
The Principal and Proficiency: The Essential Leadership Role in Improving Student Achievement

Instructional leaders should use their leadership leverage to create building-wide proficiency.

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by Douglas B. Reeves

Where do principals have the greatest impact as instructional leaders? The answer to this dilemma is not to burn principals to a symbolic cinder in a seemingly heroic, but ultimately futile, attempt to complete a list of tasks. Such a perspective assumes that school leadership is nothing more than a carnival game of bopping clowns on the head as they spring up from the board. Rather than flailing at every instructional leadership demand as if it were of equal importance, principals must engage in *leadership leverage*—the selective application of the principal's time, intellect, energy, and authority in those few areas in which building-wide consistency is imperative. Effective leadership leverage depends upon four essential leadership practices:

- The creation of a consistent definition of proficiency for students, teachers, and leaders;
- Public reporting on progress toward proficiency;
- Continuous professional reflection on the gap between the ideal state of proficiency and the present reality of a school; and
- The establishment of a moral imperative for consistency in academic and behavioral expectations for students.

Defining Proficiency

Instructional leaders do not need to be experts in every academic field. They must, however, be experts in clarity, consistency, and fairness. How does a leader find time to meet this demand? Janet Hamm, the national award-winning principal of Maplewood Elementary School in Wayne Township School District of Indianapolis, has been remarkably effective in creating schoolwide consensus on student achievement, professional reflection about student work, and teaching strategies. Her philosophy is: “If it doesn’t have to do with student achievement, we just don’t do it. That is our total focus.”

Seventy-five percent of the students at Hamm’s school are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and the school also has a significant special education population. Despite the circumstances of the population, more than 90 percent of the students at Maplewood Elementary score at the proficient level on state exams, and a significant number of those students score at the advanced level. Hamm has the same number of meetings and obligations as principals at other schools, but many of her colleagues have lower levels of achievement even with fewer disadvantaged students. The difference is that Hamm uses her time in a more focused manner, and she exercises leadership to create clear and consistent proficiency requirements for all students and teachers.

Consistently defining proficiency is important for students as well as for teachers. Kim Marshall, leadership developer for New Leaders for New Schools and the editor of *The Marshall Memo*, uses a “mini-observation rubric” that allows teachers and principals to

provide consistent and specific feedback. When a principal and two teachers all observe the same phenomenon while observing a classroom, it is impossible for a teacher to claim that the principal is arbitrary or subjective. Marshall models for teachers the clarity, specificity, and fairness in defining instructional proficiency that teachers in turn should provide for their students.

Reporting Progress

Clarity and consistency are also reflected in the way that student achievement, as reflected on external tests, is systematically compared with the letter grades students receive on report cards. Student performance at Maplewood Elementary is posted in a faculty meeting room. If there is a disparity between a student's test scores and the marks that student receives on a report card, then teachers have the ability to notice it, discuss it, and correct it.

Walk down the halls of Campostella Elementary School in Norfolk, Virginia, and within the first few days of school, the walls are adorned not only with student work, but with charts and graphs (many of them created by the students themselves) showing student progress. In a school in New Haven, Connecticut, I observed a teacher staring at her data wall one afternoon. When I asked her what she was doing, she replied, "planning next week's instruction."

These schools make public reporting of data a treasure hunt instead of a witch hunt. They gained cooperation and enthusiasm from their staffs because each publicly reported data point represented an opportunity for professional learning instead of personal embarrassment.

Professional Reflection

One of the best strategies for professional reflection I have seen in the past decade is the science fair for adults. In this program teachers and principals use science fair displays to share their data, observations about teaching and leadership practices, and inferences and conclusions based on the data. This technique, used in schools as diverse as Elkhart, Indiana; Gilroy, California; and the entire state of Connecticut, is a powerful way for teachers and instructional leaders to learn from one another. Instructional leadership depends on shared research, and the science fair is truly a celebration of superior teaching practice. Best of all, the science fair distinguishes between best practices that are based on data, and what is more accurately called "popular practice," which is distinguished only by personal preference.

The Moral Imperative

If principals want to sustain their leadership gains, then they must establish a moral foundation for their demands. For example, the moral imperative of fairness requires that teachers and school leaders agree on what the word "proficiency" means on a consistent and transparent basis. Whatever your leadership initiative, the first obligation is to explain "why" in a way that extends beyond, "because the central office, state department, or federal government said so." Instead, create a personal moral imperative for change.

In our quest for instructional leadership, we must acknowledge that the demands on our time far outstrip our supply of available time and energy. Principals must therefore wisely choose how they spend each precious moment of the day, each ounce of emotional energy, and each increment of political capital. If the objective is improved student achievement and educational equity, then the best ways for principals to invest their time is to create a consistent definition of proficiency, and to encourage public data displays, continual professional reflection, and a moral imperative for change.

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On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What might we do to establish a common understanding of proficiency?
2. What are some of the ways we might report student progress to our school community (*i.e.*, teachers, students, and parents) in order to help all students achieve high levels of proficiency?
3. To what degree do we teach the same standards to all students?
4. To what extent do we expect all students to reach high levels of proficiency?
5. What are some of the tasks that we might take off our plates so that we can better focus on improving student achievement?
6. What would it take to make reflecting on instructional practice an integral part of our daily routine?

—Created by **Stephen Gould**, who is co-director of the National School Leaders' Network (NSLN), a leadership coach in private practice, and a consultant for the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL). He has more than 30 years experience as an elementary school principal and assistant superintendent.
