Step One: Establish, Implement, and Achieve Academic Standards

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I f the primary purpose of schooling is learning, then determining what students need to know, how and when it should be taught, and whether or not these instructional goals have been reached are paramount for effective instructional leaders. Decisions about what to teach were easy when textbooks *were* the curriculum. Principals could place one teacher's edition and 30 books for each course or subject in the hands of the teacher and depart, confident that the mate-rial was being covered. However, establishing instructional goals for the 21st century is a far more daunting assignment. The National Research Council (2000) has framed the following important questions that need to be asked and answered by instructional leaders and their staff members:

> To provide a knowledge-centered classroom environment, attention must be given to what is taught (information, subject matter), why it is taught (understanding), and what competence or mastery looks like.
>
> (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 24)

- What specific knowledge and skills should all students learn?
- How do we decide what is in or out of the curriculum?
- Should all students learn the same content, or should it differ for those with different aspirations, abilities, and interests?
- If we agree that we want students to have more than a temporary acquaintance with important concepts and skills, how do we

modify the curriculum so that there is adequate time for in-depth learning?

- How do we assess that kind of learning?
- How do we incorporate the growing body of research that indicates that the most-effective teaching strategies are highly content-specific—that content and instruction are inseparable—into our decision making?

HOW CAN YOU ESTABLISH MEANINGFUL ACADEMIC STANDARDS?

> Defining school goals is a process of balancing clear academic ideals with community and internal school needs. A leader provides the guidance and central themes for this orchestration of goals, from the unit objectives to the general understanding of a school's philosophy.
>
> (Weber, 1987, p. 6)

Instructional leaders are ultimately responsible for guiding the establishment, implementation, and assessment of a set of clear instructional goals or standards for their schools—broad general outcomes that define what students should know and be able to do when they exit the school. In addition to these broad goals in every curricular area and for every grade level, teachers also need specific benchmarks to guide their daily lesson planning. These more discrete outcomes will constitute the roadmap for learning that teachers will follow. This roadmap will guide the selection of materials and programs (curriculum), dictate the types of instructional strategies and approaches that are used (pedagogy), and suggest the kinds of formative assessments (both informal and standardized) needed to determine if students are making adequate progress toward achieving the standards.

> Standards provide all parents, teachers, and students in a state with clear expectations of what all students should learn. They also contribute to coherent educational practices when teachers align their instructional methods and materials with assessments based on these standards.
>
> (Stotsky, 2000, p. iii)

Many districts and schools no longer have the freedom to choose what their teachers will teach or how and when their students will be assessed. Most states have developed academic standards and administer periodic assessments in every curricular area and at most grade levels. This fact of educational life in the 21st century drives our instructional efforts and is most assuredly a mixed blessing, for all standards and their concomitant assessments are *not* created equal. If a standard is fuzzy, indefinite, or incapable of being evaluated, as many current standards are, most teachers will ignore them or substitute learning outcomes of their own choosing. A teacher-selected set of outcomes may or may not be articulated and connected highly content-specific with any other teacher's chosen standards. A verbose or

repetitive standards document invites teachers to tuck it away on a shelf to gather dust rather than to consult it daily as a road map for where to head next. Some teachers may profess adherence to the standards but fail to prioritize instruction or bring lower-achieving students to mastery in the essential outcomes before moving on to cover more material.

Strong instructional leaders work with teachers to translate fuzzy standards into plain English so they have detailed and understand-able directions for instruction and communi-cate with both staff and students to explain the relevance and importance of assessments.

> An authentic assessment system has to be based on known, clear, public, nonarbitrary standards and criteria.
>
> (Wiggins, 1993, p. 51)

Effective instructional leaders facilitate the translation, consolidation, coordination, and integration of state and district standards into a coherent set of school level marching orders. Some principals even pub-lish an abbreviated version of their school standards in a booklet for parents or develop Goals at a Glance summaries for teachers to keep them focused on the essential outcomes for their grade or subject. Only when teachers take personal ownership of the standards at their grade levels or in their disciplines will they be able to translate them into effec-tive instruction and solid learning for all their students. If used cre-atively, well-developed standards documents can be a powerful tool for bringing about instructional and curricular change in a school. Rather than bemoaning their limitations or ignoring their mandates, effective instructional leaders use them as leverage to improve instruction and increase student learning.

The standards aren't the only aspect of standards-based reform that pose a challenge to principals. If state assessments measure only basic skills or are unreasonably difficult for all but the highest-achieving students, neither teachers nor students will take them seriously. Strong instructional leaders must respond in several ways: (a) Work with state officials and politicians to ensure that assessments are valid, reliable, and equitable; (b) work with parents and students to help them understand the impor-tance of assessments, not only to the individual student but also to the school and district as a whole; (c) work with teachers to help them design instruction that includes the skills and knowledge students will need to be successful on standards-based assessments.

HOW CAN YOU ENSURE A CONSISTENT AND COHERENT PROGRAM?

A *consistent* program has similar outcomes and curriculum at every grade level (elementary school) or in every content area (secondary

Here at a minimum is what we want [from schools], three general goals that stick close to the narrow endeavor of education. These are goals almost no one would argue with: retention of knowledge; understanding of knowledge; active use of knowledge.

(Perkins, 1992, p. 5)

A FOCUS ON CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: KATHIE DOBBERTEEN, PRINCIPAL

La Mesa Dale School, La Mesa, California

Kathie Dobberteen, the principal of La Mesa Dale Elementary School has seamlessly integrated the first of the seven steps to effective instructional leadership into the fabric of her school. Her focus on continuous assessment and improvement has resulted in remarkable gains in student achievement. La Mesa Dale has been named a California Distinguished School, a Title I Distinguished School, and received one of six annual Change Awards from the Chase Manhattan Bank and Fordham University. In the spring of 2001, 90 percent of the students were reading at and above grade level at this Title I school (up from 42 percent in 1996). Ninety-four percent of the fifth graders went on to middle school reading at and above grade level, with 33 percent of them reading at 8th- and 9th-Grade levels. There is a sense of academic press and instructional relentlessness at La Mesa Dale that leaves no child behind.

We challenge ourselves and our students to succeed by writing schoolwide goals every year. These goals are

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school). If a program is inconsistent, it will be characterized by the doing-my-own-thing syndrome. On the other hand, if a consistent program is in place, all students will have the same opportunities to learn. For example, students enrolled in freshman English with Mrs. Bequeath will encounter the same expectations regarding the quantity and quality of text they read and write as the students enrolled in Mr. Smith's section across the hall.

A *coherent* program is connected from the beginning (kindergarten) to the end (12th grade). In a coherent program, preparation for the third-grade assessment does not begin with a mad dash for the finish line at the beginning of third grade, but at the beginning of kindergarten. When coherence is present, teachers at every grade level know the expectations for students in both the preceding and succeeding school years. Ensuring that school and classroom activities are consistent with adopted and mandated standards as well as consistent and coherent with other grade levels or courses in their school necessitates a great deal of planning, collaboration, and cooperation by principals. In some cases, teachers may have to give up their treasured creativity and autonomy with regard to choosing what they will teach and when they will teach it. When that fails to happen, you will be there to ask the difficult questions as well as provide support and encouragement for finding solutions. Here are some ways effective instructional leaders get the job done.

• Put teams of teachers together and provide time for them to solve grade level or departmental achievement problems. The peer pressures that marginal

teachers will feel relative to measuring up to the school mission and mastery of specific outcomes for their students will encourage them to seek out resources and alternative instructional strategies. Let teacher power assist you in improving the marginal teacher.

- Set schoolwide as well as grade level, team, or departmental goals. No one will want to be left behind. What you (and your faculty) choose to pay attention to, what you (and your faculty) think is important, and what you (and your faculty) measure and monitor will be accomplished (or begin to be accomplished) more effectively than it ever was in the past.

> **La Mesa Dale School** (continued)
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> directly related to the district's goals, and we solicit input from the School Site Council, the PTA, and surveys of the parent community. Then, each grade level writes its own specific goals based on the school and district goals. These grade level goals are almost always stated in terms of how they can be measured using data and are posted on the bulletin board outside our Parent Center. The heading on the bulletin board says: "We've come so far . . . but we're not satisfied yet!" (K. Dobberteen, 2001, p. 4)

HOW CAN YOU ENSURE A SCHOOLWIDE FOCUS ON ACHIEVEMENT AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT?

If your goal is student learning, how will you know you have reached your goals? Who will be responsible for charting the course? Focus on data. Look for proof. Insist on results. Involve everyone. The research is clear about the power of the continuous monitoring of progress in bringing about increased student learning

> [The] litmus test for a good school is not its innovations but rather the solid, purposeful, enduring results it tries to obtain for its students.
>
> (Glickman, 1993, p. 50)

(Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1984). Here are some ways that effective instructional leaders collect and use data to drive school improvement.

- Use test results, grade reports, attendance records, and other information to spot potential problems. Become skilled at picking up bits and pieces of information as you talk with teachers, attendance clerks, counselors, or deans. Move in on potential instructional or learning problems swiftly. Never wait and see when a child's academic success is at stake.

- Use a standardized set of questions every time you approach a data set such as the following: (a) What do these data seem to tell us? (b) What do they not tell us? (c) What else would we need to know? (d) What good news is here for us to celebrate? (e) What needs for school improvement might arise from these data? (Holcomb, 1999, p. 64)

• No matter who teaches a specified course and grade level or what methodologies are used, the outcomes must be consistent. Facilitate the development of common final examinations in core courses or curriculum-based assessments in reading, writing, and mathematics at the elementary school level. These assessments will give teachers a focus, result in better test construction, and enable you, the instructional leader, to monitor the consistency in your curriculum.

> To increase student learning, approach it directly, and bring the energy of everyone in the school or district to bear on the effort.
>
> (Joyce & Showers, 1995, p. 55)

• Share summaries of individual students' performance with all the staff who can then assist in developing action alternatives. *All* the teachers in your school are responsible for all the students. The kindergarten teachers should be interested in the achievement of sixth graders and vice versa. Teachers of graduating seniors should feel as responsible for sophomore course outlines and content as they do for their own syllabi. Work to eliminate the closed-door syndrome characterized by too many teachers who feel no responsibility for what is happening in other classrooms of the building.

• Target low- or under-achieving students in your school for an all-out team effort to improve their achievement. Make the target students the responsibility of all faculty members. Form a problem-solving, student-study team to come up with innovative instructional strategies to help these students. Find ways to offer extra help and increased opportunities for success.

> Historically, schools and school systems would be re-accredited and even receive public acclaim if they had the appropriate mix of inputs (books in the library) and curricular offerings (advanced math courses). Unfortunately, these input assessments never addressed the question of how much students were actually learning at the school.
>
> (Lezotte, 1992, p. 58)

• Collect trend data so that you can evaluate your progress over several years. Learn to use spreadsheets and develop databases or hire a secretary who is a whiz so that multiple measures of student achievement are readily available.

• Collect data from other sources in addition to student achievement. Use the level of staff development participation, staff attendance records, parental involvement in PTA, number of school volunteers and the time they volunteer, and the attendance at parent-school activities.

• Survey the faculty, community, and student body relative to their perceptions about the school's effectiveness.

• If your community or state does not issue a report card on student achievement, publish your own school report card so that parents are

aware of your emphasis on accountability. Communicate student progress to parents—through published documents, parent conferences, narratives, and portfolios that give a holistic picture of student strengths and weaknesses.

• Match your assessments to standards and do your best to coordinate your school, district, and state level assessments to minimize the amount of time spent in testing.

• Disaggregate different categories of data to determine if all students have an equal chance of achieving academic success in your school. *Disaggregation* is the process of separating out different types of information for different groups of students (e.g., "Do a higher percentage of boys score in the upper quartiles in math and science than girls?" Or "Are specific ethnic groups overrepresented in the lower quartiles on standardized achievement tests?"). Types of data that can be disaggregated include norm-referenced test scores, criterion-referenced test scores, state level test scores, grade distributions, attendance or tardiness patterns, graduation rates, expulsions, students accepted in postsecondary-education programs, graduates placed in jobs, students participating in extracurricular activities, students receiving academic awards and scholarships, discipline referrals, suspensions, advanced-placement enrollments, specific courses (e.g., algebra), and honor roll. Student groups to pull out for comparison might include higher- or lower-socioeconomic status; minority or nonminority; gender; student mobility; or students enrolled in special programs such as Title I, special education, and bilingual education.

• Update student records in a timely fashion so that all the individuals who work with students will have relevant information at their fingertips.

• Use less-traditional methods of gathering data, such as flow charts, histograms, scattergrams, and force-field analyses.

Effective instructional leaders devote a great deal of time to number crunching. They have clear ideas of what constitutes success, and they use a variety of data sources to determine if

> An emphasis on results is central to school improvement.
>
> (Schmoker, 1999, p. 3)

their achievement goals have been reached. Dave Burton, a middle school principal, doesn't rely on just one measure. He's constantly assessing teaching and learning, especially during his frequent forays into the hallways, cafeteria, and team planning periods. He says, "I look at the analysis of standardized test scores, review student grades quarterly, make frequent classroom observations, and talk with teachers and students almost daily."

Focus on fundamentals: curriculum, instruction, assessment, [and] professional culture

(Fullan, 1997, p. 28)

School improvement is like a race—with one major difference. The race is never really over. There is rarely a clear finish where we can declare a winner. Schools are in a constant state of flux. There *are* brief moments where we can celebrate regarding marvelous milestones, and then the race begins anew with an entirely new group of runners. Teachers resign and new ones are hired. New students enroll and others transfer to different schools. New textbooks are adopted. Instructional leaders must continually monitor and adjust. New staff members and parents must be informed and brought on board. The temptation to limit the inner circle of leadership to experienced and supportive staff members and parents is a strong one. Don't overlook, however, the need for involving everyone at key points along the way. Holcomb (1999) recommends involving all staff members whenever the following activities are taking place:

ESTABLISHING, IMPLEMENTING, AND ACHIEVING ACADEMIC STANDARDS IN A HIGH SCHOOL: JAMES EDWARDS, PRINCIPAL; LAURA GALIDO, GARY MAYEDA, YVONNE PECK, AND PHYLLIS THROCKMORTON, ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS

Oxnard High School, Oxnard, California

The energies of the entire administrative team at Oxnard High School are focused on instructional improvement and the achievement of academic standards. Established in 1901, Oxnard High School has a rich and colorful history. It currently serves over 3,000 culturally and economically diverse students (Latino, 62 percent; Anglo, 21 percent; African American, 6 percent; Asian, 4 percent; Filipino, 4 percent; Native American, 2 percent; and Pacific Islander, 1 percent). Under Proposition 98, schools in California are required to prepare an annual School Accountability Report Card.

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- Developing and affirming the school's mission
- Identifying significant, meaningful data to be compiled for the school portfolio
- Interpreting the data, requesting more data, and identifying areas of concern
- Focusing areas of concern on a few priorities and developing goals
- Participating in study groups to further analyze improvement concerns, select indicators of improvement, and recom-mend validated strategies
- Affirming the completed school improvement plan
- Participating in staff development to learn the use of new strategies and assessments
- Discussing evidence of progress with implementation and goal attainment. (1999, pp. 90-91)

I would recommend keeping a representative sampling of your parent community involved with this process as well.

HOW CAN YOU USE THE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP CHECKLIST TO ASSESS STEP ONE?

Step One: Establish, Implement, and Achieve Academic Standards

There are four indicators that describe step one in more detail. Each indicator is followed by three sections: (a) a *comment* that defines the specific focus of the indicator; (b) a *scale of descriptors* that gives a continuum of behaviors (1 to 5) from least effective to most effective; and (c) *key points in the descriptors* that give succinct explanations of each of the five items in the scale. For each indicator, select the number from 1 to 5 that most accurately describes your own behavior on a day-to-day basis.

Indicator 1.1

Incorporates the designated state and district standards into the development and implementation of the local school's instructional programs.

Comment

The main focus of Indicator 1.1 is the support the principal gives to mandated state and district standards while developing and implementing an instructional program that also meets the needs of the individual students, classrooms, and the school as a whole.

Scale of Descriptors

1. Principal does not support the use of state and district standards as the basis for the instructional program.

2. Principal pays lip service to the use of state and district standards as the basis

Oxnard High School
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Student achievement and demonstrated progress toward meeting academic standards are reported in terms of an Academic Performance Index (API). Administrators and teachers at Oxnard are currently engaged in a school improvement initiative that focuses on improvement in two major areas in an effort to increase their API.

Teachers and administrators have jointly identified functional and textual reading, as well as language mechanics, as very low areas of achievement by disaggregating the data from the SAT 9 test. All of the teachers have received an inservice on how to use both the standardized test data and formative classroom assessments to identify areas of weakness in their students and, in turn, tailor their lesson plans to target those areas. A group of freshmen and sophomore students who are reading well below grade level have been targeted to receive a period of direct instruction in reading at their specific instructional level in addition to their regular English class. The second period of the school day has been lengthened by 8 minutes, and all teachers (regardless of their subject matter assignment) are teaching a daily oral-language lesson to the students. The current emphasis on language development and reading proficiencies, with the goal of improving student achievement, has been communicated to students and parents. The assistant principals facilitate implementation by making informal, random, drop-in visits to classrooms to ensure that lessons are being taught (Y. Peck, personal communication, January 14, 2002).

> **MUST-READ BOOKS TO ASSIST YOU IN IMPLEMENTING STEP ONE**
>
> F. English. (1992). *Deciding What to Teach and Test: Developing, Aligning, and Auditing the Curriculum.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
>
> E. Holcomb. (1999). *Getting Excited About Data: How to Combine People, Passion, and Proof.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
>
> K. Leithwood, R. Aitken, & D. Jantzi. (2001). *Making Schools Smarter: A System for Monitoring School and District Progress.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
>
> E. K. McEwan. (1998). *The Principal's Guide to Raising Reading Achievement.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. (For elementary instructional leaders.)
>
> E. K. McEwan. (2000). *The Principal's Guide to Raising Mathematics Achievement.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin. (For elementary, middle, and high school instructional leaders.)
>
> E. K. McEwan. (2001). *Raising Reading Achievement in Middle and High Schools: Five Simple-to-Follow Strategies.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
>
> M. Schmoker. (1999). *Results: The Key to Continuous Improvement.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Curriculum and Supervision Development.

for the school's instructional program but permits teachers to exercise personal judgments regarding their ultimate inclusion.

3. Principal believes that state and district standards should be used as the basis for the school's instructional program and communicates these expectations to teachers.

4. Principal believes that state and district standards should be the basis for the school's instructional program, communicates these expectations to teachers, and works with them in the development of instructional programs that do this effectively.

5. Principal believes that state and district standards should be the basis for the school's instructional program, communicates these expectations to teachers, works with them in the development of instructional programs that do this effectively, and monitors classroom activities and instruction to ensure such inclusion.

Key Points in Descriptors

1. No incorporation of state or district standards into program

2. Belief in importance but permissive in supervision

3. Belief in importance with expectations communicated

4. Belief in importance, expectations communicated, assistance provided

5. Belief in importance, expectations communicated, assistance provided, and implementation monitored

Indicator 1.2

Ensures that schoolwide and individual classroom instructional activities are consistent with state, district, and school standards and are articulated and coordinated with one another.

Comment

The main focus of Indicator 1.2 is the match between the highest level of academic standards—whether those be state, school, or district—and what is happening in individual classrooms and the school as a whole; and what the principal is doing to ensure that consistency exists in each classroom in the building. The existence of clear standards is a *given* in this indicator.

Scale of Descriptors

1. Although state, district, and school standards do exist, many activities act as deterrents or impediments to the achievement of those standards.

2. Although state, district, and school standards do exist, instructional practices in the school as a whole (majority of classrooms) do not appear to support the achievement of those standards.

3. Although instructional practices in the school as a whole appear to support the state, district, and school standards, there are many individual classrooms in which instructional activities and outcomes do not support the stated standards.

4. Instructional activities and student achievement in *most* classrooms and the school as a whole support the stated standards.

5. Instructional activities in *all* classrooms and the school as a whole support the state, district, and school academic standards.

Key Points in Descriptors

1. Level 1 implies that the principal is unwilling to address a lack of consistency in *many* classrooms (more than half) or in the school as a whole.

2. Level 2 implies that the principal expresses a verbal willingness to address lack of consistency but fails to follow through with actions to ensure consistency.

3. Level 3 implies that the principal is willing to address a lack of consistency between standards and instruction but is marginally effective in doing so.

4. Level 4 implies that the principal is willing to ensure consistency between standards and instruction and is usually very effective in doing so.

5. Level 5 implies that the principal is highly effective in ensuring that instructional activities and outcomes match standards.

Indicator 1.3

Uses multiple sources of data, both qualitative and quantitative, to evaluate progress and plan for continuous improvement.

Comment

The main focus of Indicator 1.3 is the use of multiple assessments and sources of data by the principal and, in turn, the teachers to evaluate and, if necessary, make subsequent adjustments in instruction or curriculum to ensure that state, district, and school academic standards are being achieved.

Scale of Descriptors

1. No internal schoolwide program of assessment or data collection exists.

2. Although a district or schoolwide standardized testing program exists, the results are merely disseminated to teachers and parents; the principal does not use the information to help teachers evaluate and improve the instructional program.

3. Standardized test information is the sole indicator used by the principal for program evaluation. Review of the information is not systematic or specific, and teachers rarely review the results beyond the initial report.

4. Results of multiple-assessment methods—such as ongoing curriculum-based assessments, criterion-referenced tests, standardized tests, and performance or portfolios assessments—are systematically used and reviewed by the principal along with teachers.

5. Results of multiple-assessment methods are systematically used to evaluate program objectives. A schoolwide data base that contains longitudinal assessment data for each student, classroom teacher, and grade level, as well as for the whole school, is regularly used by the principal and teachers to make instructional and program modifications for the school, individual classrooms or grade levels, and individual students, and to set meaningful and measurable goals for subsequent school improvement.

Key Points in Descriptors

1. No testing program

2. Standardized testing program with little use of results by either principal or teachers

3. Standardized testing program with some use of results by principal and little use of results by teachers

4. Well-rounded evaluation program with some use of results by both principal and teachers

5. Well-rounded evaluation program with effective use of results by both principal and teachers to modify and improve program

Indicator 1.4

Instructional leadership efforts on the part of the principal result in meaningful and measurable achievement gains.

Comment

The main focus of Indicator 1.4 is the achievement of measurable gains on a state assessment or local standardized test as a result of sustained instructional leadership and improvement efforts led by the principal.

Scale of Descriptors

1. The principal believes instructional leadership is no different from management and is unwilling to devote time and resources to improvement efforts toward raising achievement.

2. The principal pays lip service to the concept of instructional leadership, the development of goals, and school improvement activities but does nothing to provide resources or support to teachers.

3. The principal believes that instructional leadership is important, engages in some goal-setting and school improvement activities, but is unable to provide the support and resources that are necessary to bring about change.

4. The principal believes that instructional leadership is essential, engages in many meaningful goal-setting and school improvement activities, provides some support and resources which have resulted in some measurable achievement gains, but is unable to hold all teachers accountable and sustain improvement or realize meaningful gains for more than 1 year.

5.   The principal believes that instructional leadership is key, engages in meaningful goal-setting and school improvement activities, provides strong support and ample resources, and has led the staff to meaningful achievement gains that have been sustained over time.

Key Points in Descriptors

1. No instructional leadership toward school improvement.

2. Minimal effort given to instructional leadership, goal setting, and school improvement activities. No resources or support provided to teachers. No gains.

3. Some instructional leadership. Some goal-setting and school improvement activities. Limited resources and support. No gains.

4. Excellent instructional leadership. Meaningful goal-setting and school improvement activities. Provision of resources and support. Limited accountability for all teachers. Minimal gains.

5. Strong instructional leadership. Meaningful goals and school improvement activities. Provision of resources and support. Consistent accountability. Sustainable gains.