



Bill Ferriter is a 6th-grade social studies and language arts teacher at Salem Middle School, Apex, N.C.

Myth of the instructional leader

Never one to avoid a good row, I raised a few eyebrows in a meeting of administrators when I asked whether the “principal as instructional leader” was just a mythical creature. “Is it really possible for one person to provide instructional leadership to all of the teachers in a building?”

Needless to say, I touched a nerve. “The principal is the instructional leader of EVERY building!” one participant replied defensively. “It’s something we’ve been trained to do. We’re the experts!”

The conversation dwindled (thankfully), but my questions didn’t — and my mind hasn’t stopped thinking about instructional leadership yet!

In the best schools, instructional leadership is continuously changing hands because everyone accepts responsibility for leading. Individual passions become areas of expertise shared through formal and informal work with colleagues. Diversity of leadership allows influential ideas to spread throughout an entire organization. Collective knowledge and growth is valued regardless of its source.

My instructional leaders have always been those with high levels of professional credibility earned by demonstrating excellence as educators. They are the people in a school who everyone turns to for advice on teaching and learning. No topic seems to be beyond their grasp, and the ideas that they present are timely and provocative. Instructional leaders are constantly challenging the thinking of others.

Instructional leaders also have a high degree of personal credibility. They’ve built strong working relationships across grade levels and departments. They are widely visible, teaching model lessons, visiting classrooms, and offering

feedback during planning meetings. Valuing individuals and respecting the viewpoints of others, they seem to draw others in rather than drive them away.

The best instructional leaders aren’t heroic figures relying on appointed positions for prestige. Instead, they transcend their titles, refusing to see levels of authority in an organization and believing that every member of a team should have an equal voice. They encourage others to examine their practice. They provide practical advice and guidance, supporting efforts and stimulating change. Above all, the best instructional leaders engage others in powerful conversations about learning.

Most recently, the teachers of my learning team have served as my instructional leaders. Mike Hutchinson, a social studies expert, has introduced me to a new instructional practice that is highly engaging, incorporating elements from across our curriculum. Before that, Corinna Knight, Emily Swanson, and Marcy Clemmons challenged me to reconsider how I introduced collaborative dialogue in my classroom. Together, we have had lengthy conversations about teaching and learning that have changed the way we work as individuals.

If our schools are to become communities committed to learning, school leaders must shift from functioning as “instructional leaders” to functioning as “leaders of instructional experts.” By tapping into the expertise of their faculties and creating structures for collaboration, they will empower teachers in the truest sense. Individual and organizational growth will multiply exponentially when we realize that each member of a school community has something of value to contribute.

Is this view of instructional leadership possible? ♦



Join the conversation with Bill by visiting www.nsd.org/blog/ and offering your opinion. Bill posts his provocative ideas frequently — be sure to return often.