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Increasing Communication Between Administrators and Reading Personnel

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What do administrators believe are the strong and weak points in their district's reading program? How do they evaluate the performance and capabilities of reading personnel? Do principals at the elementary and secondary levels differ in their expectations of the reading program?

These questions were raised recently in a survey of elementary and secondary administrators in New York State in the hope that this information would assist in developing needed training programs for administrators and teachers.

With tight budgets and reduced staffs putting additional pressures on administrators, reading personnel must assume a role of providing information to administrators about reading components, new materials, new techniques and needed programatic changes. Although administrators would like to function as the initiators and coordinators of curriculum change, in reality many are forced to operate chiefly as business managers and community relations specialists. Reading personnel might enhance both their own positions and the reading program, if they would serve as a primary source of information for their administrators.

This survey was completed to outline the needs, concerns and perceptions of administrators with regard to the reading program. Interviews were conducted in ten districts selected to sample districts of various sizes, locations and economic conditions.

Table 1 depicts how the administrators at the elementary and secondary level respond to seven questions about reading in their respective districts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Administrators Responding</th>
<th>High School</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the present program adequate?</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is a written description of program available?</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the program reviewed regularly?</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there a procedure for reviewing new information?</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the program learner centered?</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Is there a regular staff development program?  
14  86  57  43
Is there a need for comprehensive planning?  
100  0  100  0

Both groups of administrators agreed that a need existed for comprehensive planning but they differed on what such planning should generate. Those at the elementary level wanted various program components coordinated into one program. At the secondary level, they preferred that the continuity of the reading program from elementary to secondary should be delineated and emphasized. The majority of administrators acknowledged that some written statement of the goals, methods and skills of the reading program existed and that provisions were not made for a regular, coordinated staff development program. Both groups were equally divided on whether the district had a policy for disseminating new reading information. Those who answered yes to this question said it was the responsibility of the reading coordinator.

The data indicated that the two groups differed substantially on four responses: the adequacy of the program; the existence of a regular review of the program; the presence of a learner centered approach; and a systematic program for staff development. In some instances, administrators from the same district responded differently to questions about district policies which indicates that certain district policies are not clearly defined.

Three topics were discussed during the interview which focused on the strengths and weaknesses of reading teachers and classroom teachers as perceived by principals in the areas of classroom techniques, personal characteristics and peer group relations (Figure 1). Generally, elementary principals tended to question the adequacy of pre-service training: first, to teach basic skills; second, to provide extended practice teaching experience; and third, to encourage individualization of the instructional programs. On the other hand, secondary administrators expressed their feelings of inadequacy when asked to evaluate reading programs but did recognize the need for more creative approaches to comprehension instruction. They also questioned the value of reading class separated from content instruction.

In their evaluations, secondary principals stressed the motivational, creative aspects of the reading teachers' job when working with either students or content area teachers. The elementary administrators tended to emphasize a knowledge about the total language process as one positive teacher quality and identified the inability to both diagnose and prescribe instruction as areas in need of improvement. Both groups of administrators recognized that reading specialists were hampered by a lack of time and authority when called upon to serve as a resource person or to implement staff training programs.

The results of this survey indicated that in-service workshops should focus on the separate needs of administrators and teachers at the secondary and elementary levels. It also provides a listing of administrator's needs for additional information.
The topics most frequently identified by secondary administrators as major concerns or needs are:

- nature of the reading process,
- methods and materials for content area reading;
- comprehension instruction;
- use of reading specialists as resource people; and
- motivating change with content teachers.

On the other hand, elementary personnel listed different concerns and interests such as:

- designing staff training sessions for diagnosing, prescribing and comprehension instruction
- evaluating material and programs
- effective methods of using staff for in-service.

Finally, reading specialists might write a proposal to generate a regular program review and a comprehensive reading plan. Both areas were identified by administrators as needed. As reading teachers assume a more active role in planning district goals and policies, effective reading programs should continue their development even in this age of restricted educational spending.

Figure 1
Administrators' Perceptions of Reading Personnel
Secondary Principals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Classroom techniques</td>
<td>-- difficulty teaching basic decoding skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-- ability to locate appropriate material</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ability to motivate students personally</td>
<td>-- inability to creatively design programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Personal characteristics</td>
<td>-- lack of self-discipline for records and planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-- willing to devote time and effort to assignments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-- anxious to continue professional improvement</td>
<td>-- lack of imagination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Peer group relations</td>
<td>-- lack of authority to act as resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recognized as having necessary training</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-- willing to share materials and ideas</td>
<td>-- lack of confidence in working with peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Elementary Principals

1. Classroom techniques
   - basic knowledge of reading process
   - instructional skills
   - knowledge of materials
   - lack of expertise to prescribe remediation
   - lack of achievement when working on comprehension
   - lack of skills in diagnosing

2. Personal characteristics
   - ability to achieve in small groups
   - demonstration of interest and motivation for work
   - tries to accomplish too much
   - lack of positive personality and "housekeeping" skills

3. Peer group relations
   - ability to motivate staff development
   - willingness to share material and methods
   - lack of time to work with staff
   - lack of service to offer staff