Increased federal and state expectations, angry parents, discipline issues, bus problems, lockdown drills, and daily challenges are just some of the issues principals face on a daily basis. Clearly, their responsibilities have multiplied since many generations ago when they served as the “principal” teacher.

But what about the responsibility of instructional leadership? We know that principal leadership is second only to teaching quality when it comes to improving student achievement. Yet the most recent research shows that principals spend an average of 8 to 17 percent of their time (Jerald, 2012), or three to five hours per week (Supovitz & May, 2011), in instructional leadership activities. This same research suggests that some of the work principals are spending in instructional leadership lacks the focus needed to improve instruction. Much of the challenge lies in figuring out why this occurs and how we can address it.

Over the past few years, through the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership has been working with 15 school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs)
on a knowledge-development project aimed at supporting principals as instructional leaders.

We closely examined these districts and CMOs, which are arguably some of the best in terms of performance and reputation. In the project’s early work, we found that not one of the school districts actually had a consensus around which five to 10 high-impact practices principals should be enacting every day to improve the quality of teaching.

These districts all had some kind of principal evaluation. They were all using a principal standard, mostly tied to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards. That said, there was no consensus on the high-impact instructional leadership practices of principals.

This lack of consensus led us to develop what we call The 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership™ framework (2012). The framework is not the sum of everything that a principal needs to do to be successful; it is a description of the most salient practices of instructional leadership that improve teaching and learning.

Based upon our review of the research and what we’re learning from our work in the field, we identified 12 high-impact practices that we organized within four dimensions:
- Vision, mission, and culture-building
- Improvement of instructional practice
- Allocation of resources
- Management of people and processes

Let’s take a closer look at the dimensions and offer some guiding questions that school leaders can use to improve their practice of instructional leadership.

**Vision, Mission, and Culture-Building**

In *Shaping School Culture*, Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson (2010) acknowledge that there is no universally accepted definition of culture; they also share a widely cited, simple definition of culture: “The way we do things around here.” For us, school culture is foundational to instructional leadership. In this first dimension in the framework, school leaders create a reflective, equity-driven, achievement-based culture of learning focused upon academic success for every student.

Culture includes a shared vision of academic success for all students, where learning is the most important goal. School leaders foster high expectations for both students and adults and, perhaps most importantly, they create a results-focused environment.

**Improvement of Instructional Practice**

In this second dimension, school leaders use a research-based instructional framework to provide the shared vision from which to observe, analyze, and plan professional development for teaching practice. Leaders establish a focus on learning and nurture a culture of continuous improvement and public practice.

For example, principals in Washington’s Central Kitsap School District used CEL’s 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning™ instructional framework (2012) as the basis for observing classroom instruction. Over the course of a year, principals and teachers used the framework in classroom learning walk-throughs to develop their common language and shared vision for high-quality instruction.

During each walk-through, principals took detailed notes of what they observed—what we call “noticings”—with a focus on a particular dimension of the framework. They learned to base their noticings and their questions about instructional practice on evidence while avoiding judgments.

This focus on public practice and evidence has had a great impact. “Teachers are having more conversations with each other, working collaboratively more often because we’re all using

---

**Vision, mission, and culture-building**

**Principals should ask themselves:**

1. What do the school’s environment and day-to-day interactions among students, staff, and families say about what is valued in the school community?
2. How do I communicate and drive the school’s instructional agenda?
3. How do I organize the learning environment to respond to cultural and linguistic diversity and the varying learning and social needs of students?
4. How do I encourage leadership in others?
5. How do the community and I use evidence of student success and learning needs to drive collaboration?
the same words,” concurs Craig
Johnson, an assistant principal at
Central Kitsap School District in
Washington. “We all have the same
vision. We’re all looking at the
same guiding questions. There’s no
misunderstanding about what we’re
going to look for and what we’re
going to talk about.”

Allocation of Resources
In this third dimension of
instructional leadership, principals
have many resources allocated to
them (e.g., time, money, technology,
pace, materials, and expertise). Ideally, school leaders use data to
make equitable decisions regarding
the allocation of these resources.

How do school leaders allocate
resources strategically so that

...instructional practice and student
learning improve?

In Memphis, TN, Tracie Thomas,
the principal at White Station
Elementary School, provides a
great case study. An analysis of
data showed Thomas that students
in third through fifth grade were
the school’s lowest performers,
so Thomas took advantage of a
state mandate requiring physical
education—which brought her a
second gym teacher—to differentiate
instruction for those students.

With the increased staffing,
classroom teachers were able to
incorporate small-group instruction
three times weekly, providing
more personalized instruction.

“It allowed teachers to pull those
kids for reteaching or enrichment,”

Thomas said. “I think that made a
great impact.”

Students in third through
fifth grade ended the year as the
top-performing grades. “Third grade
did so well I now have to make sure
the fourth grade teachers carry on
that progression and continue to
grow the students,” Thomas said.

Management of People
and Processes
One of the most important things
principals do is ensuring that the
right people carry out the necessary
jobs, which brings us to this last
dimension. Instructional leaders
have to be very strategic in their
recruitment and hiring. They have

to be very strategic in onboarding
newcomers and developing staff.
In addition, leaders have to manage all kinds of processes. Think about all of the school improvement initiatives that exist and the role of instructional leaders to make sense of all those initiatives. How do leaders make certain that staff understand how the initiatives at the district level and the initiatives in the school are integrated, how they are aligned, and how they are all going to contribute to the overall mission and vision of the school?

And then finally, we constantly hear teachers wanting to collaborate with one another for professional growth. “One of the beliefs of CEL is that to become better at our practice, we have to collaborate, and we are truly collaborating now, talking about our instructional practice in objective terms,” says Bo Miller, principal at Jackson Hole Middle School in Teton, WY. “We are being specific, analytical, and diagnostic. And all of our decisions are grounded in how to teach to student needs.”

**Challenges**

Many ask, “How do I do all of this in addition to everything else I’m expected to do?” This is a fair response.

One of the challenges—and we hear this from principals all the time—is that school leaders have not had the time and opportunity to learn exactly how to perform, or to gain the skills for, the work of instructional leadership. Many principals tell us that they go into classrooms but often don’t know what to look for or how to have necessary conversations with teachers.

We cannot talk about what we expect from instructional leaders without talking about what the central office does to support the work of instructional leadership. We refer to this as reciprocal accountability: It’s the idea that if district leaders are going to hold principals accountable for instructional leadership, then those district leaders have an equal responsibility to ensure that principals know how to do what’s expected and are fully supported in that process.

In fact, the first action area of CEL’s Principal Support Framework (2013), a tool we use in our work at the central-office level with principal supervisors, is all about clarifying what we mean by principal instructional leadership. We cannot even begin to work with principal supervisors regarding how to support and develop principals until they clarify the most important practices for principals (Fink & Silverman, 2014).

The 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership™ framework equips school districts and school leaders for this very first challenge. With the growing demands of the principalship, ensuring that principals have the knowledge and skills to be instructional leaders is now more important than ever. PL

---

**REFERENCES**


Stephen Fink (finks@uw.edu) is executive director of the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership. Follow him on Twitter @StephenFinkAtUW.

June Rimmer (juner2@uw.edu) is the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership’s associate director.