



Improving Leadership for Learning ■ Stories from the Field

Out of the Office and into the Classroom

An initiative to help principals focus on instruction

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By Holly Holland

In Penny Cecil's first year as principal of Hodgenville Elementary School, management tasks dominated the agenda. School bus problems, testing schedules, personnel changes, discipline issues, building maintenance, phone calls from parents, and endless stacks of paperwork consumed her 12-hour days.

"I was always trying to triage," Cecil said, describing a job that was "driven by interruptions."

The next year, Cecil changed focus. With a trained School Administration Manager (SAM) hired to handle the organizational overflow, the principal achieved her goal of getting into every classroom at least once a week to observe teachers and interact with students. Within a few months, Cecil was spending an average of 70 percent of her time on instruction and learning, up from 40 percent at the start of the term.

She exceeded that pace going into the current school year. By the second week of the new term, Cecil had observed every teacher, knew most of the 589 students by name, and was such a regular presence in classrooms that teachers and students barely noticed when she entered or exited.

"Penny is so much more accessible," said Cherie Altman, who teaches 3rd and 4th graders. "She'll get on the floor with kids. She'll talk to you about what you're doing. She used to be a teacher, and she can share so much with us."

Teresa Fightmaster recalled the day Cecil taught a model lesson on memoir writing to her 3rd and 4th grade students. The principal brought in a suitcase from home and unpacked items that she could use to trigger descriptive details of her life.

"I welcome her into the classroom," Fightmaster said. "I need the feedback, as a new teacher. That way I know what I need to do to be better."

Hodgenville is the hub of LaRue County, KY, an agricultural region an hour south of Louisville and the birthplace of Abraham Lincoln. More recently, it also has become part of a rapidly expanding national model for school-level leadership. Designed to free principals from the tasks distracting them from teaching and learning while ensuring the smooth operation of their schools, the SAM initiative offers a way out of the daily time-crunch dilemma. And it calls attention to a commonly acknowledged but rarely resolved obstacle to education reform: Principals can't and shouldn't do it all.

"When you look at all the data out there and all the things we ask principals to do, it's not humanly possible," said Sam Sanders, superintendent of the LaRue County Public Schools.

“Student achievement is the focus, but the only way you’re going to move student achievement up is if you allow principals to get directly involved in instruction and assessment. Other than that, they’ll be putting out fires every day.”

Getting principals out of the office and into classrooms is not a new approach, of course. Many school reform efforts in the past two decades have emphasized the importance of redefining the principal’s default role as supervisor of “buses, budgets, and butts” to the school’s chief executive of learning. What the SAM initiative does is systematize the process by showing principals exactly how they spend their time and how they can use it better. It encourages changes in professional practices driven by coaching and data.

Based on a study conducted in the Jefferson County Public School District in Kentucky, the SAM project includes three key components. The first is hiring a business manager or reallocating the duties of an existing building administrator to focus on school operations. The second is routinely and accurately tracking the principal’s time to ensure that she or he does, in turn, emphasize instruction and learning. The third is coaching the principal to become a more effective and reflective leader.

The last aspect may be the most important because if a principal doesn’t use the reallocated time well, then the effort will be wasted. An outside coach visits each principal monthly to provide support.

“This is not something you can just do. It’s something you practice,” said Mark Shelling, a former principal and superintendent who serves as the national expansion coordinator for the three-year-old project.

With support from The Wallace Foundation, principals and SAMs in nine states receive extensive professional development and mentoring to help with the transitions. Participating school districts agree to pay for the SAM positions over several years, and the foundation pays for training and data collection.

The statistical review is multi-dimensional. Principals, SAMs, and their mentors analyze both daily and longitudinal patterns to see how the administrators are spending their time and what adjustments they may need to make. As part of the process, trained outside observers spend a full week each year shadowing the principals and coding their work in five-minute increments to develop an accurate portrait of their management and instructional roles. The research shows that most principals initially spend only about 30 percent of their time on activities that are directly related to learning, such as observing and modeling instruction, providing feedback to students and teachers, and discussing curriculum and assessment. The majority of their work involves school operations, everything from cafeteria supervision to playground patrol.

The ratios usually reverse after just one year in the SAM program. A pilot study in Jefferson County also found that the rate of student achievement gains doubled during the same period.

The SAM’s position is vital to the transformation. Most of the participating schools have hired midlevel managers from the business community to fill the roles. At about \$35,000 a

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year, the SAM's salary is roughly a third of what many principals earn, so the added costs usually are manageable. Some districts have reassigned or split the duties of assistant principals instead of hiring outside people with business backgrounds. Other districts, such as the Linn-Mar Public Schools in Marion, IA, have hired certified teachers with administrative training, seeing the SAM's position as an opportunity to groom future principals.

A SAM handles routine operations

Janelle Steichen, who has experience in both teaching and business, divides her time between an elementary and middle school in the Linn-Mar district. In her new role as a SAM, she schedules the principals' observation and coaching sessions with teachers, supervises all non-instructional staff, coordinates the ordering and distribution of supplies, and serves as the first contact for student discipline and parent communications. Instead of finding the principals behind closed doors in meetings or having phone calls routed to voicemail, staff and parents usually get a quick response from Steichen.

"Our population has been very accepting of this because I'm more accessible," said Steichen, who assumed the position in March 2007.

The principals are still in charge of school management, and Steichen consults with them every day about her activities, but by handling the routine operations of the school, she enables the principals to concentrate on instruction. For example, the middle school principal initially spent only 12 percent of his time meeting with teachers but tripled his contacts after the first three months of participating in the SAM initiative.

"There are a lot of places for him to be in the middle school, and he wasn't getting there before," Steichen said. "The technology, P.E., and health teachers — he didn't have time to get into those classrooms."

After ensuring that principals get out of the office and into classrooms, the next step is improving their interactions with teachers and students. Many principals have limited experience observing and coaching teachers; they are more accustomed to periodic and passive classroom walk-throughs or scheduled evaluations that may determine teachers' tenure but not promote their professional growth.

Steichen recalled that after a presentation about the SAM initiative, several administrators in the audience asked her what participating principals actually do to improve teaching and learning.

"I think it's been so long that the job has been defined as more management than instruction that they've almost forgotten what to do," she said.

A more collegial, supportive role for principals

Through the SAM initiative, principals learn how to deepen their conversations with teachers, shifting from an evaluative role to a collegial and supportive role. Mentors show principals how to motivate people, when to pull back, and how to provide effective feedback. Principals also learn how to grade students' work and conference with them when visiting classrooms. In addition to establishing relationships with students and demonstrating support for teachers, these activities give principals a broader understanding of instruction and learning within the school.

Another key challenge for principals is learning how to diplomatically deflect distractions. Whether a parent calls about an attendance issue, a custodian reports a water leak, or a teacher wants to update a textbook order, the crush of people requesting attention continually will divert a principal's attention without a planned offensive. Part of the SAM training involves role-playing common scenarios so principals will be prepared to respond differently than in the past.

"We talk about what to do when people catch the principal in the hallway and say they just 'need a minute of your time,' " Mark Shellinger explained. "If it's a management issue, the principal can say, 'you're more important than [a minute]. Please see the SAM if you need to take care of this now or schedule an appointment with my secretary so I can be sure to meet with you later.' "

Those with reservations about the SAM initiative point to the cost of adding a new position and the demands on time for data collection. Another concern voiced by Joe Burke, the superintendent of schools in Springfield, MA, is that it still places too much responsibility on the principal for directing school change. Burke said he's concerned about any reform model that doesn't specifically build a base for distributed leadership. No principal has the background to be an effective coach in all content areas, he said, and no school can transform itself without broad support from teachers.

"The SAM's strategy is that the principal has too much to do and they can't be an effective instructional leader, so we'll hire a manager to take all the nitty-gritty from them, and everything will be wonderful," Burke said. "Well, if your teachers are still not engaged in the change process in meaningful ways, it's not going to work that effectively."

Burke said Springfield is pursuing another strategy, which includes identifying and training two new levels of teacher leaders who will coordinate professional development and guide school improvement plans, respectively. To pay for the project and gain approval from the teacher's union, Springfield streamlined its salary schedule to reward teachers who demonstrate success with student achievement instead of providing automatic increases to teachers based on advanced degrees or years of employment.

"I think what we need to do is look at the deeper changes that need to occur in instruction, classroom by classroom," Burke said. "It's my firm belief that if you're going to rely on one leader in the school to do that, you're not going to get the leverage points you really want."

Lois Adams-Rodgers disagrees. A former principal, superintendent, and now the deputy executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers, she believes that schools can attain better results by redefining the principal's job. She said many principals participating in the SAM initiative are creating leadership teams that include highly effective teachers who can help coach their colleagues. But unless schools minimize the operational duties expected of a principal, instruction and learning will not become the first priority.

"It's not an either/or [situation]. It's what combination does it take to run a successful

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school,” Adams-Rodgers said. “It means the principal might lead professional development or identify the best teachers to serve as coaches, in addition to teaching.”

In LaRue County, Cecil is working toward such a dual approach — guiding global changes from the top while developing teachers’ talents from the ground up. Because she routinely observes teachers, Cecil can identify common strengths and weaknesses among the faculty and use the information to frame future staff development sessions. For example, she has begun helping teachers identify activities and assessments that ask students to apply, not just recall, what they’ve learned. In addition to targeting such trends and tapping skilled teachers to model more effective practices for their colleagues, Cecil can work individually with teachers to design professional growth plans that address their specific needs and interests.

Cecil also gets to know students well by being in classrooms so often. She asks them probing questions and extends their thinking because she has an intimate knowledge of what they’re studying.

“She knows the kids academically as well as personally,” said Hodgenville teacher Cherie Altman. “She’ll tell me, ‘this was a struggle for this child last year, and you might want to pay attention to that this year.’”

“As big a school as this is, our kids are not numbers to her,” Altman said. “At this point in the year, we’re still getting to know them, and she already does.”

Having SAM Tammy Harding on staff makes this intense focus on instruction possible, Cecil said. A former office manager and substitute teacher, Harding delights in handling the duties that used to drive Cecil to distraction. On a recent morning, she eagerly and deftly juggled multiple tasks: creating a diagnostic test schedule for students, distributing paychecks to staff members, intercepting a phone call from a textbook sales representative, and scheduling a fire drill for the following week. In addition, she periodically checked Cecil’s computerized time-tracker to remind the principal of her planned meetings and objectives.

“It still amazes me every day that I’m doing all this and she used to do it all” in addition to her other responsibilities, Harding said. “She’d have to handle it after school and be here until 9 or 10 at night. You don’t realize how much a principal does until you’re right there with them.”

Deftly handling multiple tasks

Daily debriefings ensure that both the principal and the SAM know what the other person is doing and encourage them to delegate duties.

During the first year that LaRue County’s two elementary schools participated in the SAM initiative, Superintendent Sanders received detailed weekly reports that demonstrated how it had improved their efficiency, responsiveness, and job satisfaction. Although comparative student achievement data won’t be available until later this fall, Sanders saw enough evidence to expand the program to the district’s middle school this fall and to the high school next year.

“For us to go out on a limb like this, we’re definitely sold on the value,” he said. “I know I’ve got three happy principals. I think everybody feels good when they think they can be effective.”