THE PRINCIPAL AS
Study group leader

Clear, thoughtful guidance allows the process to thrive

By CARLENE U. MURPHY and DALE W. LICK

The principal is the most important factor in beginning, implementing, and continuing any change process. The principal must be the official sponsor and advocate for an initiative. How the principal assigns roles and responsibilities and monitors those assignments is what makes change occur.

Whole-faculty study groups are one approach that principals can use to impact student performance. In schools that use study groups effectively, every certified staff member joins a study group that meets weekly or, at the least, every other week (Murphy, 1997). The faculty meets at the beginning of the year to decide what the groups will study that year. The groups report throughout the year to the principal and to each other regarding their progress.

At Jackson Elementary School in Greeley, Colo., for example, every certified staff member meets weekly in a small study group. The faculty analyzes student data to determine students’ instructional needs, decides what to address, and organizes study groups. Each group of no more than six members then designs an action plan. The study groups follow 15 procedural guidelines (Murphy, 1999). The results have been improved student test scores, fewer disciplinary referrals, and a more collaborative school culture.

Jackson’s principal, Barry Shelofsky, initiated a Whole-Faculty Study Group model (Murphy, 1995), then worked with a team of teachers to implement the plan. He was key in getting 100% of the teachers to agree to begin. Because this model requires organizational adjustments, the principal is the key to its success.

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES

For study groups to be successful, the principal must establish certain conditions. The principal:

- Sponsors and advocates for the study groups;
- Participates in training and planning sessions;
- Reviews and responds to the study group action plans and to each meeting’s study group log;
- Makes sure teachers in the same study group observe each other’s students to see the effects of instructional practices that are the group’s focus;
- Confirms in the logs that the groups are looking routinely at student work;
- Plans time for study groups to meet;
- Helps identify internal and external expertise to support study group work;

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● Makes sure study groups communicate with each other;
● Schedules monthly meetings of each study group’s representatives (the instructional council) on the school calendar, confirms attendance and logistics, makes sure the facilitator knows each group’s status, and participates in these meetings;
● Uses study groups as the primary units to implement the school’s instructional initiatives and school improvement plan;
● Communicates what study groups do to district leaders, parents, and the general community;
● Assists any study group that loses its momentum or is not doing work that is likely to impact student learning;
● Initiates procedures for study groups to assess their progress and use assessment information to strengthen their work; and
● Charts the impact on student learning by always keeping student data in front of the faculty.

OTHER EXAMPLES

Patricia Atkinson, principal of Keeseville Elementary School in the AuSable (N.Y.) Valley Central School District, writes to each study group and responds to what the study group logs indicate the groups are doing, demonstrating how principals let teachers know that their study group work is important.

To a group focusing on listening and following directions, a skill assessed on the New York English and Language Arts Assessment, she wrote: “WOW! I read Log #15 and was very impressed with the progress you have made. I really am pleased to see the student work schedule you developed, naming the members who will be responsible for bringing student work on specific dates. I compliment you on your decision to extend study group meeting #16 by 40 minutes to brainstorm …”

Later, she commented, “Dialogues about student work like the one you had during this meeting point out why (study group) examination of student work can be so beneficial. Your examination of the activity actually helped redirect instruction, or, at least, to create a climate to question why instruction was not successful. Congratulations! You’ve got it!”

In Atkinson’s comments after subsequent study group meetings, she stated: “I saw on Log #21 that you met with the other study group that is working on listening skills. I am pleased that you arranged the meeting independently. You are demonstrating one of the outcomes of the Whole-Faculty Study Groups: to increase the amount of sharing with colleagues.”

Atkinson’s comments are substantive and purposeful. She went beyond simply implying support and offers both pressure and support for the study group to continue.

In another school, Round Rock (Texas) High School, the principal was responsible for more than 3,000 students and 325 staff members. When the 242 teachers wanted to replace their traditional staff development program with Whole-Faculty Study Groups, the principal publicly appointed an assistant principal to oversee the process. The assistant principal receives the study group action plans and responds to the logs.

Principals also may want to delegate oversight of the process if they feel more competent initiating and implementing change than maintaining and institutionalizing changes. The reverse also may be true. Some principals are more competent and comfortable maintaining a process, but don’t have the desire or skills to start it. In this case, principals may give a team of teachers responsibility for initiating and taking action on research about the effects of a program or process.

SOME PRINCIPALS MAY HAVE MORE COMPETENT AND COMFORTABLE MAINTAINING A PROCESS, BUT DON’T HAVE THE DESIRE OR SKILLS TO START IT. IN THIS CASE, PRINCIPALS MAY GIVE A TEAM OF TEACHERS RESPONSIBILITY FOR INITIATING AND TAKING ACTION ON RESEARCH ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF A PROGRAM OR PROCESS.

Purposeful comments from the principal help. One example: “Your examination of the activity actually helped redirect instruction, or, at least, to create a climate to question why instruction was not successful.”

REFERENCES


