

# GUIDING HAND

of the  
superintendent  
helps principals  
flourish

BY GENE SPANNEUT AND MIKE FORD



Whether by design or by chance, superintendents communicate their beliefs about what is important educationally and the roles they expect their principals to fulfill. Superintendents who champion the development of their principals as instructional leaders begin by establishing common understandings with them about why principals' instructional leadership is necessary for school success. They reinforce this by actively providing support for their principals to develop and refine their

effectiveness as instructional leaders.

"I'm hooked on visiting classrooms, observing artfully crafted lessons and students engaged in purposeful learning," said Janice Driscoll, principal of the intermediate school in Phelps-Clifton Springs, N.Y. "It's all coming together now, and I'm enjoying being able to share what's going on in classrooms and, more impor-

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tantly, to encourage teachers to share what they're doing and seeing in their students."

Phelps-Clifton Springs, commonly called Midlakes, is a centralized public school district located in rural upstate New York. Superintendent Mike Ford has two fundamental beliefs about the academic performance of the 1,860 students enrolled in his K-12 school system. First, he believes that they are all capable of high levels of academic achievement. Second, he believes that students' opportunities to perform at those levels can be realized by developing the capacity for principals to grow and excel as instructional leaders. This

growth happens when school leaders deliberately design and implement measures tailored to the needs of the school system.

To develop principals as instructional leaders, Ford and his colleagues

the reading department at a nearby college and taught a course on literacy coaching. The other principal, Janice Driscoll, has a strong desire to improve student performance on state assessments. With these two leaders in

This permitted Cameron and Driscoll to spend time regularly in classrooms and gave them time to provide monthly training sessions for all teachers and teaching assistants. This new position also allowed the principals to function as leaders of learning when they observe teachers, provide coaching, interact with students, and actively model instructional strategies.



### EXPLORING LEADERSHIP THROUGH PLCs

The district explores the importance of principals as instructional leaders through professional learning communities (PLCs). DuFour (2003) describes how superintendents use PLCs by employing a tactic described as “one that is loose and tight, a strategy that establishes a clear priority and discernable parameters and then provides each school and department with the autonomy to chart its own course for achieving the objectives” (p. 2).

When he meets with principals, Ford provides practical examples of the connections between their instructional leadership and students’ academic accomplishments. For example, he crafts the agenda for his biweekly administrative leadership team meetings with an emphasis on learning and engages the principals in purposeful discussions about “growing people.” The team explores ways they can help teachers improve their skills, expand their knowledge, and find ways for them to demonstrate leadership. These conversations drive district priorities and build principals’ capacity to lead at the building level.

To boost the district’s expertise in effectively using PLCs, Ford arranged for all Midlakes administrators to attend a four-day institute on PLCs in summer 2004. Principal Cameron noted, “The opportunity to attend the institute on PLCs with the other principals in the district allowed all of us to hear the same information and dialogue and reflect on the new learn-

first define the specific areas where the district needs to improve instruction. In Midlakes, districtwide performance on state elementary English and language arts assessments was quite low. The district commissioned an audit of its program, and the two elementary principals, the director of curriculum and instruction, and the superintendent reviewed the audit and prepared a plan. The audit produced two strong findings: the need for a literacy coach at the elementary level and a recommendation that the principals be present in classrooms more frequently to monitor and support instruction. One of the two principals, Karen Cameron, is an adjunct professor in

place, the team decided on a novel approach: principal as literacy coach.

To support such instructional leadership approaches, superintendents must provide principals with resources that will allow them to put their plans into action. Increasing the capacity of principals as instructional leaders does not alleviate the management needs of their schools.

Superintendents can find ways to meet those demands by removing obstacles that impede principals’ progress. For example, when the Midlakes principals became literacy coaches, Ford created the position of dean of students to free those principals from some managerial duties.

ing. It provided the time for us to discuss the possibilities and plan for their implementation.”

The district also paid for 10 members of its Professional Development Committee to attend the National Staff Development Council’s summer conference in each of the past three years. They chose sessions on PLCs to further enhance the school system’s use of the model in the district. Teams now exist in Midlakes at the elementary and middle school levels. In the elementary schools, each grade level is a PLC; at the middle school, the math and the English and language arts departments are PLCs. Time is built into the schedules so that each team can meet at least once a week. Team meetings are devoted to discussions about what is being taught, what students



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are learning, and how well they are learning it. The analysis of assessment results is a central theme.

Team leaders, who received training in facilitation skills, lead meaningful conversations about student learning and instruction. The principals meet regularly with them to ensure the alignment of priorities and to assist in planning and problem solving.

The central message they communicate is that leadership, rather than being a one-person title, is “a shared

activity in [their] schools” (Oduro, 2004, p. 24).

#### **DEVELOPING LEADERS OF LEADERS**

As leadership becomes a staff-wide responsibility in a school, the superintendent and principals are ready to explore links between principals’ instructional leadership and successes in the core business of their schools. Ash and Persall’s Formative Leadership Theory (2000), for

instance, suggests that principals function as “Chief Learning Officers...[who] focus more on the learning opportunities provided to students and on the work students do” (Ash & Persall, 2000, p. 16).

When districts work to develop principals as chief learning officers, the district is creating leaders of leaders. This evolution of leadership roles helps the district establish leadership as a distributed responsibility with teachers. From this perspective, principals work “collaboratively with teachers in planning, scheduling, and leading students in academic work (Ash & Persall, 2000, p. 17).

Shared leadership is an important organizational value in Midlakes. The leadership team has created avenues for teacher leadership to emerge. Teachers serve as committee leaders,

### Phelps-Clifton Springs Central School District

Clifton Springs, N.Y.

**Number of schools:** Four (one primary, one intermediate, one middle, one high)

**Grades:** K-12

**Enrollment:** 1,860

**Staff:** 360

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

**White:** 97%

**Black:** 1%

**Hispanic:** 2%

**Asian/Pacific Islander:** 0%

**Native American:** 0%

**Other:** 0%

**Limited English proficient:** 0%

**Free/reduced lunch:** 31%

**Special education:** 14%

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assist in building management, and facilitate curriculum and staff development processes. The leadership

team encourages all staff members to provide feedback and counsel.

### ONGOING SUPPORT AND LEARNING

Superintendents encourage and support their principals through targeted dialogue in a variety of areas, including shared leadership, teachers as leaders, and accountability for results, to investigate how to achieve changes in the way they define authority and power. Each summer, the leadership team at Midlakes devotes two days to dialogue about leadership. This collegial time not only fosters team and relationship building, but also encourages the development of a shared vision, and, most importantly, cohesion. In nine years, there has been almost no turnover on the leadership team.



Providing support also means that superintendents must keep their principals focused on their continuing development as instructional leaders. While specific conversations may help with this, superintendents also need to provide tools principals can use to examine their own growth. A prime example is the encouragement of principals' reflective thinking, what Rich and Jackson (2006) describe as a process through which leaders can "think about and improve upon practice as well as challenge internal faulty perceptions and beliefs [and to] see gaps in their knowledge base" (p. 12).

Reflections present superintendents with opportunities to model leadership through their facilitation of professional discourse from collegial as well as supervisory perspectives. Reflection is not only a solitary experi-

ence; indeed, "powerful reflection and collaboration is also possible when educators engage in professional dialogue with each other in small groups" (Rich & Jackson, 2006, p. 13).

Ford plans and conducts the leadership development initiatives for his principals and other administrators. Their most recent activities have included book studies (e.g. *Working on the Work* by Phillip Schlechty and *What Great Principals Do Differently* by Todd Whitaker), training sessions on effective observation skills, and developing action plans to achieve the district's vision for learning.

During one-on-one and group discussions, superintendents can prompt their principals to move from maintaining their current leadership abilities to identifying new areas for growth. As principals re-create their

roles, superintendents can support them in seeking opportunities to lead instructional initiatives and improvements in their schools.

When principals specify what their instructional leadership roles need to be to successfully accomplish such ends, they invest in their own professional learning by creating self-expectations.

## CONCLUSION

Superintendents focused on instructional leadership provide not only the rationale for their principals to realize that they can operate their schools efficiently, they can also develop within their principals the knowledge that by investing in their growth as instructional leaders, they can effectively move their schools to increasingly higher levels of success.

Superintendents also have a responsibility to communicate this message to school district constituents — especially boards of education, district employees, students, and parents. Publicly providing valid, concrete examples of how those roles have led to documented increases in student achievement highlights what is taking place, what is expected, and what will be accomplished.

Midlakes has seen encouraging results in just the first year of the principal-as-coach initiative. While only 60% of the district's 5th graders scored at the proficiency level on the state assessment in 2006, 82% met proficiency in 2007. Of the 25 school districts in the region, the 5th-grade results were 23rd in 2006 and 6th in 2007. At the 4th-grade level, the percentage of students meeting proficien-

cy increased from 61% to 76%, while the regional rank improved from 23rd to 10th.

Last year, principals Cameron and Driscoll learned one more important lesson when their fellow administrators singled them out as the two district administrators who made the biggest difference last year. They learned that principals grow and succeed when others have faith in their capabilities as instructional leaders, have expectations for their accomplishments, and believe their leadership will result in higher levels of success for their students and schools.

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