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# **Ways Elementary Administrators Support Literacy Education**

**Mary J. Lickteig  
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Susan Denman Ellis**

The work of an effective school principal is reflected in a variety of ways throughout the school. One area in which the principal's influence is most clearly evident is literacy instruction. Studies conducted over the years provide support for this idea. In an investigation of the role of the school principal in reading instruction, Cox (1978) concluded that the leadership of the principal is vitally important in the development of an effective reading program. Chance (1991) also recognized the importance of principals as instructional leaders as she investigated principals' own views of their involvement in the school reading program. In a summary statement, she maintained that the "principal's well planned, competent involvement in the instructional program" is essential for program improvement at any level (p. 33).

The value of principal involvement was also evident in a study by Miller, Ellsworth and Howell (1986). This research was an attempt to identify reading-related factors which would differentiate between schools in which student reading achievement was significantly higher than would be expected on the basis of the income level of the students'

families, and schools in which student reading achievement was significantly lower. A variety of factors were identified as having some influence, including some relating to principals' beliefs and behaviors. In the higher achieving schools, the principals showed more positive attitudes toward reading instruction than did principals in lower achieving schools. These principals also demonstrated more strongly held beliefs about how reading should be taught. It seems likely that these individuals acquired their "strongly held beliefs" through active involvement in their schools' reading programs.

There is much to be learned about how principals can be effectively involved from an examination of schools having exemplary reading programs. Manning and Manning (1981) asked the principals of such schools what they saw as their role in improving a school's reading program. A large majority of principals (more than 90 percent) said that principals should participate in inservice reading training along with their teachers, assist their teachers in diagnosing reading problems, and be familiar with different reading approaches and commercial reading materials. In response to a question about the components of an excellent reading program, almost all of the principals (99 percent) agreed that establishing close communication between the home and the school is essential as is an emphasis on recreational reading (94 percent). When these principals were asked to identify the factors having the greatest influence on their own professional growth, 90 percent named their own teaching experiences. They agreed that all principals should have first-hand experience in teaching reading.

Many other recommendations for principals who want to have an impact on their school's reading program are available. Doan and Noland (1988) suggested that principals themselves should initiate more involvement with the reading program and should schedule more time in the

classroom so that they will be aware of the program's strengths and needs. They maintain that principals also need to be aware of the importance of staff development and teacher inservice in literacy education. Finn and McKinney (1986) suggest that principals should encourage their teachers to read aloud daily and offer reading incentive programs that involve the school, the parents, and the community in working together to promote a common goal. Martinez, Vernon, Allen, and Teale (1991) maintain that the first step principals must take is to make teachers aware of the value of voluntary reading to children's development as readers. "Most teachers," they write, "do not place the same educational value on voluntary reading that they do on comprehension, word recognition, and study skills" (p. 45). A second recommendation from the study is for principals to provide classroom teachers with the financial resources they need to develop a good classroom library. Martinez et al. (1991) suggest that this could be accomplished by reallocating funds. "If seatwork costs were cut in half by replacing worksheet tasks with independent reading, the savings would enable schools to purchase annually as many as 30 titles per child" (p. 45). Truby (1987) has similar recommendations for principals. He suggests encouraging parents to read to their children by providing book lists, sending home monthly suggestions for reading activities, and sending letters to new parents explaining the importance of being their child's first teacher.

## **The study**

To provide a different perspective on the role of the school principal in promoting literacy, this study examines the reasons teachers give for nominating a particular administrator for a literacy award.

## **Source of the data**

Each year, the Metropolitan Reading Council of Omaha, Nebraska — local council of the International Reading

Association — has held a meeting to recognize administrators who have made significant contributions to literacy in area schools. Nomination forms are distributed through the council, and nominators are invited to provide a written statement to support the nomination. In the four years between 1990 and 1993, 100 administrators from 15 different school districts in the metropolitan Omaha area were recognized. Eighty-nine of the 100 administrators were elementary principals or assistant principals. All of the nominations of principals and assistant principals were written by teachers, except one submitted by a parent.

**Table 1**  
***Nature of Positions for Those Recognized  
as Outstanding Administrators from 1990 to 1993***

|                                   |    |
|-----------------------------------|----|
| <b>1990</b>                       |    |
| Principals                        | 19 |
| Assistant principal               | 1  |
| Elementary supervisor             | 1  |
| <b>1991</b>                       |    |
| Principals                        | 25 |
| Assistant principal               | 1  |
| Superintendent                    | 1  |
| Assistant superintendent          | 1  |
| Director of elementary curriculum | 1  |
| Chapter One project coordinator   | 1  |
| Assistant supervisor              | 1  |
| <b>1992</b>                       |    |
| Principals                        | 24 |
| Assistant principal               | 1  |
| Assistant superintendent          | 1  |
| Coordinator of reading            | 1  |
| Supervisor - Reading Services     | 1  |
| <b>1993</b>                       |    |
| Principals                        | 17 |
| Assistant principal               | 1  |
| Assistant supervisor - reading    | 1  |
| Director of Chapter One           | 1  |

The support statements which accompanied the nominations provide data to address the question of how school administrators can become involved in literacy programs. The statements also shed light on what is noticed and valued

by the teachers. The following analysis includes all of the teachers' supporting statements for the 89 elementary principals/assistant principals who were nominated.

## Analysis of data

Many of the ways acknowledged in existing studies of administrators' involvement in literacy programs are likewise included in data presented in the nominations of the 89 principals and assistant principals for the literacy award. For example, teachers frequently acknowledged the importance of attitude (Miller, Ellsworth and Howell, 1986) and active classroom involvement (Doan and Noland, 1988).

**Table 2**  
***Principals' Professional Development/Involvement***  
***Number of Times Mentioned in 89 Nominations***

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Member of local reading council                      | 11        |
| Serves on reading committee                          | 8         |
| Attends professional meetings                        | 4         |
| Member of International Reading Association          | 4         |
| Member of professional organizations (not specified) | 4         |
| Published articles on reading                        | 2         |
| Took courses in reading                              | 2         |
| Attends International Reading Association convention | 2         |
| Presents at professional meetings                    | 2         |
| Member-Executive Board, local reading council        | 1         |
| Attends library book exhibit                         | 1         |
| Reads professional books/journals                    | 18        |
| Shares children's books with staff                   | 2         |
| <b>Professional activities - Total</b>               | <b>37</b> |

Numerous ways for communication with the home are represented in the data here, as well as an emphasis on the importance of teacher inservice, both considered by Manning and Manning (1981). All of the specific methods discussed by Finn and McKinney (1986) and Truby (1987) were included in the documentation as well. The data provide much other information about ways administrators affect literacy programs. This information, presented in Tables 2 through 5, describes

the principals' involvement within the following categories: 1) the principals' own professional development and involvement; 2) the principals' support of the professional development of teachers; 3) the principals' support of instruction, and 4) special projects.

**Table 3**  
***Principals' Support of Professional Development of Teachers***  
***Number of Times Mentioned in 89 Nominations***

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Encourages staff to attend professional conferences/workshops | 29 |
| Promotes/shares professional reading                          | 12 |
| Purchases professional books for staff libraries              | 6  |
| Plans inservice   | 5  |
| Encourages membership in local reading council                | 5  |
| Buys adult fiction for staff library                          | 1  |
| Organized ABC Project (Adult Book Conferencing)               | 1  |

Table 2 presents the ways teachers acknowledged the principals' professional development. Professional activities were noted, such as committee work, professional memberships, writing for professional journals, presenting at professional conferences and attending meetings. Many teachers mentioned the professional reading of the principals. Said one nominator, "He shares his remarkable knowledge of recent research and contemporary trends via articles popped into mailboxes and spur-of-the-moment conversation. In addition, he invites teachers to publish their own advice and perspectives."

The ways principals support the professional development of teachers are presented in Table 3. Most frequently cited was encouraging attendance at professional meetings but important, too, were planning inservice and promoting the teachers' reading.

**Table 4**  
***Principals' Support of Instruction***  
***Number of Times Mentioned in 89 Nominations***

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Encourages whole language efforts  | 30 |
| Principal reads to children  | 30 |
| Encourages silent, self-selected reading in classrooms   | 29 |
| Provides money for reading materials, multiple copies of books, financial support for media center   | 24 |
| Encourages teachers to try new things  | 23 |
| Principal listens to children read   | 17 |
| Endorses reading incentive programs  | 17 |
| Provides methods of communication with parents   | 16 |
| (Parent reading workshops; weekly communication to parents; encourages reading activities; newsletters; publicizes public library activities; sends home applications for library cards; established Reading Club for families |    |
| Arranges visits of authors/storytellers/celebrity readers  | 13 |
| Encourages publication of student-authored books   | 9  |
| (Established publishing centers; principal announces over intercom when students publish a book for library; school-wide magazines; publish student writing; organized school-wide poetry-writing project)                     |    |
| <u>Other</u>   |    |
| Helps to obtain materials  | 2  |
| Talks to students about books  | 2  |
| Works directly with students   | 1  |
| Does demonstration lessons in classroom  | 1  |
| Encourages and praises early attempts at reading   | 1  |
| Takes a personal interest in any student having difficulty with reading..  |    |
| .makes sure they get appropriate help  | 1  |

From a study of Table 4, one can conclude that teachers value encouragement in their innovative efforts. Combining the specific mention of encouraging whole language efforts (mentioned 30 times) and the general idea of encouraging teachers to try new things (23 times), this represents the most commonly stated acknowledgement of principals' efforts. Said one teacher, "I feel very fortunate that I work with a principal who promotes an atmosphere which encourages me to take risks." Table 4 also reveals a wide variety of ways that principals become involved with children and parents. One nominator summarized a principal's efforts in this way, "Students are warmly greeted and ushered in when they arrive at his office, book or writing in hand. Teachers have even noticed children stopping this eager listener in the hall-



way to tell him about their literary discoveries and achievements."

### The ideal principal: A summary

The data provide ample evidence of the literacy related attitudes and activities that teachers value in their principals (see Appendix for an abundance of interesting and innovative ways for principals to promote literacy). Drawing together this information creates a profile of the ideal principal. The ideal principal is one who:

- places the development of literacy as a priority;
- inspires faculty and children to do their best;
- provides moral support;
- provides support through acquisition of books and materials and through inservice opportunities;
- offers leadership through special events celebrating literacy;
- becomes involved with children;
- becomes involved in professional reading organizations;
- is available;
- is a good listener;
- offers encouragement.

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INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION  
ANNUAL READING RESEARCH GRANTS AND AWARDS 1995

Reading educators, researchers, students, and others involved in reading education are invited to apply for the following grants and awards:

**ALBERT J. HARRIS AWARD** is a monetary award granted annually for an outstanding contribution to the prevention and/or assessment of reading and learning disabilities. Publications appearing in a professional journal or monograph between June 1, 1994 and June 1, 1995 are eligible. Deadline: October 15, 1995.

**ELVA KNIGHT RESEARCH GRANT** is a grants program offering up to \$5,000 for research in reading and literacy. Research is defined as that which addresses new and significant questions for the disciplines of literacy research and practice. Projects should be completed within 2 years. Studies may be carried out using any research method or approach so long as the focus of the project is on research in reading or literacy. Deadline: October 31, 1995.

**HELEN M. ROBINSON AWARD** is a \$500 award given to support doctoral students who are IRA members, at the early stages of dissertation research in the area of reading and literacy. Deadline: June 15, 1995.

**INSTITUTE FOR READING RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP** is an award of \$1,000 given to a researcher outside the United States or Canada who has evidenced exceptional promise in reading research and deserves encouragement to continue working in the field of reading. Applicants must have received their doctorate or its equivalent within the past five years. Deadline: November 18, 1995.

**NILA BANTON SMITH RESEARCH DISSEMINATION SUPPORT GRANT** is intended to assist any IRA member to spend from 2 to 10 months working on a research dissemination activity. The grant is funded from the Nila Banton Smith Endowment and support shall not exceed \$5,000. Deadline: October 31, 1995.

**OUTSTANDING DISSERTATION OF THE YEAR AWARD** is open to those who have completed dissertations in the field of reading between September 1, 1994 and August 31, 1995. This competition carries a \$1,000 award and is intended for doctoral students who have focused their research in the reading/literacy field or who have conducted related research having implications in reading. Deadline: October 1, 1995.

For specific guidelines on submitting a proposal write to: Gail Keating, Division of Research, International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139, USA or call 302-731-1600, ext. 226. You may also e-mail your request to 73314.1411@compuserve.com or fax to 302-731-1057. All applicants must be members of the International Reading Association.

## APPENDIX

**This is a listing of special projects principals used to promote literacy as mentioned in nominations:**

Gives book to every child in school (usually in conjunction with parent organization). Some are given new books on the first day of school — some on children's birthday;

Organized puppet-making project;

Annual storybook parade;

Formed Reading Buddies club with junior high students;

Annual read-ins — staff and students gather in gym for silent reading;

At weekly assemblies, she praises reading achievement;

Begins assemblies by reading to entire student body;

Held book fair;

Ensures that all special education classes have scheduled library times;

Had a sign made and posted outside of school to announce number of minutes read by students;

Involved with local TV station in effort for holiday book drive — collected 440 books;

Comes dressed as Johnny Appleseed and tells stories;

Buys books for Christmas presents for teachers;

Sponsors one child per grade level, pledging \$.10 per book read during three-month period;

Monthly reading themes are displayed in hall and front entrance;

Sponsors summer reading program;

Organized teacher support group for those implementing changes in reading/writing classrooms;

Student members of reading club receive T-shirt from parent organization;

On character dress-up day, came dressed as Ramona (Ramona Quimby from *Ramona* books by Beverly Cleary);

Offered classroom help in the form of paraprofessionals to aid teachers in providing more one-on-one assistance to readers experiencing difficulty;

Each morning reads story or poem over intercom;

Used a \$100.00 gift from parent to purchase five gift certificates to local children's bookstore as awards for sixth grade students;

For Children's Book Week, principal had all 600 students and staff members go outside and form the word READ while reading a book (picture was in two local newspapers);

Organizes Bedtime Story Night — children come dressed in pajamas with teddy bears to listen to principal read;

Takes over class to provide whole language planning time for teachers;

Supports and participates in Teacher Book Discussion group that meets monthly;

Decorates office with children's work; gets daily newspaper for every classroom;

Plans Family Reading Night; assists in classrooms with book and portfolio conferences;

Formed partnership with public library (every student taken by bus and toured public library where they learned about special summer reading programs and other services. Result: 75 new library cards);

Organizes Early Bird Read (students who bring a book are allowed early admittance to school — 30 minutes);

Students are personally greeted by principal each morning and he joins them in reading;

Instituted RUFF (Reading Unleashes Family Fun) — children read at home, keep a daily calendar and are acknowledged at end of month.