

HORACE

A strong principal's convictions and guidance have proved crucial to the lasting success of school change. But how do leaders balance authority with a healthy respect for teachers' growing participation in key decisions? How can they ensure that change will outlast their tenure?

The Essential School Principal: A Changing Role in a Changing School

WHEN PEOPLE TALK ABOUT what Essential school principals do, I notice, they reach for metaphors from geometry, physics, architecture. The principal must "up-end the pyramid," some say, supporting the school structure from below, not directing it from above. The principal serves as the "fulcrum of the change process," keeping a delicate balance between the often conflicting pressures coming from teachers, community, district, state. The principal introduces a "blueprint for change," then adapts it continually in response to those who will have to live with it.

The images are filled with tension and motion, conflicts and resolutions. Strikingly, they mirror the very process Essential school classrooms hold dear—exploration, questioning, collaboration, reflection, risk-taking. Even more strikingly, they contradict the traditional picture of the principal as strong-armed manager in a hierarchical system, the high-profile executive of excellence who keeps everyone else in line.

Yet nobody describes the principal's position as comfortable; indeed, it is often a confusing one in these times of change. Interviews with administrators from widely different Essential schools across the country bring out time and again the core dilemma Coalition principals share: how to reconcile strong leadership with the participatory decision-making that forms the bedrock of any sustained change effort.

At universities and on school boards, among parents and politicians, convention calls for the good principal to lead the charge for reform within a school, waving the banner of change and bearing chief responsibility for victory or failure. What happens when instead the principal gives up that prominence, investing substantial authority in teachers, parents, and students and backing up even their divergent decisions? As teachers gain power, do principals lose it?

Virtually every successful Essential school over the last eight years, say those who have watched the Coalition's growth, has depended on a strong and committed principal more than on any other single factor. Yet the effectiveness of a principal in fostering reform, it seems, is best measured not by immediate results but by whether the changes survive the principal's term.

In this regard, an effective principal must be much more than "keeper of the vision": she must foster a faculty capable of marshaling *itself* to keep the vision and to go forward as a governance system. As the school's intellectual conscience, as its resource for time and opportunities, as manager not of its product but its *process*, the principal carries the Essential School metaphor of "teacher as coach" to the administrative level—provoking, modeling, and nurturing the thoughtful growth everyone in a good school should experience.

The Definition Changes

Current discourse on principals and their role takes place in the context of the "effective schools" research of the past two decades, centered at the University of Wisconsin. The most effective schools, this research effort concluded, had in common a strong building principal. Many school systems nationwide participated in Effective Schools training sessions aimed at strengthening the principal's skills and authority as an instructional leader.

Researchers within the Coalition of Essential Schools argue, however, that the Effective Schools model is less well suited for schools moving away from the existing system. They see that system as flawed, along with the convention of one strong leader it depends on. Looking for a different framework, Coalition member schools have often turned to the 1986 report *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*, by the Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, which recommended moving toward teacher-centered school governance systems.

Schools that have taken such a view, however, often cast principals onto uncertain ground. Often left out of contract negotiations that give teachers substantial decision-making power, principals are nonetheless still legally accountable for what occurs in their schools. They often feel caught between a hierarchical bureaucracy expecting efficiency and authoritative leadership and a ferment from below that requires a new style of leadership—open, unguarded, inclusive, and so regarded by such theorists as Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, author of *The Good High School* (Basic, 1983) as more "feminine" than the traditional patriarchal style. (Interestingly, though only one-fifth of the nation's secondary school principals are women, among Coalition principals women number 35 percent.)

A principal's authority, under such conditions, no longer derives from the organizational structure itself but

Principals as Coaches: The Thomson Fellowships

Many of the principals quoted in this issue, though not all, have been named Thomson Fellows by the Coalition of Essential Schools, under the aegis of an ambitious professional development project called the National ReLearning Faculty.

The ReLearning Faculty may be best known for its Citibank Faculty, experienced teachers who work closely with colleagues in their own Essential schools and others nearby. (Sixty Citibank Faculty members have been selected since 1990, including 24 for 1992-93.) But the project also has two other tiers: one which includes district administrators, school board members, and community representatives; and the Thomson Fellows program, which seeks to develop and deepen the leadership skills of twelve to fifteen Essential school principals each year.

As Fellows, principals come to planning seminars and workshops held at Brown University—an intensely focused setting, the Coalition believes, that plays a key part in their examining the complicated issues of Essential School leadership. Crucial to these sessions is their interaction with the Citibank Faculty who are brought to Brown for similar and often entwined experiences.

For example, principals and teachers might work together on matters such as conflict resolution, strategies for professional development and for consulting with faculty members, teaming, school scheduling, and other common challenges that confront schools in the midst of change.

Each Thomson Fellow then establishes a intensive consulting relationship with one or two schools in his or her geographic area—either Essential schools or those who are still in ReLearning's early stage of "networking." In some cases a Citibank Faculty member and a Thomson Fellow work as a team with one school. Serving as "critical friends," the Coalition hopes, the principals will bring insight and support as schools venture upon important pedagogical and structural change.

"We are not evaluators of any sort," program administrators emphasize. "We are concerned colleagues who are willing to be involved in difficult discussions about how to best improve our schools." For seven or more working days during the school year, each Fellow will help gather resources, identify roadblocks to change, and establish important connections outside the school's normal channels. Thomson Fellows, like Citibank Faculty, only go to schools upon invitation by a significant number of the school faculty and administration.

Thomson Fellowships are named after Scott Thomson, the former executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and funded by a grant from the Danforth Foundation. All expenses are paid for the fellows' spring planning meeting and ten-day summer institute, and fellows are also provided a modest stipend. The deadline for applying for Thomson Fellowships is in December; more information can be obtained by writing Paula Evans or Mary Hibert at the Coalition of Essential Schools or calling (401) 863-3473.

directly from the teachers, who are becoming leaders themselves. As decision-making power spreads out among the school community, new tensions inevitably arise.

How far can a principal go in expressing his or her own strongly held values, for instance, without imposing them excessively on the school? Can a principal sap teacher-

driven changes of their strength simply by withholding strong support, thus encouraging others who are unwilling to participate? In the end, aside from carrying out administrative, disciplinary, and bureaucratic chores, is a principal really necessary when decisions are shared among the staff? Is a good principal these days charismatic or

modest, a star or a *mensch*? What does a good principal actually *do* in a successful Essential school?

Architect and Idea Person

"Principals now have to struggle between helping people see new possibilities and enabling them to decide whether they're going to go for the new possibilities," says Patricia Wasley of the Coalition's School Change Study, which provides analysis and feedback to principals and faculties in a few key schools working toward reform. "They may come in as an architect does, with an initial vision—but then they have to be able to accommodate revisions to their notion. If they can't do that, they haven't really learned to operate in new ways."

Coalition principals show a range of styles in this area—from what might be called "dynamic centralism" to a completely consensual practice—and how quickly they push toward change may depend both on personality and on how deep they perceive their school's crisis to be. At Chicago's Robeson High School, for instance, principal Jackie Simmons defends her decision to double the length of classroom periods despite a close faculty vote against it.

"A high school generation of kids is only four years long; you want to provide the best you can as fast as you can," Simmons says. "I had to decide between the best interests of the kids and paying attention to process alone, letting the teachers get there eventually." After much back and forth with her teachers, Simmons modified her original proposal from 84-minute periods (on which the teacher's contract required a vote) to doubled-up 40-minute periods (which did not require approval). It was a risky move, she admits, though a subsequent grievance procedure upheld it; now, she says, even teachers once opposed praise the new schedule. "For me, leadership means having the courage of your convictions," Simmons says, "being willing to risk everything, and

Principals are like architects—they start with a vision, but adapt it to suit the people who will use it.

getting teachers over the fear and rough edges. This never would have happened if I had left it to teachers to hassle it out from ground zero."

Sid Smith, principal of the 1,350-student Boston English High School, agrees. "I cannot allow something to pass here that I will not stand up for and defend 100 percent to the world," he says. Without faculty debate, for instance, Smith instituted "binding assessments" in several academic areas, without which a student may not graduate from Boston English. But the assessments themselves were crafted by teacher committees, he points out. "The final product in math looks different from what I'd like it to be," he says, "but that's an area where we'll go with the consensus decision." Even so, he says, "When push comes to shove I reserve the right to make a decision that might not be endorsed by the majority of my staff." Smith insisted, for example, that seniors taking the final year's assessment demonstrate mastery over all four years' math skills, though math teachers preferred to test them only on senior year coursework.

Smith calls his approach a "dartboard methodology," in which he presents his ideas as a target and lets people throw criticisms and alternatives back at him. "I had the dartboard not been in place we wouldn't have come up with any hard change product that didn't exist before," he says. "In the absence of a tangible product you'll never institutionalize anything. When I came to Boston English I said that every student had to have a C average to participate in extracurricular activities. Now it's a city standard."

But other Coalition principals take a much different approach. "Aside from certain issues like law and order, we may lose more than we gain when we bypass that important process of starting from the ground up and letting the change take hold systemically," says Sherry King, who was principal of 330-student Croton-Harmon High School in Westchester County, New York until she took the superintendent's job in her district this year. "You can say, 'We're going to have a different schedule where teachers work together,' but if you put a teacher into that schedule who is opposed and unprepared, my own experience is that you may get the opposite result."

Timing, King asserts, is everything, and she observes that the best leaders have an instinctive sense of when they can push teachers to a new level of constructive dissonance. "A principal needs a very sensitive barometer," she says, "to back down when the time isn't right, when people don't believe. Teachers who don't believe will make a change not work." Five years ago she would have pushed her teachers more quickly, King observes, toward her goal of having every student in the



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take risks. Some of our staff really do see changes like de-tracking as a lessening of rigor compared to what they have always done."

Once a program is in place at Fairdale, it receives regular critical attention. "We never pilot anything for less than a year," Hohmann says. "Then we start analyzing and evaluating it, asking what measures were effective, what we have learned, whether we should continue."

A Leader of Leaders

Though these principals represent a range of styles, all of them emphasize the need to distribute authority, to trust their staffs to use it well, and to facilitate the conflicts that arise when decisions are shared. Chuck Bowen was hired as principal of Broadmoor Junior High School in Pekin, Illinois after having worked there as an outside facilitator when the school joined the state's Re:Learning initiative. "The principal's job is to guide the learning process about how organizations make decisions," he says, "until you've all come to an understanding of how this school makes its decisions."

At Broadmoor, that now includes four broad rules that govern administrators, staff, and parents:

- You must participate in decisions that affect you.
- You can't make decisions that affect someone else without involving them.
- Everyone who participates in a decision lives with it until the decision is reversed together.
- You are responsible for the effects of your decision, so it is your job to make sure it works or together unmake and improve the decision.

"When our school reorganized into teams, for example, everyone was affected so everyone was involved in the decision," Bowen says. "The emotional impact of the decision was potentially great, so we decided to do it only if everyone

could live with it. Once we made the decision, we all decided how to make it work by helping the school board, the central office, and the community understand it. And when flak came our way, the whole school responded—the entire staff showed up at a school board meeting not out of a sense of crisis but just to make sure their questions were answered."

Bowen calls this system "distributed decision making"; its first step, he says, is deciding which decisions belong to classroom teachers, which to teams, which to administrators, which to the school as a whole, and which involve the community. "My job is to monitor not only the process but the content of the process," he says. "I make sure we're talking about important things, so people don't get bogged down talking about pencil sharpeners and heating systems."

"Teachers make a lot of decisions in schools whether you want them to or not," Bowen observes. "Why not organize the school to take advantage of that rather than suppress it?"

What if conflict divides the decision-making body? "The principal has to coach people to participate in conflict in a way that isn't personally damaging," Patricia Wasley observes. "Feeling conflicted is an essential part of learning, for both adults and kids. The principal must keep pushing people to be open about their various viewpoints; otherwise the faculty becomes subversive."

"You watch a lot of people take a lot of heat, and it isn't easy," says Marilyn Hohmann. "You have to quietly support them, keep a low profile, exercise minimal oversight of meetings—but provide as much as possible in the way of a support system, both external and internal."

And what if the final decision goes against the principal's own convictions? "Trust the process," says CES's Director for Schools, Bob McCarthy, who himself has headed high schools in Hanover, New Hampshire and Brookline, Massachusetts. "If the decision-making

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roles have been clearly defined, go ahead with it even if you disagree. There's rarely any one decision that can make or break a school."

From central office to school board, the school hierarchy must also abandon a knee-jerk support for what the principal wants. "At a board meeting where a significant decision must be made, the best principals have the presentation made by teachers, students and parents," McCarthy says. "It's a courageous thing to do in a system that is used to high-profile leaders."

But the more powerful the system a principal heads, Alan Dichter observes, the more its leader is perceived as strong. "And if the decision is not his to make," he says, "the principal is actually in a much better position to make his own views known in a strong and forthright way." Delegating power for important decisions makes the principal a leader of leaders, Dichter and Nancy Mohr believe. It creates not an "authorizing culture"—where the leader gives people "official permission" to do things and then holds them accountable—but an "empowering culture," where meaningful involvement is an obligation and all involved develop the ability to participate.

In Chicago, where local school councils now govern all public schools, Jackie Simmons sees a striking change in the school climate since her staff has developed expertise in important administrative matters. "We have nine 'design teams' that handle areas like professional development and staff selection," she says. "Ad hoc training

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sessions continually spring up, where teachers help each other learn new things. And at a city-wide job fair attended by 4,000 teachers last week, we were the only school that had a team of teachers, not a lone principal, interviewing applicants for the four positions we had available."

The Principal as Teacher

It seems natural, given all this, that many Essential school principals speak of their role as teachers, in the sense that they coach their faculty to think independently, learn continually, take intellectual risks. "Like a good teacher, your job is to motivate, to lead, to create an environment where people can best work," says Central Park East's Paul Schwarz, who (like his co-director Deborah Meier) taught kindergarten for twenty years and believes the experience shaped his vision of school leadership. "You can't impose reading on children, for instance—you have to let them discover at their own pace how wonderful it is."

The very process of participatory management, for example, provokes teachers to learn new skills. "Our folks never dreamed that learning to use Edward Deming's model of shared decision making would teach them how to use data so well," says Marilyn Hohmann. "Now they do all kinds of statistical analysis—they not only use it for charting student improvement and attendance, but they can also teach kids to use quantitative reasoning in academic areas."

Learning what works in education is part of a teacher's education when power is shared. "Teachers need access to a tremendous amount of facts when you ask them to make decisions about important issues like de-tracking," Hohmann observes. "It can be a real learning experience, and my responsibility is to make sure they know what they need to know."

Even more important, several principals noted, sharing responsibility for school decisions helps teachers learn how to cooperate on joint learning ventures, which translates directly into classroom expertise on cooperative learning. "Secondary schools, unlike elementary schools, have traditionally been very isolating places for teachers," says Hohmann. "The most difficult task we face is learning to work together."

One reward when teachers do that, say principals, is a new sense that their jobs offer continual personal and professional growth. "I try to foster an ethic in which teachers transcend the limitations of their role," says Larry Myatt, who heads Fenway Middle College, an alternative Boston high school. "They're not just teaching four classes and guarding the cafeteria—they're supervising internships, working as peer mentors to new teachers, researching new curricula, reporting to each other on visits they make to other schools." Raising the level of the school's internal discourse, Myatt says, is a key part of his job: "Every day there is something in teachers' boxes about research, pedagogy, learning, assessment."

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classroom teachers, clarifying issues and gathering resources so that teaching, learning, and decision making might go better. "My job as a leader is to stay at the cutting edge of things in education, and to make sure teachers see things, hear them, and talk about them," says Jackie Simmons. "I arranged a computerized network throughout our building, for instance, so that any teacher anywhere can use software in an interdisciplinary way."

Record-Keeper, Point Person

Provoking a rich conversation about contemporary practices, several observers note, is one of the most important functions of an Essential school principal. But a key adjunct, as in any community of researchers, is to document and analyze the results of the changes a school adopts.

"I encourage teachers to write up and record what they do, so we can share it with other people," says Lenora Hay, principal of Brown School in Jefferson County, Kentucky. "It takes time and space, but I feel a commitment to doing it." A prime example of this takes place at Pasadena High School, where principal Judy Coddling obtained a grant to follow every entering ninth-grader's progress through graduation and beyond.

The natural extension of this practice takes the principal into the community to talk about the school's changing values and practices. "We have a larger role in the district, the state, even the nation," says Larry Myatt, who admits that joining the public discourse can be "a fearsome thing" at first. "I agree with Ted Sizer that if we don't make these choices, people will make them for us—things like national testing will be imposed on us simplistically, adding another debilitating layer to the problems that already exist. Principals have to forsake just writing in our journals and get out to talk about our ideas with parents, business people, legislators, anyone who will listen."

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Principals are sharply aware that they bear ultimate responsibility for the changes their schools make, even when leadership is shared.

Such a public presence, naturally, invites public criticism as well, and these principals are well aware of their own accountability for change in their schools. "When I don't sleep," Sherry King confides, "is when I encourage people to take these risks and I just don't know for sure if it's the best thing for the kids. I don't ever remember feeling as anxious as I did the day of those Regents exams. It's like giving birth—you pace the floor, asking whether it's fair to ask kids to take the test if they might not pass, whether you've thought through all the consequences. In the end, if you're worth your salt the buck stops with you, not with the teacher who's gone out on a limb."

What Do Principals Need?

Given such daunting new demands, what kind of preparation and support do Essential school principals need? Conventional principal certification programs generally focus more on school law, facilities management, statistical skills, and personnel policies than on the new challenges that face principals in times of change. Unless the Coalition itself were to establish a certification program—a move strongly urged by one of its charter principals, Dennis Littky—principals will get little training in shared leadership as they climb the traditional ladder to the school's top job.

"When you have a whole new climate in your district, you have to look within the system for your leaders," says Superintendent Jerry

Parker in Pekin, Illinois, where he chose Chuck Bowen to head Broadmoor Junior High. "We're establishing a program to recruit and mentor those teachers we think have promise as administrators. They'll still have to jump through the state's hoops, but we'll help them come out of the licensing process with the skills we're looking for." Parker has begun teaching a monthly class in his office for teachers interested in moving up, and he continually scouts for possible new enrollees. "Some of the best leaders didn't start out thinking they would end up in administration," he says.

"There is an ambivalence among teachers in progressive education about the principal's position," says Paul Schwarz. "Many see administrators as bosses and bureaucrats, number-crunchers who have gone over to the other side. The Coalition needs to show our best teachers a different kind of power—to convince our best teachers that being a wonderful principal or administrator is an honorable thing to do in our profession."

"We need to convince our best teachers that being a wonderful principal is an honorable thing to do in our profession," says one teacher turned administrator.

In fact, the Coalition's National Re:Learning Faculty program includes just that aim. Besides naming some 20 teachers each year as Citibank Faculty to coach their peers in new ways, the program also names about a dozen Thomson Fellows from the ranks of Essential school principals. Fellows meet regularly for seminars and workshops in Essential school leadership,

and they provide for each other the peer fellowship and "critical friends" that principals commonly lack.

Other principals turn to their own community for support and training, sometimes through unconventional channels. Lenora Hay has joined a group of Kentucky women in school administration, many of whom have come to their positions very recently and through nontraditional paths. "Because I was a curriculum coordinator before, where I had to rely more on friendly persuasion than on power, I haven't had to unlearn previous habits," Hay says. "Also, I think there may be more of a natural bent among women toward collaboration."

Some principals have asked local corporations to include them in executive leadership seminars, which often focus on shared decision making. In other districts, professional development centers like Jefferson County's Gheens Academy provide a forum for growth and training. Still other schools, such as Central Park East, choose to divide the top position between two or more people. "Every school ought to have two principals, maybe instead of a principal and an assistant principal," says Paul Schwarz. "When really tough judgment calls arise, two people make them better than one."

From their districts and their state education offices, these principals ask for a constant environment that encourages change. "Re:Learning as an idea is centered on creating that environment 'from schoolhouse to statehouse,'" says Illinois principal Chuck Bowen, "but it needs to focus even more on the district level." Symbols like pay and access to higher-ups are also important to principals as leadership roles shift. In Jefferson County, Kentucky, superintendent Don Ingwersen eliminated a hefty number of middle-level district administrators, giving his principals more access to system-wide services and asking them to report difficulties directly to him.

What Is a Principal's Power?

As the roles of Essential school principals change, the ways they perceive their own power change too, and so do their attitudes toward those they lead. "Real power is the ability to say *yes*," says Jackie Simmons. "People come to you with ideas, and you can help them. Sometimes you can best help by offering a creative alternative, keeping the person moving in a positive direction at the same time you preserve the relationship. My teachers laugh at me because I'm always 'making them an offer they can't refuse'—but if I do, I try to make it really a better idea."

How do principals harness the power of those they lead, ask Nancy Mohr and Alan Dichter, if not by directing it from the top down? "By recognizing that 'independence' is not the goal but a mid-point," they write. "We must strive to create an interdependent community, where these self-reliant and independent citizens understand the greater potential that interdependence

offers." So the principal, they say, can help the school community become more than the sum of its parts. Power indeed, as Mohr points out—but not a dirty word.

"Sure, this could all be done so much more quickly and easily," says Marilyn Hohmann. "You could just say 'Do it' and it would be done. Thank God I have a long, narrow office—I can't tell you how many times I have started out of here intending to do just that, and changed my mind before I got out the door." It takes longer to achieve change when you redefine the principal's role, Hohmann acknowledges. "But by God, the change takes—just like an immunization. There was no way of ever telling *what* took, back when people just did what they were told."

Only when principals share school leadership, Hohmann argues, can a true community of learning exist, where every member learns and also teaches. "Kentucky takes so many of our school's great teachers to lead others in the reform effort," she says. "We *have* to replace them as

leaders with other teachers. For that you need a climate where people can risk trying new things, and the principal has to start it. What we're doing, all of us, is teaching and learning. They're inseparable, an endless wheel."

Like all great teachers, Hohmann lives out her convictions with such authenticity and strength that many who work with her choose ultimately to shape their own practices after those beliefs as well. In the end, TheodoreSizer observes, that quality may serve a principal better than any other. "It takes a different kind of leader to lead a school that's going to change," he says. "It requires a person who can truly be *primus inter pares*—the first among equals—carrying the authority of the principal teacher, born of conviction and experience." More sharply than most in the engine of Essential School change, principals may feel the friction Hohmann's "endless wheel" creates. But they seem bent on transforming the energy that results, and perhaps transforming themselves into the bargain. □



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