

RESULTS

Leaders as creators of high-performance cultures

Principals are responsible for developing a high-performance culture in which productive relationships can thrive.

By Dennis Sparks *Results*, November 2003
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High-quality professional learning by all teachers is critically important if high quality teaching is to occur in every classroom. Such learning is ultimately based in and stimulated by a high-performance culture, the creation of which is a major and often-neglected role of school leaders.

A widely held view of instructional improvement is that good teaching is primarily an individual affair and that principals as instructional leaders will interact one-on-one with each teacher to strengthen his or her efforts in the classroom. The principal is like the hub of a wheel with teachers at the end of each spoke. Communication about instruction moves back and forth along the spoke to the hub but not around the circumference of the wheel.

NSDC's view, on the other hand, is that some of the most important forms of professional learning occur in daily interactions among teachers in which they assist one another in improving lessons, deepening understanding of the content they teach, analyzing student work, examining various types of data on student performance, and solving the myriad of problems they face each day. From this perspective, sustained teacher-to-teacher communication about teaching and learning is one of the most powerful and underused sources of professional learning and instructional improvement. While the Council's view does not negate the value of principals' expertise and direct engagement in the improvement of instruction and student learning, it recognizes that it cannot be the exclusive or even the primary form of learning-oriented interactions among educators.

Consequently, one of the most important responsibilities of principals is the development of a high-performance culture in which productive relationships can thrive. Because culture is the sum total of interactions among community members and the beliefs that they bring to those interactions, the creation of such a culture means establishing norms and practices that lead to trust and mutual respect, continuous improvement, team-focused collaboration, clarity of thought, the candid expressions of views, and interpersonal accountability for the fulfillment of commitments. Because few principals have worked in such settings or have been formally prepared to assume this role, it is essential that preparation programs and leadership development efforts for practicing principals teach these skills and provide one-on-one support as they are implemented in the complex interpersonal environment of the schoolhouse.

A skeptic may read the previous paragraph and wonder what long-term culture-building skills have to do with the pressing issue of improving test scores in reading and math, a priority which consumes a great deal of principals' day-to-day attention. Perhaps nothing, if a school's dominant goal is nudging up test scores to satisfy externally imposed demands. A common human response to such a situation is to do that which is most familiar, especially if in the short run it will likely produce the desired result. And for many school leaders, what is familiar is command and control procedures - define the problem, prescribe solutions, issue directives, monitor compliance, and use carrots and sticks to motivate performance, methods which are hardly the substance of a high-performance culture.

While I understand why principals may default to such actions--even when they are against their better judgment--over the long term these methods will not produce quality teaching in every classroom nor schools in which teachers and students alike experience success, joy, and satisfaction each day. Such schools are grounded in relationships and intellectual tasks that honor and challenge every member of the community to more fully development his or her talents to serve both individual and collective purposes. Those are the schools to which we would all happily send our own children.