

# The Invisible Role of the Central Office

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Although the central office's role often goes unnoticed, its contributions to instructional leadership show up everywhere.

**T**eachers as leaders. The principal as instructional leader. The superintendent as the first instructional leader. But what about the central office staff?

How many articles and headlines have you read about central office leaders? I suspect you've read very few. You might have noticed some passing acknowledgments. For example, in a recent article on leadership in education, Bolman and Deal noted that "the center mounted a series of studies of superintendents, principals, teachers, and *other school leaders*" (2002, p. 21, italics added). Are central office staff—the curriculum developers, the best practices guides, the assistant superintendents—no more than "other school leaders"?

As the assistant superintendent for instruction in a 19,000-student school system in Arlington, Virginia, I am proud to serve as a central office instructional leader. Despite the lack of attention to their role, the contributions of central office staff members are crucial to the strength of a school system. In this era of standards, high-stakes testing, and increasing expectations of school staff, the role that the central office plays takes on even more importance. What is the leadership role of the central office staff, and why is it invisible?

## FOCUSING ON PRIORITIES

Our state, like so many others, instituted criterion-referenced tests several years ago. These assessments qualify as high-stakes tests, determining the accreditation of each school and the graduation of each student. As anticipated, school staffs reacted to these pressures with a variety of strategies, including more practice worksheets, multiple-choice assessments, direct instruction, and test-taking skills instruction. Still, in their hearts and minds, teachers knew what good teaching and real learning were.

In the central office, we took on the task of articulating the goal of *teaching for understanding*. We used a state grant for addressing Virginia's Standards of Learning (the objectives tested by the criterion-referenced tests) to fund the Lead Teacher Initiative. We joined principals in identifying five lead teachers (one instructional and four core content) in each of our 31 schools. These classroom teachers receive a stipend in return for helping their schools develop the best ways to teach for understanding.

Through an arrangement with George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, the instructional lead teachers first took and then taught a graduate course that emphasized designing instruction for students' understanding (Danielson, 1996; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). For final class projects, teachers designed teaching units following the rigorous standards of Wiggins and McTighe (1998). These lead teachers now help other teachers set clear goals for what they want students to learn, how they will measure that learning, and how students will demonstrate deep understanding. Through this approach, we believe that our district's students will perform well on any standardized assessment because they will understand the content.

## COMMUNICATING THE MESSAGE

The lead teacher course generated such a following that principals requested a study group on the course's textbook, and some principals even enrolled in the course. Teachers and administrators heard about teaching for understanding from the lead teachers, from those who took the course, from the central office instructional staff, and from the superintendent. An instructional presentation during a school board meeting expanded the audience. Lead teachers spread the word through school newsletters and staff meetings.

Fortunately, our district enjoys a sophisticated parent community and teaching staff. Both groups appreciate the commitment to teaching for understanding. Still, the pressures of the statewide testing and its impact on accreditation and graduation can lead school staffs away from this commitment. Through the leadership of the central office staff and teacher leaders, the message continues to overcome the countervailing pressures.

## FOSTERING LEADERSHIP

The central office fosters leadership among teachers. The Lead Teacher Initiative identifies classroom teachers interested in a leadership role, provides them with enhanced opportunities to learn and grow, recognizes their contributions through stipends and public acknowledgment, and capitalizes on their skills and talents for the benefit of students. Teacher leaders from throughout the district meet to provide input and feedback on the instructional program.

The central office identifies professional conferences and encourages teacher leaders to attend and apply as presenters. It organizes teacher research groups, paying stipends to the teacher leaders and providing them with training so that they, in turn, can work with groups in their schools on action research. Teacher mentors in each school building receive stipends and staff development from the central office, and central office staff members work with teachers seeking National Board certification, outlining the path and sustaining the incredible effort needed to reach this goal.

## ORIENTING NEW TEACHERS

Central office staff members lead the orientation of newly hired teachers. The purpose of our four-day program is to help new teachers understand the district's shared values and let them know how we can support them professionally.

*Hold high expectations for all students.* We start the orientation with a skit to emphasize the importance of this message to our district, where close to 40 percent of students qualify for federal lunch subsidies and more than 30 percent speak a language other than English as their native language and where we are deeply committed to closing all achievement gaps.

*Teach the district's curriculum.* The newly hired teachers receive their curriculum guides and participate in activities that engage them in reviewing their content. Some teachers come from school systems where the textbook represents the curriculum, but our central office, in collaboration with classroom teachers, has developed a scope and sequence of curriculums based on national, state, and local standards. When teachers honor the curriculums agreed to by their peers, students can progress and teachers can avoid duplicating units of study.

*Use best practices.* Using Danielson's model (1996) and our own experience, we review instructional practices that will set the standards for teacher observations, teacher evaluations, and self-assessment. The teachers review these best practices and, in groups, present them to one another in different ways to demonstrate an understanding of multiple intelligences.

*Use assessment to inform instruction.* We discuss using information from all kinds of assessments—from checking homework to examining standardized test results—to improve instruction. We share a sample of test results, discuss their potential for interpretation, and describe the assessments that students will encounter in our schools, stressing the importance of preparing students to succeed on any significant assessment that they will experience.

*Recognize and value diversity.* An activity on given names and their meanings for different cultures and communities kicks off this discussion. The students in our district speak more than 70 languages, and we have a significant Hispanic and African American student enrollment. Appreciating the diversity of our classrooms and how this diversity contributes to the richness of our school community is an important shared value.

*You are not alone!* A short video shows a new teacher, whose arms are piled high with curriculum guides and handbooks, entering an empty classroom with blank walls, and then follows her as she learns about the many support resources available to teachers, from in-school technology coordinators to laminating services to teacher mentors. With high expectations for all teachers and stu-

dents, we want to support their important work as much as possible.

The teachers join their school staffs the following week, aware of the district's values and better prepared for the challenge of their first year in the school system.

## PROVIDING SERVICE AND EXPERTISE

The demands on school staff members increase every day. The central office provides service and expertise to the schools so that they can fulfill their missions without distraction. For example, central office staff members

- conduct the textbook adoption process,
- order new textbooks,
- evaluate supplementary materials,
- develop programs of studies,
- conduct formal observations of teachers,
- assist teachers having difficulties,
- design and conduct staff development,
- facilitate teacher attendance at professional conferences,
- organize countywide activities, such as art exhibits and science fairs,
- organize informational meetings for parents,
- meet with citizen committees on each instruction area,
- analyze achievement data,
- apply for and manage grant-funded projects, and
- complete required state and federal reports.

These tasks, essential to the instruction program, require much time and effort. School staff members provide input and feedback, but knowing that the central office staff is meeting the many other potential demands on their energies allows them to devote most of their time and effort to the daily challenge of instructing students effectively. In this way, central office and school staff members divide the often overwhelming work of the school system to more efficiently serve the students and their families.

The expertise of central office staff members in specific curriculum areas also enables them to serve as consultants and to develop curriculums and instruction strategies that encompass national standards and research-based practices. For example, each school cannot devote the time to learn about and analyze the latest research on second language acquisition and then design instruction to incorporate these concepts. Instead, the central office works with national authorities in English language learning and develops useful models for teaching speakers of other languages. Central office leaders also share their expertise

almost daily in their staff development offerings and small-group work with teachers.

This expertise applies also to teacher hiring, a function of growing importance. Principals continue to interview and personally select their teachers, but they want the content-area experts in the central office to screen the candidates' level of subject proficiency.

## ENSURING CONSISTENCY

How does a school system set goals and work toward them? How does a school system avoid a balkanization of its neighborhoods and schools? How can families trust that their children will receive a high-quality instruction program at any of the schools in a school district?

Through the central textbook adoption process, the development of curriculums, the publication of programs of studies, the development of services to special populations, classroom observations and feedback, staff development activities, and community forums, we establish ways to achieve the district's goals and consistency of the instruction program. Certainly, school staff members vary the instruction program to better meet the needs of their students and to take advantage of their own strengths and interests. But whenever I attend evening meetings to address families who are considering choices within our school system, I can state confidently that our schools share common goals, curriculums, instructional texts, instructional practices, assessments, teacher training, programs for special populations, resource staff, and much more. The central office leaders maintain this high quality and consistency.

## THE INVISIBLE SKELETON

Central office staff members do serve behind the scenes. If they perform their jobs well, their efforts often go unnoticed or at least without credit. I am married to a middle school principal. I sometimes overhear him talking at a party with a group marveling at such a demanding and interesting vocation. As he describes his school's innovative curriculum, the practices of his school's teachers, the materials the teachers use, and the changes his school has made to accommodate the changing population (like the interpreter for the Somali students), I restrain my immediate response. I know that the staff in my department developed the curriculum, identified and taught the best practices, selected the materials, and even found the interpreter. I know how the central office has fostered teacher leadership in the school. I also know that many other

principals are speaking possessively of the same components but out of my earshot.

And I know that if the school staff members take credit for these elements of the instructional program, then they feel ownership and pride in them. Their enthusiasm indicates that the central office staff members have succeeded in their mission of strengthening the instructional program, encouraging teacher leaders, and supporting student achievement and success.

In these ways, central office leaders are effective, in part, precisely because they are invisible, much as the skeleton in the body is invisible. Vitally important, central office

staff members provide the support and consistency necessary for a high-quality instructional program.

## REFERENCES

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