

From the Principal's Desk

The Principal as

INSTRUCTIONAL
Leader

What else can I do to help these students get it?" queried a frustrated teacher who rushed into my office at the end of another hectic day. It did not matter that I had telephone calls to return, e-mails to answer, and math papers to grade. As her principal, I owed it to this teacher to listen, counsel, pray, and act—as needed.

Donaldson was right when he wrote that "Principals are frequently so inundated with short-term demands and problems that their work lives become governed by management tasks and decisions. They find little time for seeing the field, or they end up seeing the field through management-colored glasses."¹

When outsiders view a principal's typical day, they often tend to conclude that instructional leadership is not the primary focus. Such an outlook, however, "ignores the capacity of the principal to influence instruction through indirect actions that suggest teaching and learning."² Most of a principal's de-

isions inevitably have an impact on instruction.

In the post-World War II era, principals were expected to assume a broad spectrum of responsibilities: curriculum, personnel, teaching, emotional quality of the classroom, resources, teaching materials, lunches, attendance, and textbooks, as well as public relations and a host of additional duties.³ School systems have attempted to streamline the responsibilities of the principal, although this restructuring is a work in progress, especially in smaller districts and school systems. In multigrade schools, principals still fill nearly as many of the roles listed above from the post-World War II era. Since the turn of the 21st century, many principals have also been looked upon as counselors, supervisors, referees, and heroes. In the Adventist system, the principal is expected to be a spiritual leader, marketing expert, and fund raiser, and to fulfill additional duties usually carried out by the district educational office of a public system of education.

However many and varied the roles a principal fills, one of

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his or her major responsibilities is to be *the instructional leader of the institution*. Failure to fulfill this role will seriously diminish the success of the school.

What does being an instructional leader involve? This article will focus on five primary responsibilities: being a source of encouragement, framing and maintaining standards, leading by example, implementing regular evaluations, and being a teacher advocate. In order to provide insight into these responsibilities, we shall examine the principal's instructional leadership using the hypothetical perspectives of "Mrs. Jenkins" as the principal and "Mrs. Holland" as the teacher.

1. Providing Encouragement

Often a teacher is so inundated with responsibilities that he or she may feel it is impossible to fulfill all of the expectations of the administration, parents, school board, and conference. At such times, the principal can be an effective source of encouragement. The Adventist principal has the advantage of bringing multiple perspectives to this task. On the one hand, he or she is an outside observer; on the other, the principal is an insider familiar with the entire school program who knows the strengths and weaknesses of every teacher. It is up to the principal to identify the talents of each teacher and build upon them in order to ensure positive classroom experiences for students.

Principal Jenkins knows that students in Mrs. Holland's science class have not been performing well. However, Mrs. Jenkins also knows that in the past, every time Mrs. Holland reviewed the lesson using a game, the majority of students earned a score of at least 85 percent. Using this information, the principal can encourage Mrs. Holland to regularly include similar kinds of reviews, and she might even ask to observe the next review game.

Unfortunately, it's easy for the principal to become so engaged with the business of administration that he or she neglects the importance of human capital—the teachers whose responsibility it is to ensure the academic excellence of the school. Donaldson suggests that when principals take the time to engage in and encourage active questioning and open dialogue, they can learn more about the talents, expertise, and desires of the staff. During faculty meetings, private conferences, and informal interchanges, the principal can help teachers plan ways to use their untapped or seldom-used talents in the classroom or the school as a whole.⁴

2. Being Responsible for High Professional Standards

While uplifting the teachers, the principal must also take seriously his or her responsibility to maintain high standards for

professional performance and student achievement throughout the school. He or she can achieve this goal by developing guidelines for classroom management, lesson planning, and instructional strategies. A principal who stays attuned to classroom activities will know when one of his or her teachers is having difficulty enabling students to master certain concepts. In such situations, the principal must implement strategies to aid "employees whose marginal behavior causes concern or whose performance threatens to drag down the performance of others."⁵

In the case of Mrs. Holland, Mrs. Jenkins could suggest that together they investigate readily available and proven instructional strategies, and then implement them. Regardless of whether teachers have completed 4MAT training,⁶ readymade, brain-friendly lessons are available at <http://aboutlearning.com/>. A helpful Adventist resource for successful learning

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strategies is CIRCLE at <http://circle.adventist.org/>. After helping the teacher find these resources, the principal needs to monitor classroom application to ensure that the strategies are being properly implemented.

Hands-On Learning—A Successful Learning Strategy

The principal must recognize that one poorly performing teacher threatens the success of the entire program, and therefore be ready to take whatever measures are necessary to promote effective instruction in every classroom. Through faculty meetings, outside assistance, schedule modifications, curriculum restructuring, and personnel evaluation, the principal may be able to identify and remediate whatever hinders effective learning. Excellence never happens by accident; it is a result of hard work, team play, careful planning, and supervision.

When a teacher is not performing as well as expected, the principal must find out why, and then create an environment that aids the teacher in reaching the goal. After intense conferencing, creation and implementation of a professional development plan, focused observations, and assessment, the prin-

principal can craft a “where do we go from here” plan. Principal Jenkins may determine that Mrs. Holland needs to attend workshops or take an online course in a specific curriculum area. Or perhaps Mrs. Holland should switch recess to a different time of day in order to spend more time on science.

Another option is to have Mrs. Holland observe someone who teaches the same subject area or grade level. According to Webb: “Book learning, or listening to instruction, must always be built upon through observation and involvement.”⁷ Marzano makes this observation: “If teachers do not have opportunities to observe and interact with other teachers, their method of generating new knowledge about teaching is limited to personal trial and error.”⁸ Goodland found that 75 percent of the teachers in one study said they would like to observe other teachers in action.⁹

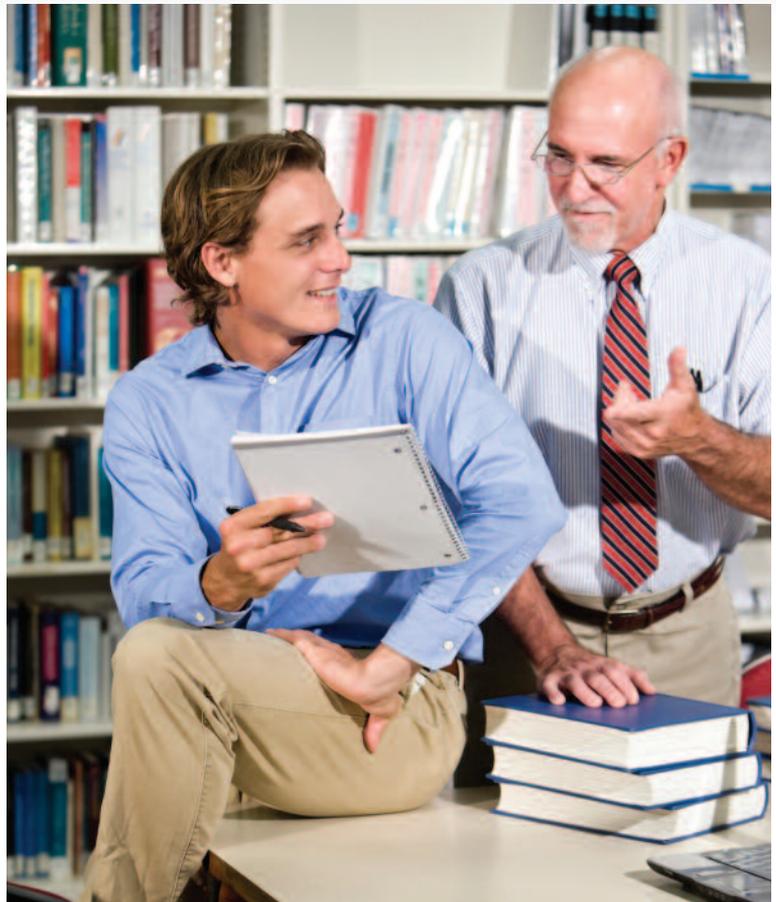
As Mrs. Holland tries innovative methods, Mrs. Jenkins should observe and confer with her during each step of the journey.

3. Leading by Example

In 2008, worldwide, around 30 percent of all children were taught in multigrade classrooms.¹⁰ In these schools, the principal is also a teacher, which provides him or her with an excellent opportunity to instruct by example. Due to time limitations, the actual instruction time of the principal-teacher must be organized to ensure maximum efficiency. If a teacher—or any other observer—walks into the teaching principal’s classroom, he or she should see what quality instruction looks like. Not only the instruction, but also the principal-teacher’s classroom management must provide a model for the entire building, since effective teaching cannot occur in the midst of chaos.

The principal can model best practices by team teaching, collaborative inquiry, and peer coaching. Nolan and Hoover suggest that collaborative teaching and observation efforts empower educators to grow and improve as adult learners.¹¹ Peer coaching allows the teachers to set good examples for one another. When peer-coaching programs function effectively, the annual teacher observation can be complemented by a principal-teacher conference at the beginning or end of the year.

According to Pulliam and Van Patten: “Educational administrators traditionally were successful teachers who were promoted and learned management skills on the job or with continued graduate training.”¹² Hence it is not too much to expect that the principal should lead by example—periodically preparing and presenting a lesson, and inviting another teacher to observe. Mrs. Jenkins might even choose a lesson from a science unit and teach it to Mrs. Holland’s class. This will doubtless help Mrs. Jenkins better understand Mrs. Holland’s challenges. Afterward, a post-teach conference will reveal what went well and what Mrs. Holland learned. During the conference, Mrs.



Jenkins should describe how this opportunity helped her to better understand the various personalities within the class and how they affected the implementation of the lesson. Throughout the process, Mrs. Jenkins must be careful to avoid presenting herself as the perfect teacher. The approach described above enables the principal to remain engaged in the learning activities of the students and the teaching activities of the teacher.¹³

When the principal and his or her teachers collaborate to improve learning, this helps to develop an environment of “we” and “us” instead of “me” and “them.”¹⁴ Describing Jesus’ teaching practices, Ellen G. White wrote, “What He taught, He lived. . . . Thus in His life, Christ’s words had perfect illustration and support. And more than this; what He taught, He was. His words were the expression, not only of His own life experience, but of His own character. Not only did He teach the truth, but He was the truth. It was this that gave His teaching power.”¹⁵ The principal who applies these principles will achieve personal and team success.

4. Implementing Regular Evaluations

Once the principal has encouraged, guided, and provided an environment for instructional success for each teacher, formal evaluation can take place. The teacher must know what is expected throughout the evaluation process, which should en-

compass classroom management, lesson preparation, instruction, and commitment to the school program. In Adventist schools, these areas are included in the observation tools prepared by local conferences. The Southeastern Conference of Seventh-day Adventists has developed one such helpful tool, which resembles the five-phase process of clinical supervision developed by Goldhammer.¹⁶

Following the evaluation, a post-conference should take place immediately to reduce teacher stress and maximize implementation of the results. The principal should begin the post-conference by inviting the teacher to talk about the lesson,¹⁷ reflecting on what he or she felt was successful and what could be improved. Necessary changes should be agreed upon and implemented with deliberate speed. The principal will need to follow up and provide input to ensure that the recommendations are successfully implemented.

5. Being an Advocate for the Teacher

Principals must mediate and advocate so that teachers obtain what they need to achieve maximum efficiency. Excellence in instruction cannot be achieved unless the teachers and the school have appropriate resources. Through evaluations, staff meetings, and informal conferences, the principal will discover what resources are needed to provide excellent instruction. He or she should then communicate the needs of the staff, students, and building to the school board, church board, and conference office. Their contributions will help to create an optimal climate for teaching and learning.

If Mrs. Jenkins decides that her entire staff would benefit from professional development, but funds are not readily available in the school's budget, she can become creative and proactive by exploring other options, such as various federal "Title" funds, as well as county grants and donations from community members. Pulliam and Van Patten suggest that future trends will define principals as instructional leaders who network while partnering with community stakeholders and universities.¹⁸ Mrs. Jenkins can contact local universities to determine if they offer reduced-price or even free workshops or classes for her teachers.

Once the school acquires resources, the principal must have the authority to coordinate and allocate the resources to achieve school-wide excellence. This will require close interaction with the school board and conference office of education.

Conclusion

Based on the principles listed in this article, here is what a principal should do when a teacher asks, "What else can I do to help these students get it?"

- Identify the gifts of each teacher and facilitate their development to help teachers more successfully manage the instructional process;
- Be seen by teachers as a person who is committed to their growth and development;

- Set a school-wide instructional standard and work toward achieving these goals;
- Set an example of instructional excellence in the classroom;
- Evaluate the success of classroom instruction by other teachers;
- Explore the best ways to help teachers grow academically and professionally; and
- Serve as an advocate for his or her teachers. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Robert J. Marzano, Tony Frontier, and David Livingston, *Effective Supervision: Supporting the Art and Science of Teaching* (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2011).
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