

Focus on Principal's Real Job

by Bambi Betts

Effective schools have at least one thing in common: a principal who is passionately committed to student achievement. But on Monday morning, when you are standing in the door of your office and the job begins to happen TO you, that passion seems doomed to compete with just about everything.

So how do principals stay focused on the " real" job - that of gate-keeping student learning and relentlessly promoting it? How can principals make the proactive aspects of their work the centerpiece of each day?

A pre-requisite: Rigorous, clear learning standards

To do this most essential job, a principal needs to know what learning looks like. In international schools this has proven to be perhaps the biggest obstacles to principals knowledge of the progress of student learning. What does 'good' writing look like by grade three? What should an oral presentation which meets the 'standard' sound like by grade ten? While it has become popular to call these 'standards' and to write them down into a curriculum, there is at least one other way to set up these benchmarks: collate samples of work products, both from students as well as the 'real' world, which represent the standards your school expects students to achieve at various levels.

The reality is, without some knowledge of what we expect learning to look like, further steps toward ensuring it occurs are very likely to be ineffective. If you don't know where you are going, how will you know when you've arrived?

Some practical Tools

Assuming that there is some understanding of what learning looks like, what are some practical, realistic, and effective tools?

1. Develop an assessment map
2. Align assessment tools with learning standards
3. Analyze the results of assessments
4. Look at student work regularly

Develop an Assessment Map

Decisions about learning require reliable data. What learning data will you need on a regular basis? This is your assessment map. It lays out the tools which will be used to collect evidence of student learning: internal tools, both long and short term, and external

tools. There are a variety of ways to lay out your map. Whatever way this is done, the map should

a) Provide data on what the school considers to be the most essential learning standards. In many schools, principals will collect regular data on writing, problem solving, reading, research skills, level of interest, etc.

b) Define what tools will be used as evidence for various standards. For example, an internal writing prompt twice a year, an external writing assessment, and six selected classroom-based writing assessments may form the basis of evidence for the writing standard.

Align assessment tools with learning standards

Most of your data will be drawn from assessments designed by teachers. Misalignment of these assessments and learning standards is a common problem. An assessment may be rich, contextual and meaningful, but fail to assess for the learning a teacher set out to achieve. An effective principal will spend a chunk of time each month on reviewing teacher-constructed assessment tools with individual or teams of teachers. Getting this alignment right makes the results from these assessments a much more valid means of evaluating overall student achievement.

Analyze Results

Once the school is working with valid assessment tools, the principal will spend time on analyzing the results of these assessments. This is the real heart of gate-keeping student achievement. Imagine that each month you have a set of real data, which reflects student progress toward essential learning standards. Together with teachers, you will be able to begin to draw some conclusions about many things: do we need to relook at our instructional strategies? Are we setting too low or too high a standard? Why is it that such a high percentage of students do poorly on this assessment? As this skill of analysis improves, increasingly effective strategies for improving student learning emerge.

Examine Student Work

While data provides the framework for a systematic analysis, a principal will also spend time reviewing student work products and performance. Actual work fleshes out the picture of what learning is actually taking place. It also takes us full circle back to understanding what curricular standards actually look like. There are several models, from simple to complex, describing how to go about looking at student work. The key for a school with curricular standards is to look for evidence of those standards. And try to include not just student WORK, but students WORKING as well. Observing students working provides essential data for a broad array of skill standards.

If you feel forced to select a single strategy, as you ease your way into this more proactive role, try looking at student work regularly. There is an abundance of it in our schools and it is, clearly, the richest source of information about student learning.

(Note: The Principals' Training Center offers a week long course on Assessment, as well as one and two day seminars, which emphasize models of assessment maps and strategies.)