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A Model for Instructional Leadership

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Introduction

In an age of accountability where education is scrutinized through high-stakes testing, financial decision-making, and overall student achievement, school districts are looking at ways to help themselves do a better job of meeting the educational needs of their students. Districts must be poised to face the rigors of this challenge and strive to improve their schools on a variety of levels. Having their efforts lead to positive results is important not only for the success of their schools, but ultimately their students.

Establishing strong instructional leadership has been an important facet of educational reform for decades. What researchers and practitioners have struggled with is actually defining what constitutes instructional leadership. The school district presented in this article was no different from the other 500 school districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania facing this challenge. Therefore, the district examined an array of research on the aforementioned concept and took the perspective espoused by Lashway (2002) that in order for a district to have effective instructional leadership administrators from the superintendent to building level needed to possess an understanding of what good teaching is and be good teachers themselves when working with the staff. Therefore, this district chose to include professional development and the supervision model utilized by the district as defining components of instructional leadership.

This article examines a southeastern Pennsylvania rural school district's effort to establish, implement, and practice a model of effective instructional leadership in order to promote a continuous learning ethic among the professional staff and ultimately impact student learning in a positive manner. What follows is a description of the community and school district where the effort has been implemented and continually revised. A

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detailed explanation regarding the need for an effective instructional leadership by working towards proper implementation of research-driven teaching practices (also referred to as essential elements of instruction) and meaningful conferencing with professional educators will be offered. The development and examination of an action plan leading to proper instructional leadership and research in support of this model will be addressed. A particular focus will be on the meta-analytical leadership studies of Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003), which establishes a positive correlation between leadership and student achievement.

Community/School District Description

Donegal School District is located in northwestern Lancaster County and comprised of four communities – Marietta, Mount Joy, East Donegal Township (Maytown), and about one-quarter of Mount Joy Township. The communities have a small-town atmosphere each with their own distinct characteristics. Although these towns have many positive attributes, there is a relatively small industrial base located within the communities, a major issue for the district.

In looking at the demographics of the district, Donegal School District maintains a relatively homogenous client base (93% White, 2% Black, 4% Hispanic, and 1% Asian). As far as educational attainment, 85% of the district population holds a high school diploma while 15% have earned a bachelor degree or higher. This suggests that education is thought to be important, but perhaps not as important as other socio-political concerns such as unemployment, crime, and poverty. The median household income per year for a residence in the school district is \$51, 410. A strong middle class contingency is evident when looking at the percentage of household by effective buying income:

Table 1: Percentage of effective buying income based on Household Income

| House Income | Percentage of effective buying income |
|---------------------|--|
| \$30,000-\$49,999 | 26% |
| \$50,000-74,999 | 29% |
| \$75,000 and over | 22% |

Education in the Donegal School District, even with the lack of industrial base, has been well-funded and continues to utilize a variety of academic, co-curricular, and extracurricular programs to provide students with a holistic educational experience. The district has three elementary schools, a middle-school, and a high school. The schools themselves in many respects are the center of community culture. Many community members turn out for performing arts activities, athletic events, and even graduation. A familial atmosphere is present both outside and inside the walls of each of the schools making up the district. This emphasis on community, as well as the holistic development of each student, is evident in the educational philosophy espoused by the district:

Our charge is to (1) build fundamental skills, (2) communicate knowledge, and (3) help the individual child take his/her next step in development and adjustment. We will strive to develop each learner as a productive citizen who thoughtfully meets personal, community, and global challenges (Donegal School District Handbook, 2006, p.2).

Statement of the Issue

In order to fulfill the ideals represented in the above philosophy, the district needed to develop and continually enhance, through ongoing review/evaluation, innovative procedural structures to ensure that indeed students develop both understanding and knowledge. The emphasis was on working towards proper implementation of the essential elements of instruction and meaningful conferencing with professional educators. By creating instructional expectations for faculty, based on scientifically-based best practices, the district would equip professional educators with the tools necessary to fulfill the goal of providing students with a quality education. It would also assist in developing educators who would be able to make conscious, intentional, instructional decisions regarding their students and be able to articulate the reasoning for those decisions.

Table 2: Donegal School District Instructional Leadership Plan

| Action Item | Participants | Result |
|--|---|---|
| <i>Action Item #1:</i> Develop a statement or philosophy regarding staff development and a listing of instructional expectations | Superintendent Director of Curriculum & Instruction Elementary & Secondary Building-Level Administration Teacher-Leaders | Provides a continual guide for potential courses of action regarding instruction and staff development within the district and ongoing longitudinal analysis of impact |
| <i>Action Item #2:</i> Examine the supervision process district-wide and revise process where necessary – included in this would be the creation of an instructional labels reference guide for administrators and faculty | Superintendent Director of Curriculum & Instruction Elementary & Secondary Building-Level Administration Teacher-Leaders | Revision of the differentiated supervision structure of the school district to reflect scientifically-based best practices and ongoing longitudinal analysis of impact |
| <i>Action Item #3:</i> Provide training for the administrative team on effective instructional leadership | Superintendent Director of Curriculum & Instruction Elementary & Secondary Building-Level Administration Teacher-Leaders | Utilization of an educational consultant to provide extensive training during the summer months and ongoing longitudinal analysis of impact |
| <i>Action Item #4:</i> Provide collegial opportunities for the administration and faculty to discuss and revisit the essential elements of instruction | Superintendent Director of Curriculum & Instruction Elementary & Secondary Building-Level Administration Teacher-Leaders | Utilization of in-service day(s) and incorporation into the differentiated supervision plan as well as the establishment of professional learning communities at the building-level |

Action Plans

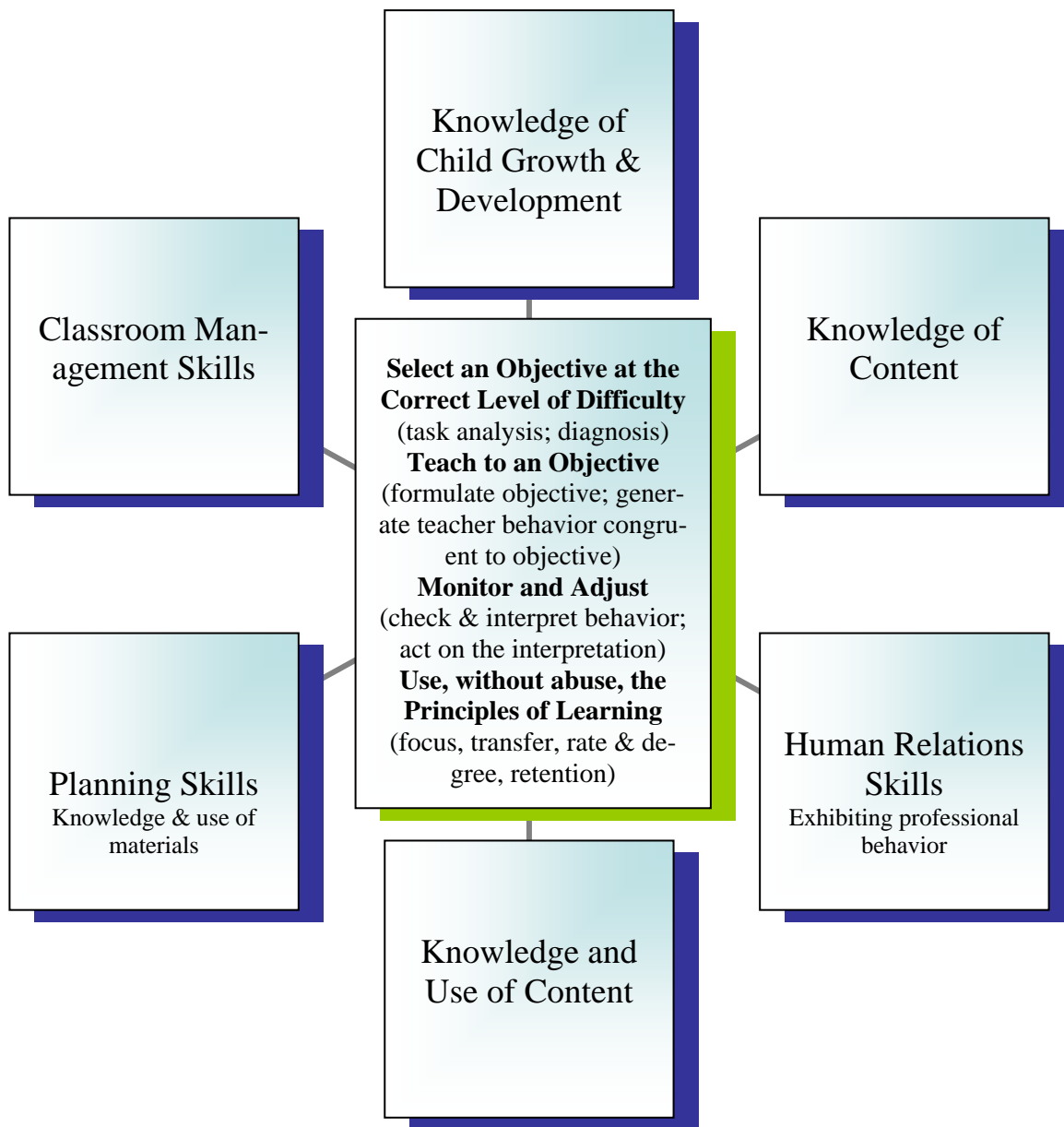
Table 2 identifies four action items that resulted in the establishment and continuation of effective instructional leadership within the Donegal School District. A description and tentative timeline for each action plan is presented below. The total timeframe for planning and full implementation was approximately 14 months.

Action Item #1: (Timeline – 2 months)

In developing a statement and/or philosophy regarding staff development that would provide solid instructional leadership, it was important to have a diverse group of individuals who worked on creating the document. Meetings were held at the district office which included all the individuals listed as participants. The meetings consisted of an organizational meeting to brainstorm ideas and two additional follow-up meetings to solidify a statement that all the participants could agree on. Along with the creation of a statement, the idea of instructional expectations was also examined and addressed. The following was the resulting statement and/or philosophy that became the guiding principle for staff development and instructional leadership (further represented in the Figure 1):

*Staff development should be flexible to deal with contingencies. It should also be consistent and pervasive which includes **focusing on research-proven results** that are consistent with the district model and **uses a common language that all practitioners recognize**. Staff development should also focus on the maintenance of existing initiatives thus allowing for individuals, who may need additional support, to catch up. The filter for staff development should be based on instructional theory.*

Figure 1: Donegal School District Instructional Leadership Plan



Action Item #2: (Timeline: 8-12 months with an annual review)

Due to the extensive nature of this task and the scheduling of meetings, the timeframe for completion of this particular aspect was longer than initially anticipated. It was in this major revision that the conferencing with professional educators was addressed. Looking at the initial supervision and evaluation plan in place prior to the revisions, the administrative team found it to be more summative evaluation-oriented than formative assessment-oriented. The overall goal was to provide faculty with an opportunity to reflect on their teaching and then apply sound practices to their instruction while eliminating those teaching tendencies that would inhibit student learning.

The participants involved in this process decided that there would be five differentiated supervision options for faculty members to participate in and that every three years they would be required to change options. The options were

administrative consultation, peer coaching, individual instructional support, professional development, and individual professional growth plan.

Along with revising the differentiated supervision model, the participants worked on establishing a common language between participants in the supervision process. It was at this juncture that we realized that a document that included a compilation of the essential elements of instruction should be shared with the administration and faculty. This allowed all parties to understand what the expectations for quality teaching are in Donegal School District and provide a framework for building-level administrators to work with faculty who may be deficient in one or more of the aforementioned elements. For the sake of brevity, the elements are listed below:

- ◆ Selecting objectives at the correct level of difficulty (Task Analysis & Diagnostic Process)
- ◆ Formulating an objective
- ◆ Teaching to an objective
- ◆ Monitoring and adjusting instruction
- ◆ Lesson plan format
- ◆ Anticipatory set
- ◆ Advance organizers
- ◆ Active participation
- ◆ Motivation
- ◆ Transfer
- ◆ Retention
- ◆ Dignifying responses (errors)
- ◆ Closure
- ◆ Concept development matrix

Action Item #3: (Ongoing – no set timeframe)

In order to be consistent across the district, the participants decided that an essential component of enhancing instructional leadership involved the thorough training and ongoing peer coaching of the administrative team. This team included the superintendent, director of curriculum and instruction, director of special education/alternative education programs, and the building-level administrators. A consultant was brought in to conduct the training during the summer months of 2004 and 2005. Dr. Ernest Stachkowski, whose work provided much of the conceptual framework for Donegal's approach to supervision and evaluation, was contracted to do the training. Dr. Stachkowski worked extensively with Madeline Hunter, Erlene Minton and others in the Theory Into Practice (TIP) Projects at the University of California. The intent of these projects was to provide districts with a research-based framework for effective pedagogy and administrative conferencing. The training opportunity allowed Donegal's administration to hone the skills necessary to teach the fundamental elements of instruction and to conference with faculty members in a productive fashion.

Along with the training, the administration agreed that establishing a system of peer coaching would ensure that the knowledge gleaned from the training could be sustained. A time was set aside during monthly cabinet meetings to address one of the fundamental elements of teaching. An administrator was assigned to present a particular element for the rest of the administrative team. Additionally, administrators were required to complete one of the following options and submit it for review:

1. Complete and submit to the director of curriculum and instruction one written conference plan for semester 1 and semester 2.
2. Videotape a conference with a faculty member and submit it to the director of curriculum and instruction.
3. Plan and conduct a conference with the assistance of the director of curriculum and instruction.

The director of curriculum and instruction then met with each administrator individually to discuss the process and rationale for handling the conference in the manner selected. Administrators also discussed and reviewed each other's work in this area. At the high school, the principal and assistant principal met to discuss how conferences were handled and were provided opportunities to give evaluative feedback to one another.

Action Item #4: (Ongoing – no set timeframe)

The administration utilized the plan outlined in Table 2 on a daily basis through the observation process. This, however, seemed insufficient for the administration. The teacher evaluation rubric for the district required that teachers have an in-depth and thorough knowledge of pedagogy. The administration believed that in order for teachers to truly understand what the district meant by this component, it was important for each administrator to do a presentation on one of the fundamental elements of instruction. They believed these presentations would also help to maintain the credibility of the observation process. The participants decided that an in-service day would be utilized to give presentations to the faculty.

In the fall of each school year, the faculty from the entire district was assigned to groups randomly for the day. Each group consisted of approximately 20 individuals across grade levels and subject areas. Each administrator would present on a different fundamental element of instruction utilizing a proper lesson format. By having the administration conduct the in-service, it demonstrated to the faculty that the administration truly understood the concepts they wanted to see in the classroom. This in turn led to a more productive dialogue within the post-observation conference and a stronger collegial relationship as noted by an end-of-year organizational climate survey conducted by building level administrators.

Corroboration from Current Research

In order to have a holistic perspective on instructional leadership and provide research-based support for the action items, Donegal focused on the meta-analytic leadership studies of Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003). According to the district, this provided the best method for Donegal of integrating quantitative research, theoretical insights, and professional wisdom regarding effective leadership. The study concluded that there was a strong correlation between leadership and student achievement, that leadership could be empirically defined, and that effective leaders not only know what to do, but how, when, and why to do it (Waters et al., 2003).

Of the key areas of effective leadership identified, Donegal School District focused on the following as related to the action items previously listed:

- ◆ Leaders must be knowledgeable about current practices regarding curriculum, instruction, and assessment.
- ◆ Leaders must establish strong lines of communication with teachers and students.
- ◆ Leaders must monitor the effectiveness of school practices and their impact on student achievement.
- ◆ Leaders must ensure that the faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices in education and make the discussion of these practices integral to the school's culture.

Marzano (2003) reiterated the importance of the above factors in providing instructional leadership at the district and building level. He stressed the need for communication and having consistent practice. Along with leadership, Marzano (2003) also emphasized the importance of effective teaching. Both communication and effective teaching through consistent practice are factors illustrated in Action Item #2 regarding the revision to the supervision model and the creation of an instructional labels reference guide in order to establish a common language regarding pedagogy. The district also took the fundamental elements of teaching and associated them with research-based strategies for instruction as presented by Marzano and others.

Current research also indicated that reflective practice and collegial dialogue related to instruction combined with communication are imperative to successful instructional leadership (Sergiovanni, 1995; Sergiovanni & Starrett, 1998). Lashway (2002) concurs and stated that:

(P)incipals must be able to recognize whether lessons are aligned with standards, develop classroom assessments consistent with standards, and evaluate student work for evidence that standards have been achieved. Their knowledge should be deep enough to let them coach teachers using explanations, practical examples, and demonstration lessons. Just as important, leaders must demonstrate the same learning traits that they expect in teachers: openness to new ideas, willingness to be driven by results, and persistence in the face of difficulty (p. 4).

The district, in the process of revising the supervision model, considered both collegiality and reflective practice – for

both teachers and administrators. Action Item #3 was adopted so that administrators could both effectively dialogue with teachers about their instruction. At the same time, the dialogue provides knowledge and constructive feedback concerning areas of instructional deficiency.

Along with providing instructional guidance to the teaching staff, the district realized it would need to offer a system of peer coaching to its administrators and included that tenet in Action Item #3. Elmore (2000) reiterates the importance of developing instructional skills.

The purpose of leadership is the improvement of instructional practice and performance, regardless of role. If this is indeed the purpose, then the skills and knowledge that matter are those that bear on the creation of settings for learning focused on clear expectations for instruction. All other skills are instrumental (p. 20).

He goes on to state that this focus on instructional improvement must include continuous learning within a social environment:

Learning is both an individual and a social activity. Therefore, collective learning demands an environment that guides and directs the acquisition of new knowledge about instruction. Leaders must create environments in which individuals expect to have their personal ideas and practices subjected to the scrutiny of their colleagues, and in which groups expect to have their shared conceptions of practice subjected to the scrutiny of individuals. Privacy of practice produces isolation; isolation is the enemy of improvement (p. 20).

The district had the foresight to understand the importance of sustainability and credibility among its administrators. Sustainability was based on the idea that present and future administrative training could be maintained and honed due to the established system of peer coaching and credibility. Secondly, sustainability and creditability were addressed in the sense that administrators would be engaging in the same practices with one another as they were with the teaching staff (Action Item #4).

All of the aforementioned areas would be moot if it were not for a vision or philosophy driving them. Donegal School District, like many organizations, needed to establish a vision to ensure the purpose of instructional leadership was a continual focus and would drive future planning and implementation. Anthes (2005) and Bliss, Baylor, Caulk & Warfield (2004) support this idea of prioritizing the vision in order to implement and sustain positive change. Anthes (2005) completed a comparison study of five different leadership standards (ISLLC, ELCC, NAESP, SREB and McREL) and found that all the standards generally fit within several categories. One category consisted of developing and articulating a vision. Both Anthes, (2005) and Bliss, Baylor, Caulk & Warfield (2004) not only stress the importance of establishing a vision, but also the idea of empowering others to effectively implement that vision:

A vision does not drive an organization unless it is communicated well, infused into the daily operations of the school, and earnestly embraced by teachers and parents. Oftentimes, the essence of the vision dissipates or is distorted as it is communicated to the larger organization. An effective leader both translates the vision into everyday practice and communicates the vision clearly in a variety of settings. A vision must be taught in order to take hold. The members of an organization must believe in the vision, using it as a foundation for their decisions regarding students. It is also important to realize that good leaders cannot succeed by themselves – they must empower those who are best able to implement the vision. They must distribute their leadership capacity to cultural stakeholders and empower them to act (Bliss et al., p. 12).

As addressed in Action Item #1, the district, utilizing central administration, building-level administration and teacher leaders, worked to establish a vision. The articulation and implementation of that vision continues to be an ongoing process.

Conclusion

The impact of this instructional leadership model on Donegal School District has been a positive one. Student achievement on state and local assessments has increased as measured by performance on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment. Pedagogy has been enhanced as observed through the supervision and evaluation process. Along with achievement and sound instructional practice, a continuous learning ethic is evident within the district.

In order to have effective instructional leadership, a district must create both intellectual capital and social capital within the organization (Fink & Resnick, 2001). By establishing a vision, empowering school participants, and creating an environment for continuous learning, effective leadership within Donegal will continue to be a work-in-progress and will be anchored in research-proven strategies that will ultimately best meet the needs of the students. In the end, leadership and learning are indispensable to each other.

Author Information

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