

Allocation of School Leaders' Time

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Abstract

This study investigated how middle and senior high school leaders spend their time. Seventeen individuals were shadowed for five days during late fall, 2006; trained data collectors coded their behaviors every five minutes using a standard protocol. On average, school leaders spent 10.27 hours per day at work. They spent about 1.49 hours on instruction, 6.54 hours on management, 0.28 hours on personal, and 1.96 hours either before or after school. No significant differences were found between how middle and senior high school leaders spent their time or the split between management and instruction by day of week. Assistant principals spent approximately 40 min. more per day on management than did principals. The results are discussed in terms of the challenges facing school leaders as they try to spend more time on instruction.

Introduction

Until recently, most of the policy attention and financial resources for increasing student achievement have focused on classroom teachers and their practices, including establishing standards, core curriculum, and pacing charts; improving teacher quality and instructional practices through both pre- and in-service requirements; and monitoring student performance through state assessments and district/school benchmark tests (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001; Marzano, 2003). More recently policymakers and others have moved their focus outside the classroom to the potential of school leaders in increasing student achievement.

Over the past 30 years, consensus has developed that school leaders have a measurable impact on student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005; Hoachlander, Alt, & Beltranena, 2001). In fact, many researchers agree that leadership is second only to classroom instruction in influencing student achievement (Leithwood, et al., 2004; Marzano, et al., 2005). Although specific findings and frameworks vary, researchers agree that the crucial leadership behavior is deep involvement in teaching and learning in the school (Elmore, 2000; Wanzare & Da Costa, 2001).

The relationship between instructional leadership and student learning has gained additional urgency in the current age of accountability. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and other federal and state mandates have increased pressure on schools to raise student achievement (Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005; Wong & Sunderman, 2007). As schools continue to pursue improvement with teachers and classrooms, they also seek to use the potential of school leaders to drive achievement. Now more than ever, it is vital to leverage the leadership behaviors most likely to pay off in student achievement (Elmore, 2000; Sunderman, et al., 2005; Wong & Sunderman, 2007).

At the same time, focusing school leaders' attention on teaching and learning is very difficult to do. School leaders face multiple, conflicting demands on their time and attention. While many responsibilities have been added to their plate, few or none have been removed (Portin, Alejano, Knapp, & Marzolf, 2006; Copland, 2001; Portin, Shen, & Williams, 1998). Furthermore, researchers have argued that instructional leadership is like exercise—much more often preached than practiced. There have been insufficient changes in policy, school structure, leader preparation, training and evaluation, and community expectations to truly allow instructional leadership behaviors to take root (Elmore, 2000; Hallinger, 1992).

Researchers over the past three decades have examined the day-to-day reality of school leaders' jobs and how they use their time. These studies include either direct observation (Martin & Willower, 1981; Blendinger & Snipes, 1996; Blendinger, Ariratina, & Jones, 2000) or surveys and self-reports (Stronge, 1988). They demonstrate a strong pattern of management tasks, such as student discipline or building management, displacing instructional priorities. School leaders' priorities or intentions often differ significantly from their realities (Whitaker & Turner, 2000; Chan & Pool, 2002).

This study was conducted to determine how middle school and high school principals and assistant principals currently spend their time. The findings have been shared with these

audiences as part of discussions about redirecting the activities of school leaders to improve student performance and professional development and policies that might be needed to support these changes in practice. The study and subsequent discussions are part of leadership work supported by the Wallace Foundation in the state.

Data Sources and Methods

Data Sources

The sample consisted of 10 principals and 17 assistant principals assigned to five middle schools, four high schools, and one charter school from six districts and a charter school in a small mid-Atlantic state. The sample was drawn to approximate districts and schools across the state. All of the superintendents agreed to have their schools participate when they were approached by one of the researchers.

Methods

Sixteen retired school administrators were asked to serve as data collectors. Each of them participated in a two-day training program to learn how to record data using a time management protocol developed for use in another state (Shellinger, 2006). The training program provided them with background information on administrators' time management, the coding system, and opportunities to practice using the coding system. At the conclusion of the training, a formal reliability check was completed. Only one individual did not meet the cut-off of 95 percent agreement; this individual was excused and did not participate in the data collection.

The coding system required data collectors, or shadowers, to record every five minutes what a particular school leader was doing. Shadowers were given a stop watch and coding sheets attached to a clipboard for recording the school leader's activities. Three codes were entered each five minutes. The first code was whether the activity was focused on instruction, management, or personal. Instruction dealt broadly with teaching and learning issues while management involved administrative, organizational, or discipline issues. Personal was coded when the school leader took a bathroom break, ate lunch, or attended to personal matters. The second code provided more detailed information about the instructional or management activities. There were 14 sub-activities for instruction and 11 for management (see Table 1 below). Eight of the instruction and management sub-categories overlapped, indicating that a particular activity could have either an instructional or management focus. For example, student supervision could be coded as instruction or management depending on the specific activity. The third code featured five sub-categories and focused on mode of activity (i.e., telephone, computer, interaction-individual, interaction-group, and read/write/think). Completed coding sheets and logs were forwarded to a central location for data entry and analysis.

Table 1
Instruction and Management Sub-Activities

Instruction	Management
Student supervision	Student supervision
Work with student(s)	Student discipline
Employee supervision	Employee supervision
Office work/preparation	Employee discipline
Observation/walk through	Office work/preparation
Teacher feedback	Building management
Parents/guardians	Parents/guardians
Site-based decision making committees, groups, and meetings	Site-based decision making committees, groups, and meetings
District meetings, supervisors, and others	District meetings, supervisors, and others
External officials, other	External officials, others
Teaching/ modeling	Celebration
Professional development	
Planning, curriculum, and assessment	
Celebration	

Each school leader was shadowed for five days in late October and early November of 2006. In most cases, the shadowing occurred on consecutive days during a single week, starting on Monday and ending on Friday. Because of illness or scheduled absences, some shadowing sessions ran into a second week. In those cases, we tried to collect the missing day on the same day of the week during the following week. The shadowers contacted their particular school leaders ahead of time to set a start time and shadowed him/her until the school leader left the building at the end of the day. The shadowers were instructed to not interact with the school leader or others while they were shadowing, to not wear bright clothing, and to keep a low profile. The school leader was told that the shadower would follow him/her for the entire week, recording what he/she was doing, and that little interaction should occur between them. The school leader was told he/she could excuse the shadower if confidential issues arose. School leaders were also asked to keep a log of their activities before the start and end of their day while the shadower was not with them.

Results

On average, school leaders in this study spent 10.27 hours per day at work (see Table 2 below). School leaders spent about 1.49 hours on instruction (14.5 percent), 6.54 hours on management (63.7 percent), 0.28 hours on personal (2.7 percent), and 1.96 hours either before or after school, usually at home (19.1 percent). School leader logs were not sufficiently specific to reliably determine the focus of their work at home, though more entries point to management than to instruction. Although most of the school leaders' time allocations clustered near the reported means, time spent on instruction ranged from less than 0.5 hour to almost 3.5 hours and on management from less than 4 hours to almost 9 hours.

Table 2
Allocation of School Leaders' Time

Allocation of Time	Hours	Percent
Instruction	1.49	14.5
Management	6.54	63.7
Personal	0.28	2.7
After Hours	1.96	19.1
Total	10.27	100.0

In terms of instruction, school leaders spent the most time on observation/walk throughs (3.9 percent); site-based decision making committees, groups, and meetings (1.9 percent); employee supervision (1.8 percent); planning, curriculum, and assessment (1.3 percent); office work/preparation (1.2 percent); and teacher feedback (1.2 percent). All of the remaining categories were less than 1 percent. A substantial difference was found between time spent on observations and walk throughs and time spent on teacher feedback, suggesting that school leaders spent more time on assessing teacher practice than providing teacher feedback. Examination of the sub-categories for management revealed that the highest percentage of time was spent on student supervision (15.2 percent) and office prep (15.2 percent), followed by employee supervision (9.7 percent) and student discipline (7.3 percent). All of the remaining management sub-categories were less than 5 percent.

Additional analyses were conducted to determine if differences existed between principals and assistant principals; middle school and high school leaders; and days of the week. These analyses are reported in Tables 3, 4, and 5 below.

Table 3
Analyses of School Leaders' Time by School Level

Time Allocation	Middle	High School	t	p
Management	6.67	6.60	2.36	.814
Instruction	1.43	1.53	-5.15	.608
Personal	0.22	0.35	-2.699	.008

Table 4
Analysis of School Leaders' Time by Role

Time Allocation	Principal	Assistant Principal	t	p
Management	6.15	6.80	-2.148	.034
Instruction	1.56	1.44	.668	.505
Personal	0.32	0.23	-1.682	.095

Table 5
Analysis of School Leaders' Time by Day of Week

Time Allocation	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	F	p
Management	6.66	6.41	6.78	7.01	5.92	1.516	.202
Instruction	1.55	1.73	1.48	1.20	1.45	.861	.489
Personal	0.22	0.23	0.20	0.35	0.44	4.251	.003

Across all of these comparisons, only three were found to be significant. There were no significant differences between how middle and high school leaders spent their time between instruction and management. Assistant principals spent on the average 39 more minutes per day on management duties than principals. Given the typical role of disciplinarian in middle and high schools played by assistant principals, this finding is not surprising.

The other two significant differences revolved around personal time. Middle and high school leaders differed significantly in terms of personal time with high school leaders spending about 8 more minutes than middle school leaders on personal time. In addition, personal time increased across school leaders as the week wore on, from about 12-13 minutes at the beginning of the week to about 26 minutes by the end of the week. These differences in time for personal tasks (including bathroom breaks, lunch) seems inconsequential given the comparatively small percentage of time devoted to personal tasks overall.

Educational Importance of Study

This study revealed that middle and high school principals devote about one-fifth of their time to instruction. Although there are no established norms for how much time should be devoted to instruction versus management, almost everyone who has reviewed these results has been disappointed with the split, including the school leaders who were shadowed, the seasoned veterans who collected the data, and other school leaders across the state.

Discussions that followed the presentation of results have revealed many school leaders' frustrations about maintaining control of their days. They frequently talk about their schedules going awry as the day progresses and their need to quickly respond to unfolding teacher and student management concerns. Others talked about the demands from district offices, the state department of education, and parents as interfering with their ability to focus more on instruction.

Nevertheless, almost all agreed that more time should be devoted to instruction. The solutions for increasing time on instruction were not readily apparent to our audiences. Some talked about decreasing the time middle and high school leaders spend on morning and afternoon bus duty, cafeteria duty, and hall duty during class transitions as a way to pick up additional time. Others lamented the paperwork demands that keep them in their offices and wondered if efficiencies

could be found here. Others promoted more role differentiation when multiple principals and assistant principals are assigned to a single school. And still others supported changing the culture of the middle and high schools so that leadership was more distributed across administration and teachers (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2005; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001).

Others noted that middle and high school leaders are more often hired and rewarded for strong management skills, unlike elementary school principals who come from much stronger instructional backgrounds. This suggests that middle school and high school leaders may prefer management over instructional activities because they are more comfortable in the former. They may also require additional training in their preparation programs and professional development afterwards to build their knowledge about curriculum, instruction, and assessment as well as how to work with teachers on instruction.

In conclusion, this study mirrored earlier findings that school leaders devote more of their day to management than to instruction. In addition, the findings reinforce current thinking that shifting school leaders' attention to instruction will not be easy to accomplish. However, presentations of the findings to multiple audiences in the state reinforced the need to change school leaders' focus to teaching and learning as part of schools' efforts to improve student achievement.

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