

BY ANNEMARIE B. JAY AND JACK McGOVERN

# NOT JUST *a* MANAGER ANYMORE

Principal's role as literacy  
leader moves to the front

As you walk into Washington Elementary School, you are likely to see a tall middle-aged man dressed in a Cat in the Hat suit. If you are lucky enough to be a student here, you'll know that's just the principal. "He really cares about our reading," said one student. Within three years, this principal took his school from a place where only 15% of the children scored at the proficient level to a learning community in which 80% exceeded state standards. He moved from managing his school to becoming a literacy leader.

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How does the principal keep the focus on student learning and skillfully identify best literacy practice? How does what is learned about best literacy practice translate into better schools that demonstrate improved student achievement?

In the reality of school life, management tasks require the principal's time and attention (Portin, 2004; Smith & Andrews, 1989). However, management tasks must be secondary to instructional tasks. Schools are learning labs for children; those who oversee instruction must be learners, too. As literacy leaders, principals are expected to be knowledgeable about all instructional trends and practices in general as well as what is specifically happening in each classroom in the

building. The principal's ability to distinguish between strong and weak practices is critical; quality instruction must be recognized and promoted in order to promote literacy learning.

Given the multiple tasks for which a principal is responsible, how does he or she function as both a literacy leader and a learner in a learning community?

### LEAD LEARNING BY EXAMPLE

The successful principal sustains literacy achievement by leading by example, learning by example, and creating conditions for collaborative professional learning. The National Association of Elementary School Principals has published standards for what principals should know and do in order to put student and staff learning at the center of their leadership (2001b). Meeting these standards

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transforms principals not only into lead learners but literacy leaders. As a learning-centered principal, DuFour (2002) recommends that "principals function as learning leaders rather than instructional leaders" by pursuing ways to provide both students and teachers with additional time and support necessary to improve literacy learning.

If principals are to lead learning by example, they and their staff need to make a firm commitment to continuous improvement of literacy instruction in their school. Here we investigate six characteristics of the principal as successful literacy leader.

## 1. LEAD LEARNING

Being a lead learner requires the principal to join the faculty in learning (Knapp, Copland & Talbert, 2003). Rather than functioning as the expert who oversees the novice learners, the principal is a team member who actively participates in professional learning.

### Principal 1:

*A new elementary principal in suburban Philadelphia held monthly faculty meetings that were much different than those the staff experienced before. Principal One clustered teachers in discussion groups to review data from state assessments, district rubrics, and student work samples. The group responded to focus questions and engaged in purposeful examination of the data. The focus was always on how students were performing and how instruction could be improved to meet their learning needs. Principal One always participated with one or more of the cluster groups. The collaborative decision making of the groups led to positive changes in instruction. For example, the groups decided that they would select and prioritize teaching strategies for comprehension. The principal participated in the discussions and offered to teach in classrooms if invited. Once invited into a classroom, the principal taught as a colleague who was interested in achieving the group's common goal. Through the demonstration lessons, the principal gained information on the selected strategies and their impact on students. In subsequent meetings, the group refined techniques and schoolwide practices related to the strategies.*

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While the format change in the faculty meetings provided a regular focus on improving students' learning, the collaborative work also allowed the principal to learn about staff, students, and curriculum. She was learning to lead literacy events as she learned about the school's literacy strengths and needs. In addition, her teaching became a common occurrence in the building.

## 2. FOCUS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Principals and their teachers need time to think and talk about the teaching that occurs in their schools (Drago-Severson, 2004). Elementary principals who lead literacy learning use formative assessment data at the individual, classroom, and building levels to inform ongoing instructional practice.

### Principal 2:

*A large wall outside of Principal Two's office, accessible to the principal and staff only, is covered with colorful sticky notes with up-to-the-minute records of every child's literacy performance. This wall is known as the data wall. Each note serves as the focus of dialogue with teachers, parents, and students because formative assessment informs practice about what a child needs in order to improve. Principal Two takes the notes with him to grade-level meetings so that teachers can focus on individual students and grade-level needs. When he meets with parents, the notes are placed at the meeting table so that the student's needs and the school's efforts are clearly evident. In the teachers' workroom, there is a display of classroom performance profiles. This at-hand information encourages discussions about grade-level literacy and pedagogy when the principal meets with individual teachers and grade-level teams.*

In all of the discussions in this school, the data wall serves to continuously refocus conversation around individual students' literacy needs and

the school and teacher responses to those needs. This moves the attention from abstract instructional goals to applied teaching practices.

### 3. DEVELOP SCHOOLWIDE CAPACITY FOR LEADERSHIP

Literacy leadership requires that a principal create a focus on aligning stakeholders to provide a quality education for each child in his school.

#### Principal 3:

*Principal Three's odyssey began when the school learned that 85% of its 4th-grade students ranked below proficient on the statewide assessment.*

*Because of his training in the Comer Process, a schoolwide intervention program that mobilizes the adult community to take shared responsibility for student achievement (Comer, Ben-Avie, Haynes, & Joyner, 1999), the principal understood that he needed to bring all the stakeholders together to find a solution. He convened the first of many sessions to discuss possible ways the school and the community could work together to guarantee students' success. The library was packed with teachers, parents, community members, and curriculum consultants. Principal Three began by sharing the scores and asking, "How can we improve? We know our kids are capable." This brief statement led to exploration of materials, best practices, and new connections with parents. Eventually the school changed schedules, initiated flexible grouping, and used student data to inform every instructional decision. Three years after the first meeting, 79% of the school's 4th graders scored proficient or advanced on the state assessment.*

By creating a learning community with plenty of opportunity for involvement, Principal Three was able to facilitate the collaborative decision making of participants. He maintained two rules of thumb: No one was allowed to generate negative comments, and nothing was off-limits if it would help the students achieve. This

powerful example of building school-wide capacity for leadership demonstrates how a principal became a catalyst for hope in a culture of despair. Lambert (1998) pinpoints the complexity of the skills needed for building leadership capacity when she reminds us that "it is more difficult to build leadership capacity among colleagues than to tell colleagues what to do. It is more difficult to be full partners with other adults engaged in hard work than to evaluate and supervise subordinates."

### 4. CREATE CONDITIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Writing about the critical role of leadership, Marzano (2003) outlines the importance of creating shared leadership through a team approach: "Members of the leadership team should cultivate the dispositions of optimism, honesty, and consideration. In the final analysis, these characteristics might be as important as those that address the more technical aspects of school reform ..." (p. 178).

#### Principal 4:

*At a small independent school, a group of teachers and their principal came together to share a vision of powerful literacy instruction. Keene and Zimmerman's "Mosaic of Thought" (1997) provided the catalyst for this effort. The group held voluntary weekly study group sessions, focusing on each chapter and discussing a series of questions. For many teachers, this was the first time that they had had the opportunity to discuss vital instructional concepts such as comprehension, fluency, and strategic instruction. The focus of faculty conversations moved from "Our students are misbehaving at dismissal time" to "What do we really know about our practice and how our kids learn?"*

Resounding messages in the literature convey the need for support, encouragement, and recognition of the best literacy practices of teachers

in the classrooms as well as shared expertise in group professional learning situations (King, 2002; NAESP, 2001b; Booth & Rowsell, 2002). McAndrew (2005) states that in order to have a "winning literacy team," the literacy leader needs to create and communicate a vision, be a model of learning, coach instructional techniques that are right for his or her particular learning community, nurture competence and collaboration, and "encourage the heart" through reflective practice.

### 5. USE DATA TO INFORM DECISIONS

Research suggests using multiple sources of data to drive decision making that is mutually arrived at by principal and staff (King, 2002; NAESP, 2001a, Booth & Rowsell, 2002). A culture of informed collaboration promotes sound curricular decisions about literacy teaching and learning.

#### Principal 5:

*Two large Title I schools began using an early literacy program with a major technology component as part of the supplemental services offered to less able students in transitional primary classrooms. According to the assessments offered as part of the program, the children were making progress individually and as a class. Participants at meetings that included Title I staff, classroom teachers, and a highly involved, literacy-focused principal, examined changes in instruction and questioned the relevance of scores from the program assessments. The group decided to compare program data with other data sources. Data from basal publisher's tests, the Title I battery of tests, and a norm-referenced standardized assessment were triangulated and compared to the program data. The opportunity to study these comparisons collegially helped the group to realize that the program data were strongly aligned with the publishers' and standardized assessments. More importantly,*

*the group recognized that the program's student resources, allotted time on task, and focused conversations of professionals were all key factors in promoting the literacy achievement of young learners. The principal, working as a group member, analyzed the data and gained insights into the dynamics of literacy learning in the classrooms.*

Multiple sources of data were critical components of the decision-making process. The shared experience of reviewing and analyzing the data as a community of learners was more beneficial than if the principal were the sole reviewer and analyst.

#### 6. USE RESOURCES CREATIVELY

Research emphasizes the importance of arranging resources — people, time, and money — in creative ways such as rearranging the day's schedule to provide time for teachers to work together on a common pedagogical issue (King, 2002).

##### Principal 6:

*As the head of a lower division of a large K-12 Quaker school, Principal Six uses his position to celebrate good literature and encourage conversations. Once a week, 20-30 students attended a "Literacy Lunch" with the principal. For the price of 40 minutes and a slice of pizza, students discussed books that they wanted to share with their classmates and their principal. These lunches provide a wonderful opportunity to use social settings to increase enthusiasm for reading. In addition, all faculty meetings in Principal Six's school begin with a "What are we reading?" segment in which teachers share their current literary interest. When principals provide time for teachers to share what they read, they speak volumes about their belief in the value of lifelong reading. The hallways also speak to the intense focus of literature; lists of the children's favorite titles adorn public spaces and books are everywhere.*

Principals who are literacy leaders interact not only with their teachers

about literacy teaching and learning, they also interact with the students. Firsthand knowledge of what students can do or find difficult to do can help the principal provide and participate in professional development.

#### CONNECTING LITERACY LEARNING AND LEADING

Connecting literacy learning and leading is a complex, necessary part of the multitasking role of the elementary principal. The elementary principal needs to involve herself in forums that help ensure integral connections between learning and leading. Just as the principal must be a catalyst for leading learning within the school, she herself needs a catalyst to learn, reflect on practice, and grow. Joining other principals to study and share instructional practices helps principals become thoughtful about what, why, and how literacy learning occurs in their schools. Such forums promote skillful literacy learning.

When a principal's participation in promoting literacy is skillful, she accomplishes several things: First, she learns more about the process of literacy instruction; second, she learns more about the professional development process; third, the principal nurtures a culture of respect for all learners — children and adults; fourth, the positive collaboration between principal and staff helps promote motivation among faculty and foster habits toward literacy learning within the school. Collaboration between principals and staff nurtures learning among professionals and positively influences the advancement of literacy teaching and learning in schools.

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