Challenges in Strengthening Academic School Improvement in Middle Schools: A Cross-Case Comparison of Promising Instructional Leadership Strategies, Practices, and Processes

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Challenges of Standards-Based Reform

- "An equitable opportunity for all children to learn challenging curricula" (Weinstein, 1996, p. 16)
- Assessment and accountability have been defined as the "twin engines driving school reform" (McDaniel, 1999, p. 132).
- "Simply administering a once-a-year standardized test by itself does nothing to change local capacity to achieve success" (Stiggins, 1999, p. 197).

If assessment and accountability are to serve as "twin engines driving school reform," leadership for capacity building is needed to ignite and steer the train.

Factors Leading to an Increased Emphasis on Accountability

- Standardized test score declines
- Workforce needs
- No Child Left Behind

Background of the Problem

- In the first wave of reform, middle schools in the U.S. focused more on meeting socio-emotional needs than academic needs (Jackson & Davies, 2000).
- Middle schools were criticized as a weak link (Cooney & Bottoms, 2002)
- Breaking Ranks in the Middle: Strategies of Leading Middle Level Reform called for collaboration, personalization and curriculum and instruction reform (NASSP, 2006)

Review of the Literature

Four quadrants for a coherent middle school success model included:

- Visionary
- Building relationships
- Building the team
- Developing the team (Davis & Pokorny, 2004)

Without question, no school can be called a middle school where its principals, assistant principals, and all instructional personnel lack a clear knowledge and understanding of the goals and objectives of the middle school concept. (Weller, 1999, p. xvi)

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) identified successful leadership characteristics as:

- Developing a shared vision
- Building team capacity
- Implementing the change process effectively
- Fulfilling managerial responsibilities

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

To identify essential practices and processes needed for effective middle school leadership. Specifically, the research question was:

1. What were the essential practices and processes of effective middle school leadership that sustained academic student improvement for two successful campuses?

Data Sources

- Focus groups with teachers, community members, and administrators
- Classroom observations
- Individual principal interviews
- Supervisor and teacher individual interviews
- Archival sources of data including standardized test scores and academic ratings

Leadership practices and processes that influenced sustained school improvement in the first school were:

- Reflective practice
- Distributed leadership
- Developing shared vision
- Celebration of success
- Involvement of the community
- Dedication to improvement
- Focus on the school culture

Leadership practices and processes that influenced sustained school improvement in the 2nd school were:

- Creative scheduling
- Effective hiring and staffing practices
- Motivational activities and celebrations
- Empowerment for all
- Systemic, targeted professional development
- Challenge with support

The exact practices varied, but there was a relentless focus on:

- Promoting Student Learning
- A positive, collaborative culture
- Celebration of success

As a principal stressed, "Maintain a focus, keep on track, pull everybody together, and make sure everything is tied to student achievement."

Significance

Studying successful middle schools can strengthen understanding of the realm of possible practices and processes that can be beneficial in sustaining the focus of middle school reform with a balanced emphasis on meeting students' academic and socio-emotional needs.

Essential Factors in Standards-Based Reform

Principal Leadership

Collaboration

Professional Development

Standards. . .

Abstract aims, wishful thinking, or specific and guiding pictures of worthy goals (Wiggins, 1991)

If standards were implemented, what difference would it make for student learning?

The answer seems to reside in the level of principal leadership, collaboration, and professional development.