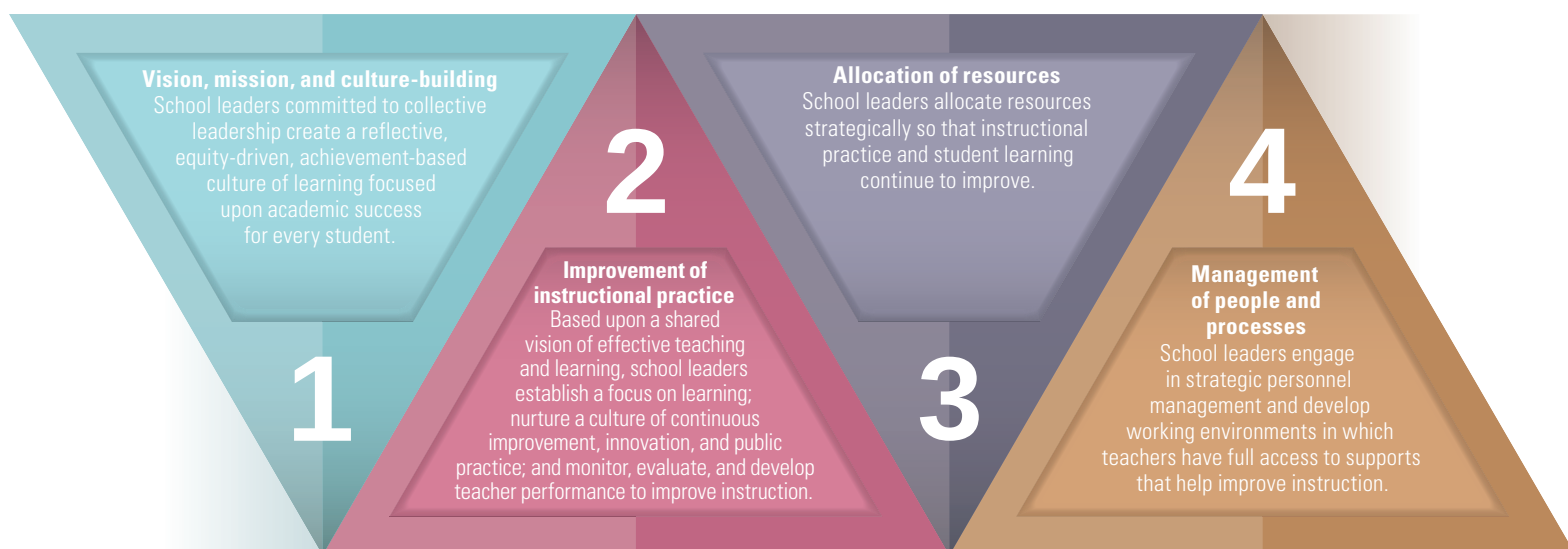# BUILDING A BETTER PRINCIPALSHIP

Supporting principals as instructional leaders

Stephen Fink and June Rimmer

Vision, mission, and culture-building
School leaders committed to collective leadership create a reflective, equity-driven, achievement-based culture of learning focused upon academic success for every student.

2

Improvement of instructional practice
Based upon a shared vision of effective teaching and learning, school leaders establish a focus on learning; nurture a culture of continuous improvement, innovation, and public practice; and monitor, evaluate, and develop teacher performance to improve instruction.

Allocation of resources
School leaders allocate resources strategically so that instructional practice and student learning continue to improve.

4

Management of people and processes
School leaders engage in strategic personnel management and develop working environments in which teachers have full access to supports that help improve instruction.

1

3

The 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership™ framework

ncreased federal and state expectations, angry parents, discipline issues, bus problems, lockdown drills, and daily challenges are just some of the issues principals face on a daily basis. Clearly, their responsibilities have multiplied since many generations ago when they served as the "principal" teacher.

But what about the responsibility of instructional leadership? We know that principal leadership is second only to teaching quality when it comes to improving student achievement. Yet the most recent research shows that principals spend an average of 8 to 17 percent of their time (Jerald, 2012), or three to five hours per week (Supovitz & May, 2011), in instructional leadership activities. This same research suggests that some of the work principals are spending in instructional leadership lacks the focus needed to improve instruction. Much of the challenge lies in figuring out why this occurs and how we can address it.

Over the past few years, through the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership has been working with 15 school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs)

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on a knowledge-development project aimed at supporting principals as instructional leaders.

We closely examined these districts and CMOs, which are arguably some of the best in terms of performance and reputation. In the project's early work, we found that not one of the school districts actually had a consensus around which five to 10 high-impact practices principals should be enacting every day to improve the quality of teaching.

These districts all had some kind of principal evaluation. They were all using a principal standard, mostly tied to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards. That said, there was no consensus on the high-impact instructional leadership practices of principals.

This lack of consensus led us to develop what we call The 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership™ framework (2012). The framework is not the sum of everything that a principal needs to do to be successful; it is a description of the most salient practices of instructional leadership that improve teaching and learning.

Based upon our review of the research and what we're learning from our work in the field, we identified 12 high-impact practices that we organized within four dimensions:

- Vision, mission, and culture-building
- Improvement of instructional practice
- Allocation of resources
- Management of people and processes

Let's take a closer look at the dimensions and offer some guiding questions that school leaders can use to improve their practice of instructional leadership.

Vision, Mission, and Culture-Building

In *Shaping School Culture*, Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson (2010) acknowledge that there is no universally accepted definition of culture; they also share a widely cited, simple definition of culture: "The way we do things around here."

For us, school culture is foundational to instructional leadership. In this first dimension in the framework, school leaders create a reflective, equity-driven, achievement-based culture of learning focused upon academic success for every student.

Culture includes a shared vision of academic success for all students, where learning is the

most important goal. School leaders foster high expectations for both students and adults and, perhaps most importantly, they create a results-focused environment.

Improvement of Instructional Practice

In this second dimension, school leaders use a research-based instructional framework to provide the shared vision from which to observe, analyze, and plan professional development for teaching practice. Leaders establish a focus on learning and nurture a culture of continuous improvement and public practice.

For example, principals in Washington's Central Kitsap School District used CEL's 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning™ instructional framework (2012) as the basis for observing classroom instruction. Over the course of a year, principals and teachers used the framework in classroom learning walk-throughs to develop their common language and shared vision for high-quality instruction.

During each walk-through, principals took detailed notes of what they observed—what we call "noticings"—with a focus on a particular dimension of the framework. They learned to base their noticings and their questions about instructional practice on evidence while avoiding judgments.

This focus on public practice and evidence has had a great impact. "Teachers are having more conversations with each other, working collaboratively more often because we're all using

Vision, mission, and culture-building
Principals should ask themselves:

1. What do the school's environment and day-to-day interactions among students, staff, and families say about what is valued in the school community?

2. How do I communicate and drive the school's instructional agenda?

3. How do the community and I use evidence of student success and learning needs to drive collaboration?

4. How do I organize the learning environment to respond to cultural and linguistic diversity and the varying learning and social needs of students?

5. How do I encourage leadership in others?

Improvement of instructional practice
Principals should ask themselves:

1 What evidence is there that leadership efforts are resulting in the improvement of teaching practice and student learning?

2 How is leadership distributed to ensure collaboration and collective leadership so that the tasks of instructional leadership are accomplished?

3 What data do I collect to learn about trends in instructional practice, as well as student performance and problems of learning?

4 What is the evidence that staff share a vision of effective teaching and learning and that the improvement of instructional practice is guided by that vision?

5 What role does a research-based instructional framework play in the observation, analysis, feedback, and inquiry about instructional practice?

6 How is monitoring of instruction and evaluation used in the improvement of instruction?

the same words," concurs Craig Johnson, an assistant principal at Central Kitsap School District in Washington. "We all have the same vision. We're all looking at the same guiding questions. There's no misunderstanding about what we're going to look for and what we're going to talk about."

Allocation of Resources
In this third dimension of instructional leadership, principals have many resources allocated to them (e.g., time, money, technology, space, materials, and expertise). Ideally, school leaders use data to make equitable decisions regarding the allocation of these resources.

How do school leaders allocate resources strategically so that

instructional practice and student learning improve?

In Memphis, TN, Tracie Thomas, the principal at White Station Elementary School, provides a great case study. An analysis of data showed Thomas that students in third through fifth grade were the school's lowest performers, so Thomas took advantage of a state mandate requiring physical education—which brought her a second gym teacher—to differentiate instruction for those students.

With the increased staffing, classroom teachers were able to incorporate small-group instruction three times weekly, providing more personalized instruction. "It allowed teachers to pull those kids for reteaching or enrichment,"

Thomas said. "I think that made a great impact."

Students in third through fifth grade ended the year as the top-performing grades. "Third grade did so well I now have to make sure the fourth grade teachers carry on that progression and continue to grow the students," Thomas said.

Management of People and Processes
One of the most important things principals do is ensuring that the right people carry out the necessary jobs, which brings us to this last dimension. Instructional leaders have to be very strategic in their recruitment and hiring. They have to be very strategic in onboarding newcomers and developing staff.

Allocation of resources
Principals should ask themselves:

1 How is the distribution of resources related to improved teaching and learning in this school? What evidence do I have?

2 How do I use instructional coaches, mentors, and other teacher leaders to help improve instructional practice?

3 How are decisions made about staff allocation and student interventions to ensure that the varying needs of students are met?

4 How do I use staff time and collaborative structures to drive the instructional program?

In addition, leaders have to manage all kinds of processes. Think about all of the school improvement initiatives that exist and the role of instructional leaders to make sense of all those initiatives. How do leaders make certain that staff understand how the initiatives at the district level and the initiatives in the school are integrated, how they are aligned, and how they are all going to contribute to the overall mission and vision of the school?

And then finally, we constantly hear teachers wanting to collaborate with one another for professional growth. "One of the beliefs of CEL is that to become better at our practice, we have to collaborate, and we are truly collaborating now, talking about our instructional practice in objective terms," says Bo Miller, principal at Jackson Hole Middle School in Teton, WY. "We are being specific, analytical, and diagnostic. And all of our decisions are grounded in how to teach to student needs."

Challenges

Many ask, "How do I do all of this in addition to everything else I'm expected to do?" This is a fair response.

One of the challenges—and we hear this from principals all the time—is that school leaders have not had the time and opportunity to learn exactly how to perform, or to gain the skills for, the work of instructional leadership. Many principals tell us that they go into classrooms but often don't know what to look for or how to have necessary conversations with teachers.

We cannot talk about what we expect from instructional leaders without talking about what the central office does to support the

work of instructional leadership. We refer to this as reciprocal accountability: It's the idea that if district leaders are going to hold principals accountable for instructional leadership, then those district leaders have an equal responsibility to ensure that principals know how to do what's expected and are fully supported in that process.

In fact, the first action area of CEL's Principal Support Framework (2013), a tool we use in our work at the central-office level with principal supervisors, is all about clarifying what we mean by principal instructional leadership. We cannot even begin to work with principal supervisors regarding how to support and develop principals until they clarify the most important practices for principals (Fink & Silverman, 2014).

The 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership™ framework equips school districts and school leaders for this very first challenge. With the growing demands of the principalship, ensuring that principals have the knowledge and skills to be instructional leaders is now more important than ever. **PL**

Management of people and processes
Principals should ask themselves:

1 What evidence shows that I implement strategic efforts to recruit, hire, retain, induct, support, and develop the best staff?

2 What data and processes do I use for instructional and school-improvement planning?

3 What evidence exists of the staff's access to professional growth opportunities?

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Stephen Fink *(finks@uw.edu) is executive director of the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership. Follow him on Twitter @StephenFinkAtUW.*

June Rimmer *(juner2@uw.edu) is the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership's associate director.*