Principles for Principals: The Role of Principal Leadership in Philadelphia

Introduction

A growing body of research shows that the role of principals is one of the most important factors in creating school improvements, second only to the quality of in-the-classroom instruction. As we enter a new phase for the district with increased school autonomy, the role of principals is critical. It is important that we recognize the importance of the skill, vision, abilities and capacity of the individuals leading and teaching in our schools. The current re-organization is an opportunity to take a giant leap forward: we must structure the position in a way that allows talented individuals to thrive, and that will attract and develop the people that we want running our schools.

If we want to take advantage of this opportunity and implement positive reform, then we need to move forward with these findings and make them a priority at the district wide level, within individual schools and across the entire community so that every student in Philadelphia is provided with an opportunity to learn.

The work we did: Education Voters interviewed numerous principals (retired and current, both from this district and elsewhere), school district leaders, teachers, and policy and practice experts in order to better understand the practices of effective principals, the factors that facilitate success, barriers and obstacles that may exist and what conditions and changes would promote success.

What we heard: There is a strong belief that in order to be effective, people need time to focus on the most important parts of their job: working with teachers and children. In discussions about priorities for spending time, a recurring theme was the need to reduce time spent in the office or at the district in order to be more hands on with teachers and students. “Kids, working directly with them, knowing every child by name.” was one of the responses to how principals should be tailoring their time. Another was: “Every classroom, every day” and “Co-teaching and observing and giving feedback - if I had my way that is how I would spend 80% of my time.”

In conversations about whether or not the job is structured and supported in ways that make that a priority, a common response was that “good principals make time” for that, but do so in a sea of “overwhelming” demands on their time.
Some of the issues identified included feeling the need to “battle” or “unearth the right person” in order to address building issues or dealing with “necessary but time consuming” compliance. Others mentioned issues of constant interruptions, noting that while much of that reasonably comes with the territory, interruptions from the central offices at the District with matters that were not actually urgent, including off site meetings or requests for information eats into very precious time. Being able to use their own time more pro-actively for priority activities, using less time interacting with the district on basic functions, and being able to deploy staff were all mentioned.

Principals are seeking “more freedom to design instruction” even as they acknowledge the need to ensure consistency and quality. The answer to that is “collaboration” and “getting high quality professional development” and “people to work with who really know the latest in curriculum” and the opportunity to develop themselves and the teaching staff.

When asked what the district should do to start making improvements, one person summed it up: “Listen better, develop talent better”.

As the district forges ahead with re-organization, we believe it is especially important to strengthen the role of principals, providing updated supports and accountability. Therefore, it is timely to engage in a broader conversation about improvements to the role, position structure, autonomies and responsibilities of the job of principal.

**What National Research Shows**

The Wallace Foundation, in particular, has assembled a wealth of data on why successful principals are succeeding and how they are doing it. This work suggests 5 key responsibilities:

1. *Shaping a vision of academic success for all students, one based on high standards.*
2. *Creating a climate hospitable to education in order that safety, a cooperative spirit and other foundations of fruitful interaction prevail.*
3. *Cultivating leadership in others so that teachers and other adults assume their part in realizing the school vision.*
4. *Improving instruction to enable teachers to teach at their best and students to learn at their utmost.*
5. *Managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement.*

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Education Voters PA’s recommendations are focused on: the role and structure of the position and the supports and the accountabilities for the people who hold it. We believe that there are focused measures that can be taken by the School District of Philadelphia to create conditions for principals, teachers and students to succeed, and to then support those conditions in a sustained fashion.
**Role Within the District**

- View principals as senior managers, who are expected to spend time developing and implementing organizational strategies for targeted improvements rather than reacting to day-to-day issues.
- Change the role of principals to reflect their importance, including more integration into the leadership and decision making structure of the District and greater representation in the discussions underway about the future of the District.
- Give principals more control in the hiring process; one way to do this would be to have the district concentrate on recruiting and vetting candidates who can apply for open positions, while principals and their site-based leadership teams will make selections to build a developing team.
- Review, update and make public the job description and information about the position. Questions that need to be addressed include:
  - What authority do they have?
  - To whom do they report, and how?
  - How are they managed and reviewed, and what steps are taken to address concerns? How are development plans implemented?
  - How are they assigned and transferred?
  - What kind of budget authority do they have? This may be clear within the district, but the broader community needs more understanding of this process.
  - What support and training is being implemented to accompany new autonomy?

District administrators and principals must redefine their roles and relationships with an understanding that the district possesses the resources to set up effective systemic frameworks, while principals have the specific knowledge of their school, employees and students to make most of the on-the-ground decisions. The broader community should have clarity around the role and how these leaders fit into, and impact, the community and the broader system in order to have shared expectations and build a stronger basis for community involvement.

**Role Within Schools**

As we move to a model where principals have more say and function as genuine leaders, principals need to be responsible for leading a process to develop a vision and mission for their school and to then set up a shared approach with staff, the community and district leadership to set goals for school improvement, identifying benchmarks and time lines for meeting those goals. “Studies of organizations that have successfully turned schools around are characterized first and foremost by strong leaders who diagnose the particulars of the schools they lead.” *(Cutting Through the Hype, Jane David and Larry Cuban).*

- They need much more say over curriculum and instruction.
- They need more autonomy in hiring, developing and structuring their staff.
○ They need control/oversight over their building and what happens in it; this includes support and proper staffing that are part of the school team and structure. Organizations that are the size of a school typically have operations staff that coordinate operations functions and report to the organization’s Director; this is generally a model appropriate for a school.

● Principals need to foster a culture of collaboration amongst teachers in concrete ways, including creating a schedule that allows for specific time for teachers to meet, plan, and share knowledge and best practices; and setting up a framework to create “professional learning communities” (PLCs) for ongoing professional development. They must be responsible for leading a collaborative environment which sets the tone for both cooperation and mutual accountability for all staff at a school. Principals must be able to work with teachers to create an environment where students feel supported and responded to in a non-bureaucratic fashion.

● Creating a safe atmosphere must be a paramount expectation and priority. Changing our collective culture to change school climate conditions, implement positive behavior supports and more aggressively pursue building and site repairs must be a community-wide priority. Children must be provided with a safe, healthy building and adults committed to their individual security and dignity.

**Proper Supports and Structuring the Job**

We need to implement the right supports into the system:

- The autonomy and the distribution of responsibility needs to be clear and focused on supporting instructional leadership, including protecting a principal’s time for this critical function; however, it has also been shown that positive outcomes increase as principals move towards sharing responsibilities and cultivating leadership in other staff and community members, and that principals do not lose influence as others gain influence (that is, school leadership is not a zero sum game).

- Professional development is critical. The district should consider seeking support to provide expanded comprehensive training, such as re-instating ALPS, or developing a more in depth and individually tailored professional development plan for individuals.

- We need to update training on using data to both adjust lessons and teaching and as a tool used in conducting high quality evaluations of teachers that are designed to improve practice. Vanderbilt researchers specifically have developed 6 key steps in school leadership that we believe accurately outline the process that we must empower principals to employ: planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating and monitoring.

- There need to be improvements to the support structure:
  - Curriculum specialists at the district level who are up to date on current curriculum practice and spend most of their time in schools working with teachers and principals.
  - Operations support and a clear system for working with the office to address site issues. The district central operations must not be seen as a barrier to getting building or site issues addressed.
Newer principles and ones in high needs schools may need additional supports, including staff and leadership support. This is a strategic and targeted deployment of resources. Principals must help develop an understanding of the supports that could be most effective for these situations.

Accountability

- Principals need to be trained to and held responsible for building leadership teams that incorporate staff and community; this team development should be a criterion for evaluation.
- The public needs to be confident that the people in that position are effective and responsible for carrying out all aspects of their job: there needs to be a clearly articulated process that describes the process and criteria for reviewing a principal and determining success. Following the process needs to be a high priority for the district.
- Not all schools start at the same place, but all schools are capable of growth and improvement. Principals need time to implement a plan, and the public is entitled to see progress. Identifying clear, reasonable benchmarks and a fair timeline for progress is the best way to balance these.

Principals must be given the resources and training to implement these practices, but then be held accountable for doing so; we know that all schools are capable of improvement, but this must be measured in a relative way that “compares apples to apples” and does not use a cookie cutter rubric for all schools.

Closing Summary

Our goal is to drive a discussion based on these principles and to lay out a clear basis for expectations moving forward. There is a role to play here for the district, for principals, and for the community as a whole. The district must create a system that gives talented principals the conditions to thrive by allowing them the autonomy they need to make the right decisions for their school while maintaining the necessary level of accountability.

Principals must take on an increased role in instruction and work to create a collaborative environment of shared responsibility that pools and directs the talents and resources of all staff members, with a special eye on developing leaders. Teachers should have the right to expect a good boss who is fair and can help them develop professionally and realize their goals. Neither principals nor teachers are simply “cogs in the machine”; both need to be treated as individuals.

The community must expect, and even demand, that these things are happening and hold school and district officials accountable. If we are able to bring these elements together and act on this issue in a deliberate and coordinated way, this could in fact be the most important and significant reform that the School District of Philadelphia could pursue to provide every student with an opportunity to learn.