

Managers Help Principals Balance Time

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Most principals probably hope that at least half their working day is spent in meaningful interactions with teachers and students.

But that's not likely.

Investigators who shadowed principals for a week showed that a crush of managerial duties allowed them to spend only a third of their day—or less—on tasks that involved interaction with students and teachers. And often, the contact that did occur was too short and unfocused to lead to real instructional improvement.

A national project aimed at **improving school leaders' effectiveness**  is seeking to change that situation by supporting the hiring of "school administration managers" in schools. Such administrators take over the managerial tasks that are important to a smooth-running school but have little to do directly with learning.

At the same time, the SAMs, as they are called, are asked to focus the principals' attention on being good instructional coaches by keeping their schedules and actively directing the principals toward classroom work. Some of the principals are also receiving additional leadership training in constructive coaching techniques.

37 Districts

Launched with three schools in the 98,000-student Jefferson County, Ky., district, the foundation-backed initiative has now spread to more than 200 schools in 37 districts and seven states, with an eighth state set to join in July. A group of principals and SAMs gathered for the first time in this Atlanta suburb earlier this month to compare notes on their progress and to offer encouragement to districts considering the model, which has been called both transformative and challenging.

"I can't imagine life without this," said Kent Stock, the middle school principal of the 1,000-student Oak Ridge School in Marion, Iowa. His K-8 school has had a SAM since last March; she splits her time between working with him and with the school's elementary principal, Dan Ludwig.

At the same time, Mr. Stock said, it was hard to let go of some of the managerial jobs that had once taken up most of his time. Though such tasks as reconciling time sheets for classified school personnel were tedious, they offered immediate satisfaction.

"You would work and say, OK, I've got that solved. But it wasn't meaningful," he said. Since a SAM came to the school, the proportion of time he spends on instructional matters has tripled, from an average of 12 percent of his day to 36 percent, and he's hoping to see more improvement as the program continues.

For her part, Janelle Steichen, the Oak Ridge SAM, said she's gratified to be helping the principals focus on student learning. "The staff and our community got on board really quickly," said Ms. Steichen, a former teacher and an aspiring principal. Parents and teachers find her easy to reach, and she believes some issues, such as discipline, are diminished because the students see principals more often.

Katie Mulholland, the superintendent of the 6,300-student Linn-Mar school district, which includes Oak Ridge, said other principals in the district are "just waiting in line" for their chance to take part in the program.

"We want to change the whole concept of what it means to be a principal," she said. "We already see the change in kids."

Mark Shellinger, a former principal and the national SAMs expansion coordinator, said the initiative began in 2002 with a study of more than 20 principals in Jefferson County, which includes the city of Louisville. It is financed by the New York City-based Wallace Foundation, which underwrites coverage of leadership issues in *Education Week*.

5-Minute Increments

Changes Over Time

Phillip Poore, a principal in Louisville, Ky., has devoted an increasing amount of his workdays to instructional issues, as indicated by how he's spent his time each November for four years.

SOURCE: Wallace Foundation

At the beginning of the process, trained observers kept track of principals' tasks in five-minute increments. The results were eye-opening: Most of the principals guessed that they spent half their day, or more, on instruction. The average, though, was more like 30 percent, Mr. Shellinger said.

The principal's job is "interrupt driven," he noted. Instead of focusing on one task for an extended period, principals are expected to supervise lunch shifts, manage transportation, deal with parents, dole out discipline, handle budgets, and juggle a number of minor crises that may arise.

Many principals like that job description, he said, because the rewards are quick and praise is immediate. But the pressure on principals to take responsibility for academic achievement has intensified. Schools need more than a "fixer" at the helm, he believes.

With the support of the Jefferson County district and the foundation, three of the principals who were originally shadowed in the study each received a full-time school administration manager. The job description was based on the SAM position already in place in the 12,000-student Victor Elementary District in Victorville, Calif. That district has had SAMs since 1992, but had not tracked their effectiveness.

In just a year, the three Jefferson County principals with SAMs went through a time-tracking study again. They saw a dramatic increase in the time they spent in classrooms, which allowed them to do such tasks as teaching lessons or joining in classroom projects.

Phillip Poore, the principal of the Schaffner Traditional Elementary, was one of the first principals to receive a SAM when he was at the Cochran Elementary School. In his former school, the SAM was a full-time staff member. In his current placement, some of the SAM tasks have been added to an existing staff position.

In both Louisville schools, the SAM has done “a lot to help me keep my focus on instruction,” Mr. Poore said. That’s particularly important for him, he said, as a newly installed administrator. It’s also important to make the extra time that’s available to be with teachers and students worthwhile, Mr. Poore said. “Now that I know what my day is going to look like, I’ve got to make this count,” he said. “It has to really matter.”

Mr. Shellinger stressed that the point of the initiative is not simply to place a new administrative assistant in a school. “A lot of principals will look at this and say, ‘Oh, I have another person; my life will be nirvana.’ That’s not it at all,” he said. “It requires good communication and trust.”

Daily Records

The concept isn’t new, said Paul D. Houston, the executive director of the Arlington, Va.-based American Association of School Administrators. He said the challenge is in getting school boards to accept any extra expense, and in encouraging principals to let go of managerial tasks that are familiar.

Then and Now

Martha McCarthy, the principal of Mojave Vista Elementary School in Victorville, Calif., describes the change in her practice after working closely with a school administration manager, or SAM.

Shedding Old Habits

- Giving up my calendar
- Giving up my e-mails
- Giving up my cellphone during instructional day; only two people are authorized to call me
- Giving up my computer
- Relying on executive secretary
- Delegating tasks to SAM

Learning New Routines

- Conducting classroom walk-throughs
- Leading student discussions
- Collecting data on classroom practices
- Offering feedback

- Coaching and evaluating teachers
- Providing staff development
- Fostering a collaborative culture

“Most principals have not been selected on a premise that they’re going to be great instructional leaders,” he said. “They’re picked because people think, yeah, they’re going to keep a lid on this place.”

In 2006, the program spread to several more districts in Kentucky, including Fayette County. In that 35,000-student system, seven principals have school administration managers. The principals in the SAMs program are undergoing additional training in effective coaching techniques.

“The whole SAM program is definitely cutting-edge leadership,” said Superintendent Stuart Silberman.

As the program has expanded, it has focused on a handful of components. Principals must have an in-depth analysis conducted on the way they’re spending their time. They must agree to meet daily with their SAM, and keep daily records of their tasks and the time they spend on them. Principals and SAMs also meet monthly with an outside coach, who works with both on ways to increase the time principals spend on instruction.

Mr. Shellinger is investigating whether school administration managers can be effective at the middle and high school levels. The schools are also adopting different models of managers, from hiring new personnel to adding tasks to a position that previously existed.

The Victor Elementary district in California has had several schools join the program so they can take a close look at the role of SAMs in improving principal effectiveness. “When we put the positions in place, we didn’t consider how to quantify the value and impact of the SAM, which is what this study has done so well,” said Janet S. Young, the assistant superintendent for personnel services.

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