The need for effective communication within schools is essential. Research clearly focuses upon the importance of communication by school leaders, but limited evidence or data are available to document the nature, flow, practice, and structure of communication inside schools (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Schlechty, 2001). It is generally agreed that principals affect communication both horizontally and vertically, yet minimal attention is paid to whether or not the flow of communication from principals contains either value or influence. It is assumed that with the preparation of principals comes an understanding of and ability for effective communication. Church (1996) states:

Fundamentally, communication is the essence of what we do all the time, every day, in our personal and professional lives. Although we often take this process for granted (with others in our immediate work setting as well as systematically with the rest of the organization and even beyond its boundaries), it is our ability to communicate that allows us to co-ordinate and collaborate on our actions, make important decisions that affect more than one individual at a time, and ultimately function as an organizational entity (p. 4).

Even though principal preparation programs, administrator professional development opportunities, and current research literature in leadership all tout the importance of effective communication in building relationships and leading the change process, assumptions are made that leaders intuitively know or have been taught how and what to communicate. However, it is not always easy to communicate accurately and effectively with others. Nonetheless, principals are required to communicate successfully on a regular basis with diverse constituents for multiple purposes.

Forms of Communication

It is estimated that as much as 70% of a school administrator’s time is spent in communication (Kmetz & Willower, 1982; Reyes & Hoyle, 1992). The role of the principal requires three basic forms of communication: verbal communication, written communication, and
communication through actions. It is not our intent to suggest that one form of communication is more important than the other two; however, since written communication allows the opportunity to review, reflect upon, and rewrite the intended message, principals have an opportunity to audit the effectiveness of their written words. Even so, sometimes the most obvious forms of written communication, such as school newsletters or weekly updates, are overlooked as a means to encourage, model, and foster the values and direction of the school.

Hoy and Miskel (1987) describe the process of communication in organizations. They posit that people have different frames of reference or mental sets with which they assign meaning to messages. Because differences exist between the backgrounds of the message sender and message receiver, different meanings may be assigned to the same message. Therefore, satisfaction with the nature, flow, and structure of communication in a school is dependent upon teachers, students, parents, and other constituencies; nonetheless, the responsibility for the development of effective communication strategies and systems is essentially that of the administrator. Effective written communication is an opportunity for the principal to demonstrate his or her ability to function as the leader of the school and take responsibility for improving teaching and learning in the entire school community.

The Study
This pilot study was undertaken because we wanted to examine the nature of school administrators’ current practices in written communication. More importantly, we wondered if work samples selected and submitted by principals would provide evidence of communication that demonstrated certain knowledge, skills, and abilities based upon the Interstate School Leaders Consortium (ISLLC) standards (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 1996) that call for competency in facilitating vision, communicating culture and instruction, managing the organization, developing collaboration and community engagement, acting with fairness and integrity, and understanding larger community issues. Lastly, we sought to use the results of the study to supply models of effective written communication that would assist principals in reflection to improve their written work and provide preliminary data for additional research.

The Sample
The districts and schools that were surveyed had accepted university students in their buildings for field experiences in the past. Participation by principals was voluntary. The sample consisted of responses from 58 lead principals in northwestern Ohio and southeastern Michigan of which 28 were female and 30 were male. These principals ranged in age from 26 to more than 61 years old. Education specialist or doctoral degrees were held by 31% of the principals. The participants had an average of 13.5 years of teaching experience prior to becoming an administrator. Administrative experience ranged from 2 to 40 years of experience with an average of 13 years. Of the 58 schools, 70.6% were public with an average of 40.8 teachers in the building. The private schools had an average of 20.6 teachers per building. The schools consisted of 26% urban, 45% suburban, and 29% rural with 36 elementary buildings, 8 middle or junior high schools, and 14 high schools represented.

Procedures
A questionnaire was mailed to principals that included nine demographic items along with the request to submit a sample of effective communication between the principal and his or her faculty, parents, students, or the community. Additional data, which are not part of this paper, asked principals to rate on a five-point Likert scale their knowledge, skills, and abilities regarding effective communication. The statements for scoring in this section of the survey were based upon the ISLLC standards (e.g., “My written communication encourages high standards and expectations for student academic achievement”); however, no specific mention was made about the standards.

It was our intent to allow participants to determine what they perceived to be “effective” communication. The returned writing samples dated from the beginning of the current school year until February. All questionnaires and writing samples were numerically coded to track return receipt. Despite the fact that most of the writing samples included the name of the school and district, confidentiality of participants and the schools they represent was honored. The type of communication determined our focus of analysis. Each sample was sorted to identify the nature of the communication (i.e., was the writing for internal use or external use) and the stakeholders who would receive the communication (i.e., faculty, students, parents, or community). After we sorted the data, we performed further analyses including coding and looking for patterns (Miles and Huberman, 1984).

The writing samples were reviewed on the basis of the ISLLC standards (CCSSO, 1996). Each writing sample was coded by the standard or standards that were addressed in the communication. The coding was as follows: competency in facilitating vision (Standard 1),...
communicating culture and instructional programs (Standard 2), managing the organization (Standard 3), developing collaboration and community engagement (Standard 4), acting with fairness and integrity (Standard 5), and understanding larger community issues (Standard 6). Lastly, the we identified representative models from this coded sample pool of written communication for each standard that could assist principals in reflection to enhance the quality of their written work. The report of our findings is aligned with the ISLLC standards.

Findings

Standard 1: Facilitating a Vision

Today’s educational leaders are encouraged to devote significant time to developing a vision statement for their schools that “articulates a vivid picture of the organization’s future that is so compelling that a school’s members will be motivated to work together to make it a reality” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 62). Nanus (1992) suggests, “There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared” (p. 3). Additionally, DuFour and Eaker (1998) assert, “The shared vision must be used to guide the daily operation and improvement initiatives of the school, and its importance must be communicated constantly” (p. 86). However, developing a compelling vision or “understanding” for a school, which helps to drive policies, procedures, and programs, is no easy task. Equally difficult is keeping this shared vision at the center of decision making and action along with being highly visible.

The sample set yielded three examples of a vision, a mission, or student goal statements: one appeared in a school newsletter sent to parents, the second was distributed to students at the start of the academic year as an informational handout, and the third was part of a welcome letter to high school students. We used Nanus’s (1992) seven questions to evaluate the effectiveness of vision statements and none of our samples provided adequate enough information and detail to be offerer as an exemplar. The limited number of samples that included a vision statement and the fact that most principals did not select a document that focused upon the school’s vision, made it impossible to provide a meaningful sample.

Standard 2: Communicating Culture and Instruction

With the advent of the No Child Left Behind Act, communication inside schools and with their broader communities has changed dramatically. The culture of schools has shifted from places of autonomous action to places of accountability to many entities. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) define school culture as:

- the guiding beliefs and expectations evident in the way a school operates, particularly in reference to how people relate (or fail to relate) to each other. In simple terms, culture is “the way we do things and relate to each other around here” (p. 37).

This focus upon accountability has changed how we “do the business of school” and increased the importance of effective written communication.

Written communication by principals is critical in establishing and nurturing a constructive school culture. By focusing this communication upon the positive aspects of the actions and efforts of the entire school faculty and staff, a principal has an opportunity to emphasize the value of educators and their work. One principal’s memo to his staff included the following:

All classes should take pride and ownership in their display cases. This is your portfolio of your hard work and your students’ success. Our community and all visitors read and view our work, so rotate student work regularly.

Since schools are clearly focused upon academic achievement of all students, one principal submitted evidence of communication to his faculty that was focused upon classroom instruction and what the school values. He writes,

Samples of great responses to literature are an opportunity for students and the teacher to create and learn together. By using great models, students can learn to develop and improve their own writing. Sharing work with the entire class allows everyone to move forward.

The samples provided another example from an elementary principal who summarized a professional development activity that occurred in her school. She writes:

Students need opportunities to practice, practice, and practice. The training we attended yesterday provided new strategies that can make a difference and help students achieve. If you need assistance implementing any of these new ideas, please contact Ms. Smith for help or additional ideas.

Effective written communication that supports a culture focused upon instruction must nurture both the “head” or academics and the “heart” or people of the organization. The following letter to a school community who experienced the loss of several students illustrates this point:

As we begin a new year, a resolution might be to talk to our kids each day about their lives and the direction they are taking. Tell them how much they mean...
to us. Offer them some guidance and assurance. No one is too old to receive some good advice and a vote of confidence.

Each of the examples illustrates the ability of these principals to “promote the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” (ISLLC Standard 2). Creating a culture that extends and expresses what is valued is critical. “What he or she (i.e., the principal) does, pays attention to, appreciates and talks or writes about all count. All this requires work, effort, and vigilance” (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996, p. 89). By using written communication to promote a positive culture focused upon instruction that results in success for all students, these principals have demonstrated the desire to connect with, encourage, support, and inform their faculty and wider community.

Standard 3: Managing the Organization

Principals are also faced with the daily challenge of managing the operations of the school. The sample provided many examples that demonstrated the principals’ ability to develop communication systems and practices within their schools. As we reviewed the communication samples, no attempt was made to assess the frequency of communication efforts by principals; more importantly, our focus was on the quality of communication between the principal and others within the school community. Although our assessment of communication quality may have been subjective, we asked, “How does this principal’s communication demonstrate his or her knowledge of managing systems?” Communication must be valuable and informative to those receiving it. One school newsletter contained the following message to the community:

A date to mark on your calendar is March 2. This is Election Day.... Closer to home our district has had to put a 9.63 mill levy on the ballot. You may be wondering why the schools are on the ballot. This past year everyone has seen “belt tightening” because of the downturn in the economy.... This emergency levy was not needed because of careless spending or misuse of funds. It was because the state cut the amount of money they give us.... You remember that two years ago we closed a school, cut staff and did some other cost saving things to make up for a loss of funds from the state. We don’t have much more that we can cut without touching the programs that have helped us improve the district. We don’t want to take a step backwards. We pledge to continue to carefully use the tax money we receive. We can’t educate the youth of our community without the parents’ participation. I urge you to make a statement! Help us to educate your children by voting in favor of the school levy March 2.

As frontline administrators, principals have an opportunity to take an active role in providing clarity and understanding to issues that impact their schools. Principals must take advantage of the numerous opportunities available to communicate with their constituencies and have their voices heard.

The sample also included many instances of principal communication to faculty and staff on procedures and ongoing school activities. Many principals provided evidence of the importance of using written communication so that teachers could adjust their lesson plans in order to maximize opportunities for successful learning to occur. Principals used e-mail messages and weekly updates to keep people informed. One message clearly demonstrated a principal’s efforts to update teachers and support their work with students:

Our class schedule must be modified this week to accommodate a visit from the superintendent. As you know, the superintendent is visiting all buildings and, while here, he has asked to visit several classrooms. Please let me know if you would like Dr. Smith (pseudonym) to observe your learning activities. We have much to be proud of, so let’s show him what our students are learning and doing. This is an opportunity for us to focus upon the progress that our students are making in writing and reading. Please make certain that the superintendent has access to students’ work because it is extraordinary. Your students should also be informed of this visit. Let’s keep SHINING!!!

By orchestrating this visit, the principal reinforced the values of her school community. She kept teaching and learning at the center of her communication. Moreover, she used a visit from the superintendent as an opportunity to support the work of her faculty and students.

Messages of commitment to helping all children learn must come from teachers and principals. This “talk” must be understood and supported by everyone in the school. One staff memo included the following:

Have you heard what is going on in Ms. Jackson’s classroom? She has been busy working with students on shared writing activities. This is an interactive event where students and teacher create text together. Ms. Jackson has samples of their work and would be happy to demonstrate the process to anyone who is interested. Please see Ms. Jackson or me if you would like release time to spend an hour in her classroom. They are usually writing in the afternoon, so plan accordingly.

By encouraging teachers to share their practice and providing release time to do so, this principal has created in-house professional development. The writing sample also shows the principal’s understanding of the quality teaching that is occurring in classrooms.
Managing systems and practices within a school requires a principal to communicate in many ways. We contend that principals who are deliberate in their efforts to write meaningful communication will demonstrate their desire to connect with, encourage, support, and inform their faculty and wider community, thus moving from a role of merely managing a school to the role of leading a school.

Standard 4: Developing Collaboration and Community Engagement

Developing collaboration within a school and community is a result of deliberate actions on the part of a principal. Keil (2003) states:

Many plans for participation or engagement are developed with little or no teacher or community input. Superintendents write memos or deliver speeches to principals, teachers, and community members and hope that town hall meetings will provide an opportunity for everyone to participate in the decision-making, but frequently little more than polite rhetoric without serious expectations or accountability occurs (p. 39).

Therefore, principals must facilitate processes and engage in activities with the larger community and then write about it. Stories of success must be shared frequently and widely with each of the various school communities. On a recent visit to a high school, we were pleased to see copies of the latest school report card, the school’s monthly newsletter, and an article about school-community partnerships that the principal chose to share with visitors to his school.

Another newsletter stated,

I am part of the Intervention Assistance Team, where teachers, principals, and parents gather as a team to help students who may need extra assistance either academically or behaviorally. We have made so much progress with so many students... I owe all of you a huge THANK YOU for being so supportive, not only to the school, but also to myself and your children.

In one short communication, this principal has identified, nurtured, and celebrated relationships within her building that are making a difference. This focused communication demonstrates the power of words.

Standard 5: Acting with Fairness and Integrity

ISLLC Standard 5 stresses the importance of educational leaders promoting the success of all students by acting with fairness and integrity. The performance measures for this standard include, but are not limited to, protecting the rights and confidentiality of students and staff; treating people fairly, equitably, and with dignity and respect; and demonstrating values, beliefs, and attitudes that inspire others to higher levels of performance.

While reviewing the work samples, we focused upon words that reflected the principal’s actions that supported fairness and integrity. Many samples of school rules and procedures that would protect the rights and confidentiality of students and staff were received. It was evident the respondents were attempting to recognize, respect, and model behaviors consistent with the prevailing values of the school. One community newsletter stated,

Research continues to show that parents and concerned adults play a critical role in education and prevention. Our policies are designed to assist students who may be involved with substance abuse/experimentation and to intervene in order to provide assistance. Currently we have several parents participating in the “Parent-to-Parent” program which will ultimately train them to facilitate this program at our school... It is a privilege to partner with you in developing our young women!

Another sample provided information on a functional behavioral assessment and the process to identify relationships that apply to a set of target behaviors for a student. The entire process was outlined to help parents to understand the school’s efforts to help students with behavioral concerns that may be impacting their learning. In addition, parents were provided with contact information so home concerns could also be addressed in order to help all students be successful in school.

Lastly, the following memo to teachers from an elementary school principal, which demonstrates values, beliefs, and attitudes that inspire higher levels of achievement, was included:

Thanks should be given for your extra tutoring efforts during the day. We can help all of our students to improve their reading ability by using this additional time in productive and meaningful ways. This is great for our students and what a difference we can make.

Principals truly have an opportunity to lead their schools to higher levels of achievement.

Standard 6: Understanding Larger Community Issues

The sixth ISLLC standard requires the principal to facilitate processes and engage in activities that ensure an understanding of, response to, and influence on the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (CCSSO, 1996). No school is an island. Principals must focus on the community as a whole rather than just their particular school and on the inter-
The new school leader must be fully cognizant of the big picture. The most effective leaders are those who can see and appreciate the larger context within which they operate. Effective school leaders must follow closely and be critical consumers of key developments in the bigger picture (pp. 59–60).

Moreover, Davies (2002) writes, “School success and community success are linked. Public schools are seldom able to be much better than their neighborhoods and surrounding communities. Neighborhoods and communities are seldom able to stay healthy and attractive without good schools” (p. 392). A crucial intersection must exist between schools and the communities within which they exist.

Principals must be able to develop this intersection through effective written communication. One school newsletter included the following:

There certainly has been a great deal made over the halftime show of the Super Bowl. It appears that the commotion caused by the CBS/MTV produced “entertainment,” will draw hefty fines from the FCC.... Several things can be done. I actually emailed the FCC, CBS, state and local elected officials voicing my concerns as an educator, parent and human being.... Please take the time to consider what course of action you will take.... children are watching.

By including her reaction and actions, this principal has engaged in activities that influence the cultural context of schools. Another school newsletter to parents stated:

On Wednesday over 59 Youth to Youth members, our resource officer and ten parents went to the Smart and Sober Celebration. Many booths and activities were provided for the students to view and participate in that were drug free related. We all attended an assembly where the Governor addressed the crowd. The students watched many testimonies from adults and students through a video and listened to stories about Chris Farley from his brother.... It was a great experience for all.... Our Annual Walk Against Drugs followed on Thursday with over 600 students, teachers, parents, and community members showing their support.

This communication illustrates the power of the written word. The principal has not only engaged the school and the community on issues of concern through his actions but has followed up by writing about these events to reach others who may not have had an opportunity to participate.

Another sample included the principal’s communication on a school’s Self-Study Process for accreditation that listed extensive demographic data about the school and community. Data regarding the diversity of student body, socioeconomic indicators, and average educational level of community members were included. These, and other data, were used to stimulate community conversations regarding the progress of the school, to write a school profile, and to develop a school improvement plan.

Principals must focus upon the big picture and develop ongoing communication with stakeholders. Writing about larger issues allows a principal to demonstrate that he or she understands the interconnectedness of issues impacting education and student learning.

**Conclusion**

The writing samples in this preliminary study provide specificity and practical applications to principals who seek ways to enhance their effectiveness (Fullan, 1995). The samples demonstrate certain knowledge, skills, and abilities based upon the ISLLC standards and illustrate the nature and quality of communication that principals use on a day-to-day basis.

From our review of the principals’ writing samples, it was evident that vision and mission statements are seldom included as part of the ongoing internal or external communication by principals, despite the persuasive research literature that stresses the importance of developing a shared vision for a school and keeping it highly visible. On the basis of our small sample of school vision statements, we suggest that principals use their vision and mission statements that were adopted or developed by their educational communities to regularly assess if the statements continue to have meaning and ownership with their various constituencies.

Principals have the opportunity to communicate their school’s vision through monthly newsletters, with letters to the community, as a signature on e-mail messages, and on numerous other documents. The vision of a school must be embedded in the fabric of its communication. Research in both business and educational settings focuses upon the importance of creating a shared vision (Senge, 1990; Kotter, 1996; Fullan, 2003) and of equal importance is the continuous sharing of this vision (Schlechty, 2001, p. 170). As Schlechty (2001) states, “Leaders must become skilled in managing symbols and symbolic expressions, especially expressions that convey inspiring images and pictures to others. Leaders must learn to speak to the heart as well as the head” (p. 193).

Because of the absence of vision statements or slogans of commitment to learning from administrators in our sample, we would encourage principals to begin communicating their current vision statements with regularity or to begin the process of developing a vision to guide the direction of their schools. Samples of the
detail and structure of several school vision statements can be found in Dufour and Eaker’s work (1998). Furthermore, Kotter (1996) provides guidelines that could be used to assess the effectiveness of a vision, while Nanus (1992) offers questions for evaluation of the vision. Once created, the vision should be communicated frequently through actions and in written and spoken messages.

Principals do not need researchers to tell them that they spend the bulk of their time communicating with others. For some principals, effective communication seems intuitive; for others, the act of delivering clear, concise, and timely information is more challenging. We believe much can be learned by focusing upon practitioners’ written work and using it to provide examples of valuable and meaningful school communication. Efforts to provide examples of “where to start” (Fullan, 2003) could offer clear direction to principals who seek ways to develop their written communication and to enhance their current writing. Effective and meaningful written communication is not an easy task and principals will best learn by doing. Through auditing their writing, principals can promote their own professional development, enhance the quality of their communication, and improve the effectiveness of their interaction within the school community. Achieving mastery is less a matter of training and more a case of knowing and learning in context with others in order to understand how to begin.

References


