period of 45-60 minutes was sufficient for their principal to determine the level of their teaching performance. However, this was not the sentiment of some of the teachers at Addison. Pam, for example, had a strong opinion concerning the way her principal handled the amount of time he reserved for her observations.

I don't believe that two formal observations are sufficient. Maybe if he stayed from the beginning to the entire end of the lesson, I would feel differently. He misses a lot, either because he came in late or left early. Now someone can come in and observe for a short period of time and know that you know your subject, have classroom management, etc, but for documentation purposes and when my job is on the line, no.

That was not the case at Stukenberry, where none of the teachers had negative remarks when it came to Sherry reserving the appropriate amount of time to observe their lessons. This was the only

difference I found between the two principals in this area.

Use of Danielson Framework materials. The principals used the mandated materials as they were intended to be used. Both completed two formal observations per teacher in their building, and both acknowledged that they were still in the process of learning how to effectively use the evaluation tools. Todd spoke about how in district workshops they were learning not to be pre-judgmental towards teachers during the observations, and to look only at the instruction that the teachers were providing to students at that moment. Teachers seemed to understand that the principals were learning as they received the new information, and none of the teachers criticized their principal for not using the evaluation tools correctly.

Pre-observation conference. Sherry and Todd implemented the pre-observation conferences with their teachers in similar ways. Pre-observation conferences, which are part of the district's Danielson Framework policy, are mandatory before each observation. During this conference, the teacher must submit the lesson they plan to teach during the observation. The principal and teacher discuss the lesson and questions can be raised about the lesson, the teacher's methods that he/she will use to develop instruction, the type of assessment(s) being used, and other pertinent information from either person.

The teachers during this meeting are afforded the opportunity to share with the principal any concerns they may have about students' behavior and achievement levels, special accommodations, and any other relevant information the principal should be aware of before the observation. The teachers in the study indicated that the principals provided support within the pre-conference meetings.

Based on this, one can speculate that the principals followed the Danielson Framework in the way that they were trained. Both principals appeared to

have a genuine concern about the teachers, including any worries teachers had during the observations. It is apparent that the principals wanted to provide support for the teachers and to have a clearer understanding of the challenges they were facing.

Post-observation conference. Sherry and Todd implemented the post-observation process in very different ways. Principals in the district typically held post-observation conferences a few days to a week after each observation. Principals provided teachers with a formal assessment in oral and written formats of how he measured their effectiveness as a teacher. Teachers were able to voice their opinion about whether they agreed or disagreed with the rating they were awarded; that is, a dialogue occurred so that both parties had a mutual understanding of what took place during the observation.

Todd's implementation of the post-observation process may have led to a loss of the trust that he had developed with his teachers during pre-observation conferences. During post-observation discussions, Todd shared positive and negative aspects of the lesson and made suggestions on how the teachers could improve. Although Todd insisted that during the post-conference meetings there was dialogue that took place between him and each teacher, the teachers did not agree that these conferences were true dialogues. Instead, teachers felt that Todd had the dominant voice in the discussions and did not display respect. Although he listened to what teachers had to say, he did not take their feedback into account in his final evaluations, even when evidence was brought forth to contradict what he claimed he had heard and or seen. Todd shared with me that he believed it was the administrator's job to make the final decision about teacher evaluation scores. Though he tried to have dialogue with teachers, the dialogue did not usually change his evaluation. He stated that he tried to be objective in his assessment, but that he would not give them credit for things he did not

see in their classrooms. The teachers at Addison felt that Todd did not respect them or believe they were competent in their craft.

In contrast, Sherry implemented her post-observation conferences in ways that maintained and strengthened trust with teachers. Sherry used post-observation form to guide her post-observation meetings. The form provided teachers a format to reflect on the lesson, on how they themselves would rate their lesson, on what last-minute changes they made throughout the lesson, and on how they believed the lesson went. Teachers at Addison did not mention the use of this form or procedure. In contrast to teacher responses at Addison, the teachers at Stuvemberry raved about Sherry's feedback, which they felt was useful. "When she gives you feedback she will tell you what were the strengths and weaknesses and provide strategies for you to help with your weaknesses," stated Leslie. Sandra also commented on Sherry's feedback, stating, "She will also talk about anything else that she noticed in the classroom—what is good or needs to be improved."

Unlike the teachers at Stuvemberry, the teachers at Addison were not receptive to Todd's suggestions because they did not feel that they were valid or helpful to them. They used terms such as opinion, negative, and critiques in their descriptions of the post-observation conferences. These words have negative connotations. Teachers at Stuvemberry selected words such as suggestions, advice, needs to be improved, and weaknesses. These words express genuine concern and helpfulness as opposed to Todd's words, which seemed opinionated and unpleasant.

Overall, although there were some similarities in the ways the two principals implemented the teacher evaluation system, the differences in their approaches led to markedly different responses from teachers. On the whole, teachers at Addison demonstrated decreased trust in Todd as their principal and instructional leader following his

implementation of the new district procedures. Teachers at Stuvembery, in contrast, demonstrated a stronger relationship with Sherry and a more positive response to her feedback.

Conclusion

This study shows that effective principal behaviors can lead to improved teacher responses to reforms such as teacher evaluation systems (Burch & Spillane, 2003). Based on my interactions the principals in this district may have required a deeper understanding of what the district expected of them throughout the school year as they prepared to observe and evaluate teachers using the new Danielson Framework (2013) for evaluations. Stronger guidance from the district could have helped Todd implement the new evaluation system in a more positive way, contributing to more positive teacher responses. School principals fill a challenging role in which they must depend on their knowledge, prior professional experience, and professional relationships to work effectively with students, teachers, parents, and others. I believe school districts have a responsibility to prepare and support principals in enacting reforms effectively. In addition, I believe principals should be aware of the power they possess and use that power to aid teachers in uniting among themselves and their peers to ensure that all stakeholders prosper academically and socially. Principals are the cornerstone of the community. When they are able to display positive leadership characteristics, their staff members may be more willing to follow their lead and take greater risks (Ebmeier, 2003). When there is proactive principal leadership, social discourse can take place to provide sincere listening, support, and appreciation for the opinions of others, which contribute to the strengthening of trust among principals and teachers (Burch & Spillane, 2003; Ebmeier, 2003; Coburn, 2005). I believe that when implementing teacher evaluation policies and procedures, principals should have open and honest conversations with teachers about instruction and student learning.

Finally, I believe that the teacher evaluation process has enhancements that include helping teachers respond to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS calls for teachers within literacy teaching to help students become active and deep conceptual thinkers who are able to take a position and support it with logic and evidence—skills and strategies needed for college and future careers. District support combined with collaboration between teachers and principals throughout the evaluation process can help improve literacy instruction to better support students in meeting the new demands of the CCSS.

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