



Finding Time to Lead Learning

Studies show the typical percentage of time a building leader at the elementary level spends on tasks that seemingly are related to teaching and learning, such as observation and feedback requirements, can be up to 28 percent and sometimes higher at the secondary level due to additional administrators (Costa, 2014; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2009; Lavigne, Shakman, Zweig, & Greller, 2016).

A closer examination of these studies, however, reveals that a majority of this time is being spent on activities that do not directly impact student learning. Some of the findings include the following:

- A study from Stanford showed that on average, principals spent only about 8 percent of the school day in classrooms. Only about half that time was dedicated to “day-to-day instruction tasks,” such as observing or coaching teachers (Horng et al., 2009).
- The “largest non-value added category in the studies we reviewed was the category of logistics [such as scheduling/calendar]. Of 535 samples of the 4,844, or 11 percent of all samples in one study, [data] revealed that time was focused on the daily operations and management of the school community, again, having little direct impact on teaching and learning” (Costa, 2014).
- An international study of 13 countries, including the United States, showed that while principals “devote a lot of time to developing and promoting their schools’ educational goals and monitoring teachers’ implementation of those goals in teaching . . . less time is given to giving advice to teachers about questions or problems with teaching” (Loveless, 2016)—the known strategy that impacts practices.

Though “Instructional Leader” is one of the three primary functions of a building administrator, making the 28 percent seem logical, to truly lead

learning these observation and feedback efforts should encompass more than one third of a leader's time. This is not to suggest that the activities beyond the classroom are not important or necessary. Nor is it suggested here that the burden of addressing issues of time rests solely on the shoulders of an individual leader, as principals of regular public schools reported spending an average of 59 hours per week on the job.

While 28 percent of the leader's time is committed to what we might call instructional leadership activities, what will it take for that to increase, allowing leaders to commit to more while ensuring that this time is quality time? One may argue that dramatic changes to the system must be made for this to be possible. In almost all studies reviewed, researchers and authors suggested that "district and state leaders may consider how school principals could benefit from additional supports, such as adding an assistant principal to the administrative team or providing leadership coaching" (Lavigne et al., 2016, p. 8).

However, we know the reality for most is not as simple or feasible as adding another person. Many of the administrators with whom we work want to—and are finding the time to—engage more frequently in those activities that serve to lead learning. It is possible! The Wallace Foundation recognized this and invested in a time-management analysis and restructuring process that recaptures an average of 27 days in the first year of implementation for a leader (NSIP, 2018).

How do administrators find the time?

First, they carefully consider the following:

- How they *opt* to use their time. (When is it in their control? How are they choosing to use their time?)
- How they create efficiencies for themselves. (Are they using organized time-management systems, processes, and protocols?)
- How they use strategies to ensure instruction is occurring at its highest levels in classrooms. (What are they doing to engage in effective observation and feedback practices?)

They also know this is not a quick fix. We polled the many instructional leaders we know who are successfully leading the learning in their buildings and found several common effective practices. How can you:

1. Make visiting classrooms a priority, even if it is just for 10 minutes at a time and only includes a few teachers during a given week.
2. Communicate a message to everyone on your staff, your parents, and your students that supporting instruction is your number one priority.

- This allows you to help them see why you will be out of your office or “unavailable.”
3. Examine your use of time, conducting your own time study to determine what tasks and responsibilities are keeping you from observing teaching and learning. Discern what is or is not in your control and be realistic.
 4. Work with what is in your control first, as a high frequency of emergency parent meetings and out-of-building training will require longer range solutions. In your building, investigate the response protocols for events such as discipline issues, unannounced parent visits, and incoming emails. Also, determine what can be accomplished when students are not in the building.
 5. Work with your assistant and clerical staff. These individuals hold a critical role in ensuring your success. Parents, teachers, and students must learn to schedule appointments and not expect immediate attention or answers. Your assistant can guard against the “I just need to see her for a minute . . .” “But it’s urgent . . .” situations.
 6. Consider what your assistant is telling parents when you are not in your office; is it, “I’m sorry; she’s not at her desk again” or “Today she is out visiting classrooms”? Think about how your assistant is helping you categorize and filter high-priority emails, issues, and calls, handling smaller issues.
 7. Find time to attend professional learning communities (PLCs) and department, grade-level, or data team meetings to talk about teaching and learning occurring in the building.
 8. Show your team your commitment to lead learning by ensuring you meet with every teacher you observe, even if it is only for a short time. This will require high-quality observation and feedback skills even without the benefit of pre-observation meetings and 30 to 40 minutes of evidence collection.

From the field . . .

Christine Baldelli, principal, and Cheryl Milo, assistant principal at New Fairfield Middle School, raised expectations at their school for both themselves as leaders and for their teachers. They go beyond evaluation policies associated with observation and feedback and work to consistently observe in classrooms each month. They manage their time around a dedication to the teaching and learning in their building, balancing their administrative responsibilities and following a schedule.

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The secret to their success lies in five key areas.

1. **Priorities:** *We preblock times one month ahead for certain days and certain periods for classroom walk-throughs (paying attention to periods 1, 2, and 3), so you get out at different times for 5 to 10 minutes. We are challenging ourselves this year based on last year. We use a walk-through form for tracking and set goals based on it, so we visited 100% of classrooms by October 1. It is important to have a schedule and commit to it.*
2. **Management of schedule:** *If “Instructional Time” is on our calendars, anyone who has access knows not to touch it. And unless there is a fire, you stick to it. Parents know phone calls and emails are answered before school or after 3:30 p.m.*
3. **Management of roles:** *As principal and assistant principal, there is no separation. We each just handle what’s going on if one is out in classrooms. We come together as a team. We don’t say, “My assistant does all of the PPTs,” or “The principal handles all parent calls.” We split things down the middle as best we can.*
4. **Finding time to talk about teaching and learning:** *Teachers will come down and ask us for feedback. We may also bump into a teacher in the hallway to start a dialogue. During data rounds/meetings, we can mention certain students and specific strategies we observed. As we are writing reports, we also share our feedback to receive each other’s input.*
5. **Determining teacher needs:** *Because we are out in classrooms, we know what our teachers need (such as in designing professional development for them). As a result, we can drive the direction of the training and allow for differentiation. The more we know about what’s going on in the classroom, the better we can address what they need. You also have to know your curriculum. If you don’t know what they are teaching and why, you don’t know what’s supposed to be going on. We also attend trainings with our teachers. Christine attended the NGSS training with them, “so I know the expectations when I am observing and meeting with them. They [teachers] know I am more vested. If you see it in the classroom, you can make connections from training.”*