Leadership Insights
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The Principal as School Leader
Researching the role of school principal uncovers no shortage of descriptions...most, if not all, point to the diverse and challenging responsibilities and expectations associated with those who are deemed “principal.” Does the current characterization of principals as "instructional leaders" instead of "managers" truly capture the totality of the work, or does it trade one single dimension for another? How can we reframe the conversation about assessing quality school leadership so that it is inclusive of expectations and transparent as a process?

The Principal as School Leader

By Joanne Picone-Zocchia

Researching the role of school principal uncovers no shortage of descriptions. From the foundations that invest time and resources in defining and supporting quality school principals and their supervisors, to policymakers and politicians whose decisions influence principals’ professional responsibilities and accountability, to Universities whose responsibility it is to develop pre-service leaders, to the districts that employ leaders - most, if not all, point to the diverse and challenging responsibilities and expectations associated with those who are deemed “principal.”

Speak to acting principals, and these descriptions quickly come alive with stories from the everyday life of their practice. Review the professional standards that define quality practices of the profession and the tools designed to assess those practices, and what is expected of an effective principal is further revealed. Triangulate what is evident in the theory behind the role, with the experiences of practice and the standards of quality, and the role of principal emerges as challenging, multi-dimensional, engaging and rigorous.

Today, in the face of all that has been uncovered, measured, researched and sought after that points to the complexities surrounding school leadership, the current commentary of the very same entities that speak so eloquently to the multi-dimensional nature of the position of school principal, now focus emphatically on a shift in the principal’s role from “building manager” to “instructional leader.” While this focus on the principal as an instructional leader clearly asserts the principal’s role regarding quality teaching and learning, an unintended consequence of interpreting this as a shift is oversimplification.

The idea that the current focus on instructional leadership somehow replaces management – or any other individual facet of school leadership presumes that it is wise – or even possible – for a single focus to be the mainstay of quality practice, and raises the question of whether one can happen successfully in the absence of attending to the other. Finally, it communicates a belief that the context of quality practice can be defined by a single subset of the world of that
practice. This is a setup for disappointment. As unreasonable as it would be to deny the importance of the leader to the instruction that produces learning, it is equally as unreasonable to deny the importance of the leader to the operations, culture, improvement, systems and relationships that are also critical to learning.

Framing and supporting school leadership practice requires attending to both the totality of the leader’s role as well as its more discreet aspects. The world of education requires its leaders to access professional expertise in strategic, organizational, and relational leadership. As a conceptual framework, these three primary areas could become the frame for leaders in any field – however, LCI has further developed each to be specific to education. This leadership framework is informed by the 2008 ISLLC standards and 2015 Professional Leadership Standards as well as by LCI’s Multidimensional Principal Performance Rubric and its intensive work in leadership development.

**Strategic Leadership** relies heavily on the leaders’ ability to apply critical thinking skills and a growth mindset, and to elicit both in others. It is the space inside which a principal focuses on the school’s *instructional* and *improvement* priorities. It is here that the principal hones the leadership skills and strategies that will enable him/her to successfully mediate the needs and challenges of ensuring quality instruction and of establishing or strengthening systems and processes that promote ongoing and sustainable improvement.

**Organizational Leadership** leans on the leader’s appreciation for and facility with a focus on the parts as well as the whole. It encompasses the human and operational aspects of the school itself, focusing the principal on specifics like traditions, induction and exit processes and the dispositions that support quality learning, while also attending to the fiscal, physical and policy aspects of the school.

**Relational Leadership** taps both facilitative and reflective skills. It addresses the opportunities that the principal has to affect and be affected by the people - teachers, staff, students, parents, community partners, etc. – the stakeholders who comprise the school community. In this area, the school leader accesses his/her interpersonal leadership skills, helping to build relationships and trust and internal capacity that can sustain the school in a variety of circumstances, but also focuses on tapping and deepening the leader’s intrapersonal skills such as reflection, self-awareness, mindfulness and resilience.

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**Are you looking to go deeper?**

The following articles provide additional context:

- **Five Key Responsibilities – School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning** (Wallace Foundation)

- **Professional Support for Principals Is Essential for Strong Teacher-Evaluation Systems** (Center for American Progress)

- **The Changing Role of the Principal: How High-Achieving Districts Are Recalibrating School Leadership** (Center for American Progress)

- **Managing the dissonance... and disconnect of change** (Joanne Picone-Zocchia/LCI)
Quality school leadership is critical to enabling quality education. Leading a school is a tremendous undertaking that must be embraced in all of its complexity, so that there is no misunderstanding about what is expected or required. The realities of every day in this role require principals to operate within Strategic, Organizational and Relational Leadership simultaneously, to move between and among them as needed, and to know when and how to blend and shift based on the most important priorities and areas of focus for their schools, staff and students. Quality school leadership practices support this, quality schools need this, quality education depends on this.
About the Author

Joanne is an educator/facilitator, a published author and curriculum designer with a passion for sustainable school improvement and issues of systemic educational reform. As the lead author of the Multidimensional Performance Rubrics (MPPR, MLPR, MSPR) and the processes that support their implementation, she has had the opportunity to weave key concepts and strategies from systems thinking and neuroleadership into her work helping thousands of educational leaders to address the challenges of designing and refining professional supervision and evaluation systems.

Joanne’s call to focus on setting and attaining goals that are WISE as well as SMART, and her commitment to supporting educators in capturing and disseminating their “Signature Practices” are key in her most recent writing and facilitation. She welcomes opportunities for discourse and collaboration, and can be reached at joannepz@lciltd.org.

About the Publisher

LCI provides professional development programs, products and services, all with a focus on sustainable improvement. We offer consultations and coaching services for leaders that revolve around client-specific questions, concerns and goals, along with professional development programs organized around our leadership framework. Our Leadership Learning Network provides a forum to deepen understanding of school leadership and sharing best and promising practices. For more about LCI’s approach to leadership development, and how we can help, click here.

In addition to our leadership work, we are known for our assessment, curriculum, and instruction expertise. Visit our website to learn more.

We are a certified MWBE in NYS and NYC, and have been successfully helping clients since 1995.