

Setting standards for our school leaders

by Bambi Betts

The strong connection between leadership and student achievement has by now been firmly established. In recent years a host of research has identified the common behaviors of principals in schools where student achievement is maximized (Cotton, *Principals and Student Achievement: What the Research Says*; *School Leader Development for School Improvement*, editors Blum and Butler).

The sidestepping of accountability and the lack of clarity and agreement on what student achievement looks like, have, unfortunately, kept many of us in international schools from rigorously applying these findings. But nonetheless they are there. And perhaps it is time we begin to set some clear standards for ourselves as principals of international schools which address them.

International school curricula are beginning to hold students accountable to standards. International schools as learning organizations are held to standards by accrediting agencies and regular audits of their mission statements. Evaluation of teachers is increasingly conducted using a set of standards and expectations. So what about our school leadership?

The PTC is working on developing just such a set of standards for international school principals. These standards will be based on the strong findings regarding the relationship between certain critical behaviors and student achievement. Let me reiterate: these are Not a set of minimum standards, rather a concise set of behaviors rooted in the premise that the principalship is an essential catalyst for student learning. They do not, therefore, include the traditional range of “skills,” all of which, clearly, are necessary, but are assumed. Neither are they a “job description.” They DO address behaviors which have been closely linked with student achievement.

These findings indicate that effective principals:

- *Establish a clear focus on student learning by setting clear learning goals*

This is axiomatic. Without a clear idea of what learning looks like in a very specific form, identify achievement will be random, and vaguely defined.

- *Set a clear, concrete model of outstanding teaching, based in individualizing learning and the quality of student engagement.*

Good teaching is good teaching; we do know what it looks like and an effective principal will ensure all teachers have access to the concrete model.

- *Establish systematic, contextually connected assessments of student learning.*

The schools in which principals insist on common assessments of specific learning standards, coupled with using the data they generate diagnostically are schools where more students achieve.

- *Monitor student progress frequently and systematically through the use of data of all kinds, openly and in a variety of shared processes to identify the most effective instructional strategies.*

It will be no surprise to regular readers of this column to hear, once gain, that PAYING ATTENTION TO LEARNING through a few simple monitoring processes is often the single biggest reasons why principals fail to impact student learning.

- *Individualize teacher supervision and focus it wholly on the improvement of instruction and assessment practices based in student learning results*

Our “supervision” of teachers clearly needs to shift away from simply what teachers do to “what teachers get kids to do.” An effective supervision process will focus almost completely on courageously diagnosing the link between what students are learning and what teachers are doing.

- *Ensure that all meeting time is focused on effective teaching and learning practices.*

The one and only resource we cannot create is time. Courageous, effective principals actually CEASE traditional meeting forums and genuinely seek ways to use all collaborative time to share model lessons, discuss student work and student learning data, and get to the “guts” of what we can do better in the classroom.

- *Provide multiple, job-embedded professional growth opportunities entirely driven by clear student learning targets.*

Not surprisingly, adult learning is pretty much like student learning. The more contextual, the better. As we begin to better understand this process, our school day will be transformed into what we now can only intellectually refer to as a learning organization.

It will be clear to even the most casual of readers that these behaviors are closely linked, and that each one begs the question of the next. Not a surprise –it’s about creating a system where the primary dialogue is about student learning and in which principal can actually impact student achievement.