These 10 practices can help assistant principals develop their instructional leadership skills to become more effective school leaders.

In school, time is precious. There is never enough of it to educate students as well as teachers and administrators would like. So how can assistant principals, who already fill their days with the three Bs—books, behinds, and buses—find time to become better instructional leaders?

Instructional leadership is defined in a broader yet more intense definition today than it was 20 years ago. As Lashway (2002) wrote:

Originally, the role involved traditional tasks such as setting clear goals, allocating resources to instruction, managing the curriculum, monitoring lesson plans, and evaluating teachers. Today, it includes much deeper involvement in the “core technology” of teaching and learning, carries more sophisticated views of professional development, and emphasizes the use of data to make decisions (Deborah King, 2002). Attention has shifted from teaching to learning, and some now prefer using the term “learning leader” over “instructional leader” (Rick DeFour, 2002). (p. 2)
One reason assistant principals should make time to become strong instructional leaders is because when they are named principal is not a good time to learn instructional leadership skills. As Resnick and Fink (1999) wrote:

Time on the job as an assistant principal or a principal deepens the gulf [between administrative competencies and instructional ones]. Principals’ time is filled by the many demands on them for administrative functions. Like most people, they also tend to gravitate toward doing what they know how to do. Unsure what to look at or how to intervene when they visit classrooms, principals tend to visit rarely, perhaps only to make required formal evaluations. With their knowledge of teaching growing outdated, they delegate questions of instruction and professional development to others. (p. 3)

Here, then, is an excellent and compelling reason why an aspiring assistant principal should find the time to strengthen his or her instructional leadership capacity. A school’s performance—and, therefore, its quality of instruction—rests squarely on the shoulders of the principal. Preparing for the principalship and its instructional demands before assuming the position can facilitate a principal’s efficacy.
The Secrets

The following 10 “secrets” can help assistant principals prepare for the principalship.

1. **Talk to your principal about how you can increase your instructional leadership capacity and take a more active role in the educational plan for the school.** Meet with your principal to talk about your concern that your duties may be keeping you away from classrooms. Come up with a plan to share time in the office dealing with facility and discipline issues. If nothing else, this meeting will let your principal know that you have an interest in instructional leadership and that you are serious about preparing for the principalship.

   Become more knowledgeable about the best practices that make up your school’s education plan. For example, if your school has recently instituted professional learning communities, then research professional learning communities. See how they are being implemented at different grade levels and in different content areas. Is another school nearby also using professional learning communities? If so, arrange to visit and talk with teachers and administrators at that school to find out how they have implemented the practice. Or become involved in the school improvement plan. Ask to sit in on the meetings with the team that helps set the goals for following year. Offer to create a strategic map of the process with time lines.

2. **Set a goal for how many classrooms you will visit each week.** After meeting with your principal, look at your schedule and set a reasonable goal for how many classrooms you will visit each week. Arm yourself with copies of lesson plans and curriculum checklists of the classes you will visit, if they are available. If spending more than a few minutes in two or more classrooms a day doesn’t seem doable, request walk-through training, which will prepare you to go into a classroom for only three to four minutes to look for specific targets and objectives. After visiting a classroom, spend a few minutes debriefing with the teacher. Remember to be positive, yet honest, when giving feedback.

3. **Become more literate about current education trends and best practices.** Many assistant principals are so busy that they lose track of current educational trends. If this has happened to you, renew your understanding by reading education journals. Several education organizations send magazines to members as part of their membership privileges. One journal even allows readers to download articles to a computer or an MP3 player, which makes listening to them while driving very time effective for busy educators.

   Create a study group that reads books and articles that address a best practice currently in use at your school or one that will be introduced as part of the school improvement plan. Several study groups can run at the same time—for example, school leaders can attend one that focuses on innovative practices that they are considering implementing and content-area teachers can attend another that focuses on a promising instructional strategy.

4. **Make a best practice suggestion and follow up on its implementation.** Let’s say that you suggested, on the basis of reading you had done, that the effectiveness of after-school tutorials should be measured, and your principal agreed that it was a worthwhile endeavor. Follow up by getting the list of students who are currently participating in after-school tutoring and check available assessment scores to see if the tutoring has had an impact on student performance. Share the results with your principal and the teachers and seek their ideas for possible changes for the students who are not performing well.

5. **Attend learning community and team meetings with your teachers.** Inform team leaders and department chairs that you would like to attend their content meetings on regular basis. Explain that you want to learn about the power of teacher-led meetings and that you are not there to take over or to intimidate. If you attend regularly enough, the teachers will not only become comfortable with your presence but also may come to appreciate having an administrator with whom they can discuss various issues.

6. **Become a trained facilitator, then train your teachers.** Ask for an opportunity to regularly facilitate grade level, vertical, or horizontal meetings. Look for opportuni-
ties to talk to teachers about curriculum and classroom issues, and engage teachers in professional dialogue often. Share good practices you have seen in other classrooms and schools or share a successful instructional strategy that you saw a teacher use during a recent class visit. Ask a teacher about something you saw in his or her classroom—start off with positive things if this is a new practice for you. Ask teachers about an idea you read about in a professional publication. Ask questions when you see something that arouses your curiosity, such as why a strategy worked more effectively in one classroom than another or why discipline is an issue with a veteran teacher but not with another who has less teaching experience. Be observant and search for answers by talking to your teachers.

7. **Take time to teach a class.** One of the best ways for teachers to learn is by observing one another, but because many schools do not have extra money for substitutes, teachers seldom have the opportunity to learn this way. Volunteer to teach a class while one teacher goes to observe another. This enables you to get back into the classroom and build a relationship with students as well as teachers. Stay in touch with students and gain instructional insight by tutoring students before or after school. But first ask teachers to teach you the current instructional strategies for the concept that you plan to offer tutoring in. They may not be the same as when you were last in the classroom.

8. **Attend professional development training with your teachers.** The easiest way to know what and how your teachers are supposed to teach is by attending professional development training with them. Principals and assistant principals should attend any training that happens in their school. But attending content-based training offered by your district will make you a more effective instructional leader. Understanding what the district says should be done in the classroom in each content area makes you very valuable to your teachers.

For example, if you see a teacher struggling because he or she is not teaching content the way that it was taught in the district’s training, you can quickly provide help. You might pair the teacher with a mentor, call in a district instructional specialist, or arrange for the teacher to observe a teacher who you know is effectively teaching the content. Think of the cumulative positive effect on instruction and morale if you did this consistently all year.

9. **Find a mentor who embodies the instructional leadership qualities you want to emulate.** Look carefully around your district. Is there a person who models the instructional leadership qualities you want? A good mentor for you may be as close as your own principal or a principal from another school in your district. A recently retired principal who had unusually strong success in his or her school might be willing to mentor you. Besides offering professional guidance, a mentor can also help you network and show others that you are sincere in developing your leadership abilities.

Your peers can also offer you guidance. Ask for permission to start a districtwide assistant principals’ networking group. Or if you are already part of a group that meets regularly, request that the last 15 or 20 minute of each meeting be devoted to sharing best practices for instructional leadership. Meeting regularly with other assistant principals not only will let you share with your peers what is working and not working in your school but also will let you use strategies that your peers have used successfully. It can also be motivating to be part of a group whose members are working together to become better instructional leaders.

10. **Become more internally disciplined to follow your new goals.** Saying and doing are two different things. Many people start in January with the best intention to eat right and exercise regularly, but few people follow through and make their resolutions part of a lifelong plan for good health. Likewise, these 10 secrets are only effective when they are practiced regularly.

It is important to maintain balance when embracing instructional leadership and managing other school duties. Burnout is easier to avoid than to cure, says Vanderbilt University researcher Will Clouse, creator of the Burnout Assessment Inventory (1999). Don’t take on too much too early. Start making the steps a
lifelong habit by choosing a few to focus on and then add others when you are able. Implementing a few of the secrets consistently will be more effective than attempting to implement all of them sporadically.

**The Best Reason**

There are many reasons why following these suggestions is a good idea. The strongest is because as you become a more effective instructional leader, you will have a positive effect on teachers, which will ultimately improve student performance. Making these 10 practices a habit may also speed your promotion to the principalship. It is not difficult to imagine that an assistant principal who has become a more effective instructional leader by consistently following most or all of these practices would have a better chance of being chosen to lead a school in a shorter period of time.

Not all administrators take the time to develop themselves as fully as they should. But there is a major reason to develop instructional leadership skills: the students. School leaders need to remember that they are in this business because it’s important. Students deserve educators’ best efforts, from the principal on down. Make sure that you can say with surety that you are giving your students your instructional best, starting immediately.

**REFERENCES**


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