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THE PRINCIPAL HELPS IMPROVE READING INSTRUCTION

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Study after study indicates the principal sets the tone for the reading program in the school. His interest, his concern, his knowledge, his sensitivity, and his ability to involve faculty are key factors determining the success of a school's reading program. What then stands in the way of principals so that we continue to have many schools with declining reading achievement? What blocks effective administrative functioning so that teachers will say in response to a question about how supervisors have helped them to be better teachers of reading: "In twelve years I don't think a supervisor has really helped me very much and I haven't gone to them either." "I have had one reading observation in ten years." "They've given me teachers' manuals and marked my planbooks with such comments as: 'Where is your medial summary?' In other words they haven't helped."

In cases in which principals have failed to improve reading instruction it is because they have not fully accepted their role as school instructional leaders, because they don't see reading as a priority goal, because they don't understand what is involved in change, or because they view materials and systems rather than teaching as the key to the reading process.

Before a principal can improve reading instruction he needs to be clear about his job. Will most of his time be devoted to school-community relations? Will working with parents use all his energy? Will written reports capture his priority? Or does he see helping teachers to improve instruction as his major function? If he sees himself primarily as an instructional leader, he needs to relegate reports and liaison with community groups to someone else's area of responsibility or to second place on his priority list.

Frequently, principals operate as though change can be mandated, that a new reading program needs only the support of an initial faculty conference, of frequent classroom observations, of close examinations of planbooks to magically bring improved reading. They are unaware that change needs an atmosphere that stimulates, informs, and supports, that this atmosphere develops when a principal recommends articles from *The Reading Teacher*, *The Journal of Reading*, or *Reading Horizons* and they become subjects for lunchroom conversation and faculty conferences. It grows when teachers are encouraged to attend reading conferences and to visit other schools to see interesting programs. It spreads when there is a professional library which is not located in an unexplored corner of the principal's office forever remaining undiscovered, unread, and untouched, but rather is a library whose use is encouraged by the principal as he refers to its contents in bulletins, at faculty conferences, and in conversation. The atmosphere nurturing the reading program is fostered by weekly bulletins

to the staff containing ideas for teaching reading, pertinent quotations, and information regarding new book acquisitions.

An essential ingredient for a successful reading program is a principal who sees reading improvement as a major goal. He cannot be like the secondary school principal whose vision of the high school is teachers teaching history, mathematics, foreign languages, and who sees reading as something to be mastered in elementary school. The principal who views reading as a major school objective needs to learn as much as possible about reading so that he can work with teachers in classrooms. Often, principals are reluctant to expose themselves as teachers in the classroom because they have lost contact with the subject. If the principal can complement the teacher in a non-threatening, knowledgeable, and supportive manner, he will have done much to break down barriers between principal and staff, between principal and students. Teachers specify the demonstration lesson as a particularly useful activity for staff development. The principal with the knowledge and confidence to take the role of demonstration teacher will gain respect and loyalty from teachers and will strengthen his position as catalyst for staff growth.

Support for a school goal needs wide support. It needs teachers, parents, and community figures who recognize its importance. The effective principal is aware of the school social system. He knows the school power structure, the strengths and weaknesses of the staff, the feeling level—its moods and rhythms, the roots and foci of some of its problems, and the sources of energy. He has a picture of the totality of the school architecture and can build structures to work on improving instruction. A reading committee can be formed representing the staff to answer such questions as: What reading goals deserve emphasis in our school? How do these goals differ from grade to grade? How do these goals differ for different children? Communication can be abetted through the use of a reading newsletter for staff and community. Such a newsletter could include reading suggestions to parents, names of recommended books, teaching ideas, and announcements of meetings.

What is perhaps most crucial is that the principal recognize that the most important factor in the improvement of reading is the teacher. Administrators frequently have sought the panacea to reading problems in the newest system. It might be pressure from a school board, or newspapers focussing on the most current cure for reading difficulty, or a persuasive salesman, and suddenly the latest reading system descends upon the school with expensive material and voluble proponents. Distar, Alpha, Sullivan, or ITA flood classrooms with promises of an end to all reading problems. The cry is that "ALL CHILDREN WILL READ ON GRADE LEVEL," neglecting the statistical inconsistency involved. Not infrequently a visit two or three years subsequent to the introduction to the system finds it has been abandoned. Money spent on more and newer materials, or reading laboratories, on introducing systems will not in itself be effective. Since there is considerable evidence that it is the teacher and not the particular system or materials which makes the difference in children's reading

development, the principal's time and energy would be most effectively expended in helping teachers to grow.

The principal who sees his role as helping teachers to expand their professional skill knows what a complex, difficult, and subtle process is involved. He knows it is not the simple application of approaches to be found in a *How-to-Supervise* book. Rather it is the creative amalgam of sensitivity and skill which shows itself in the principal who knows when to praise and when to respond objectively, who knows when to observe and when not to observe, who knows the distinction between the secure teacher and the insecure teacher.

To give help where it is needed demands knowing the problems. It takes a principal who clearly accepts people. Teachers should be able to admit weaknesses and not at the same time feel vulnerable to attack. To help teachers grow calls for a school leader with a strong enough sense of self to encourage risk taking and to allow for possibility of failure. This is no easy task in an era in which accountability is defined as blamability, and ultimate responsibility hangs heavy over the heads of the schools. This kind of principal can support experimentation based on careful thinking and preparation. He knows that teachers need recognition for their achievements. He does this by giving teachers opportunities to share their expertise through faculty conference presentations and by teaching in-service courses. Class efforts are publicized through school and class newspapers, assembly presentations, performances for parents, and poetry festivals. At the same time he is never satisfied with the status quo. He sees the school as a constantly growing organism and without jarring the staff's sense of security he introduces ideas and possibilities. He does this as he hands a teacher an article to read, as he joins with teachers at professional conferences, as he works with teachers in classrooms, or as he takes courses with staff members.

The principal strengthens the reading program through thoughtful administration. In organizing classes he matches the child's personality with that of the teacher. For example, the hyperactive child might function best with a structured teacher. Similarly, he matches a child's learning style with the teacher's method. For example, the child with poorly developed oral language might best be placed with the teacher who will use a language-experience approach. In his use of reading specialists the principal again recognizes the need to match personalities. He uses his knowledge of people to have the specialist, at least initially, work with teachers most receptive to help. He knows that not all specialists are good for all teachers. As the reading resource teacher grows in ability to work with teachers then appropriate matching becomes less of a problem.

The principal supports teachers in other ways. He organizes a smoothly running system for the distribution of books and materials. He involves teachers in ordering and sees to it that reasonable requests are met. He obtains community understanding of the schools' reading program by involving parents in planning and implementing activities and by apprising them of problems as well as successes. With force, clarity, and optimism he

communicates the detailed efforts the school is making to improve reading instruction.

The school leader who recognizes his role as instructional leader, who gives major emphasis to reading as a school goal, who implements change with sensitivity and skill, and who develops an in-service program providing teachers with support, structure, and stimulation will find that he has developed a firm foundation for the school reading program.