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Leadership Matters: It matters a great deal in improving student learning

An effective principal is not all that is required for an effective school, but it is very difficult to have a good school without a good principal. It is often stated that an effective principal makes a difference in student learning. However, research suggests, the principal **is** the difference in student learning.

Leadership characteristics are the second strongest predictor of a school's effect on student results. Only classroom factors, such as teacher quality, are stronger. A recent study (Marzano, Waters & McNulty, 2005) determined that improving principals' leadership abilities by one standard deviation lead to an increase in average student achievement of ten percentile points. This study has meaningful implications for teacher-librarians as they work with their building principals in finding ways to support and encourage effective instructional media programs in schools.

The study (Marzano et al., 2005) found the three most significant characteristics of effective principals were:

Situational Awareness: "The principal is aware of details and undercurrents in the running of the school and uses this information to address current and potential problems." This theme supports the notion of involving all staff in the instructional decisions of the school. Experience demonstrates people support what they help develop. Involving teacher-librarians in curriculum, assessment, alignment of resources and instructional lesson design, and program evaluation contributes to staff and student learning. Instruction is at the heart of a great school and teacher-librarians are at the center of this discussion. Effective principals rely on teacher-librarians to suggest ways to increase academic rigor and

provide guidance on courses implementing programs that motivate and increase student achievement.

Intellectual Stimulation: “The principal ensures that staff are aware of the most current theories and practices and makes the discussion of these a regular aspect of the school’s culture.” Teacher-librarians are at the forefront of the newest instructional materials, media and effective instructional delivery methods. These educators are well versed in job-embedded professional development trends and the latest research on the use of data to inform classroom and building level assessment results. Indeed, teacher-librarians continually network and connect with one another in an effort to share best practices in student achievement, innovative curriculum projects and technology tools designed to facilitate staff and student learning.

Input: “The principal involves teachers in the design and implementation of important decisions and policies.” Effective principals know teamwork matters. These principals know they cannot go it alone and increased involvement from all staff results in an instructional program that is strongly supported, willingly implemented, and more responsive to the learning demands of students. Principals in highly effective schools rely on teacher-librarians to provide guidance in research-based school and classroom practices in order to lead the faculty in redesigning the instructional program in ways that keep everyone focused on student learning.

Specific Strategies for Teacher-Librarians

Teacher-librarians have an opportunity to become *leaders* when they support school principals in their primary task of instructional leadership. The following strategies may be useful in ensuring their principal succeeds.

Support the principal’s efforts to create a focused mission to improve student achievement and a vision of the elements of school, curriculum and instructional practices that make higher achievement possible.

Keep the principal informed and well versed on research-based school and classroom practices designed to improve student learning. Become a regular part of the faculty agenda with updates, articles and recommendations. Volunteer to serve on instructional, curriculum and assessment committees and become an active reader of research and academic journals.

Encourage the principal's interest in establishing and maintaining high expectations for all students to learn higher-level content. Become familiar with the research on the relationship between expectations and student achievement. Rally for an increase in academic rigor and for eliminating low-level courses that do not challenge students, and support the successful transition of students within and between grade levels.

Encourage the principal to recognize and value implementation of good instructional practices that motivate and increase student achievement. Help the principal develop a deep knowledge of research-based instructional methods that motivate and engage students. Provide the analytical skills to help the principal recognize best practices in all subject areas. Observe, listen and become the eyes and ears for the principal on best practices within and outside of the building.

Support the principal in the creation of a school organization where faculty and staff understand that every student counts and where every student has the support of a caring adult. Highly effective schools are organized in such a way as to provide a personalized learning environment by creating small learning communities, schools-within-school advisor-advisees programs, tutoring, and after-school programs that provide extra help to struggling students. Teacher-librarians have the ability to ensure faculty and parents are partners with the principal in supporting and participating in this effort.

Encourage the principal to use data to initiate and continue improvement in school and classroom practices and student achievement. Teacher-librarians can support the principal by helping in collecting,

interpreting and using data to inform instructional decisions. This data can be used as a catalyst for shaping new attitudes, and behaviors, identifying weaknesses, and planning interventions that lead to higher student achievement. Serving as a member of the building assessment or learning team provides teacher-librarians with access and influence to building-level instructional decisions.

Assist the principal in staying informed and focused on student achievement. By staying active and visible in the school and classrooms, teacher-librarians can lead the conversations about what matters most to enhance student achievement by using new channels of communication such as Web sites, electronic distribution lists, group e-mails and listserv discussions. This support greatly encourages the principal to maintain a strong focus on student learning and provides the principal with immediate feedback on policies and building procedures directed at increasing student achievement.

Support the principal in understanding the change process and acquire the leadership and facilitation skills to manage it effectively. Teacher-librarians can help the principal capture the attention of school personnel and create urgency for change by organizing experiences and presenting data that promote a sense of *readiness* for change. This could involve the use of effective strategies for generating meaningful dialogue around student achievement by making study groups a regular part of the school culture. In addition, working to generate consensus among the staff for meaningful change and helping to manage the dissonance that is likely to arise when different ideas are expressed and new strategies implemented will greatly support the principal's effort in change management.

Encourage the principal to develop a stronger understanding of how adults learn and how to advance meaningful change through quality sustained professional development that benefits students. Teacher-librarians are at the center of adult learning as they often serve on the school staff development committee and clearly understand that adults learn differently than students. Adults want to share,

participate and become actively involved in their learning. Educators must know that their learning has application to their work and improves student learning. Adults enjoy team work, flexible training schedules and an opportunity to learn, apply, discuss, evaluate and continue to learn. Meaningful change will more readily occur when staff is provided high quality, sustained professional development that targets specific needs and benefits students. Teacher-librarian support for the principal is critical in order for this to occur.

Support the principal in the use and organization of time in innovative ways to meet the goals and objectives of school improvement. Good principals are not prisoners of traditional ways of organizing and using school time and they protect it for important purposes. Teacher-librarians can assist the principal in knowing and advocating for a variety of scheduling models that maximize time and support for students to learn, including use of technology to increase student achievement. Supporting the principal's desire to find extra time for some students will be well received. Some examples might include: organizing in-school, before-school and after-school tutorial programs and developing innovative summer school models that provide intensive tutoring on specific needs.

Assist the principal in acquiring instructional resources. Effective school leaders link school resources to improving their students' learning and they allocate and reallocate school resources based on current priorities. Skillful teacher-librarians constantly search for funding and other resources needed to achieve the principal and school's mission and goals. These teacher-librarians creatively coordinate the use of available human, material, financial and social resources. With the help of the faculty, they write proposals for grants and develop partnerships with businesses, universities and community agencies that have a vested interest in quality schooling and student achievement. Principals greatly appreciate support in acquiring and effectively using instructional resources as they are at the core of achieving their

mission – a focus on student learning.

Relationships Count

Barth (2006) suggested the nature of relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student achievement than anything else. He commented:

“If the relationships between administrators and teachers are trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative, then the relationships between teachers and students, between students and students, and between teachers and parents are likely to be trusting, generous, helpful, and cooperative. If, on the other hand, relationships between administrators and teachers are fearful, competitive, suspicious, and corrosive, then these qualities will disseminate throughout the school community.

In short, the relationships among the educators in a school define all relationships within that school’s culture. Teachers and administrators demonstrate all too well a capacity to either enrich or diminish one another’s lives and thereby enrich or diminish their schools.”

Teacher-librarians have the opportunity to support building level leadership, thereby increasing the effectiveness of the principal and improving student learning. Leadership does matter. Indeed, it matters a great deal. The opportunity to *enrich* your school and become a teacher-librarian *leader* is before you. Don’t miss it!

References

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