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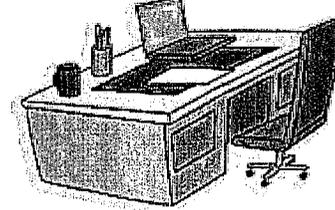
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SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ARTICLE

Principals' Classroom Visits Help Build Better Readers



When principals and literacy coaches understand what students are learning and teachers are teaching -- and actually participate in literacy lessons-- they set a positive tone that will lead to improvement in reading in their schools. Author and educator Dr. Beth Whitaker shares her thoughts. Included: Suggestions for informally observing classes.

One of the most effective strategies principals and literacy coaches can employ to help improve reading levels in their schools is easy, inexpensive, and good exercise: visiting classrooms.

That may sound obvious, said Dr. Beth Whitaker, an author, former elementary school principal, and associate professor of elementary education at [Indiana State University](#). But many administrators and literacy coaches fail to realize how much of a positive influence on learning their presence in classrooms can have.

"It's such a simple concept -- but it makes a huge impact," Whitaker told Education World. "I would tell all administrators, 'Be in the classrooms -- immerse yourself in the learning of your building. Make it a priority.'"

LEARNING FROM TEACHERS

Too many teachers don't see principals as instructional leaders, Whitaker said. While not all principals are comfortable with that role, it is one they must assume to show they value learning.

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"Visibility -- being out-and-about learners -- is important for a productive environment," she noted. "It's important not just for the students, but for the teachers as well. Principals get so caught up [with administrative tasks] that they don't have time to be in halls and classes. But great leaders assume the responsibility to develop a positive atmosphere in classes."

Whitaker bases her views on a study she did on school climates. The schools with more positive climates had strong leaders that made instructional leadership a priority, she said. Whitaker gave a presentation on her findings at the 2007 Association for School Curriculum Development (ASCD) conference.

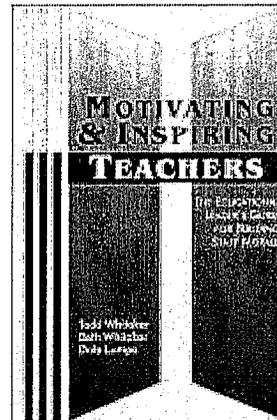
"[Some principals and literacy coaches] fear that they don't know enough to be considered instructional leaders," Whitaker continued. "But to be more of an instructional leader, you have to learn what the kids are learning. If principals don't know how teachers are teaching, or the resources and manipulatives they are using, they need to sit down [in a classroom, for example] in a kindergarten learning center."

Many principals also need to learn from their teachers. Some principals are former master teachers, while others have limited classroom experience and should educate themselves about their schools' instructional materials and practices.

"Principals need to understand the assessment tools -- the only way to do that is to experience them," Whitaker told Education World. "They need to model the role of active learners." That includes attending professional development workshops with their teachers, to learn what they are learning.

Once administrators become familiar with instructional programs and assessments, they participate in classwork. "They need to model what is important by modeling lessons along with teachers," said Whitaker. "They need to learn about the strengths of teachers, and learn more about individual students, so a student is not just a face that shows up at the [principal's] door when there is a problem; they can talk about a student's journal work ... Then they can have instructional conversations with teachers and students that send strong messages to them."

To ensure these classroom visits are positive and productive, principals should make it clear to teachers that they are not coming to critique them. "Tell people at a faculty meeting that want to know about the great teaching going on in classes," she suggested. "Then tell them you will be in classrooms, but you will not be there to evaluate them formally. You are there to observe teaching in classes."



Beth Whitaker is one of the authors of *Motivating and Inspiring Teachers: The Educational Leader's Guide for Building Staff Morale*.

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Whitaker said she encourages literacy coaches to adopt the same approach: "To walk through classes, observe, and be in there to learn more about instruction -- not to evaluate."

BE VISIBLE, BE POSITIVE

Before starting informal visits, Whitaker advises principals and literacy coaches to set a positive tone in their schools so staff members feel comfortable sharing their successes and trials.

"You have to build that trust element, whether you are a coach or a principal," she said. "If you don't set up that environment, you can't have that dialogue, and you don't grow. If you can't talk about it, growth is slow and painful."

When observing instruction informally, leave the clipboard and legal pad in the office. "Don't make it look like a formal visit."

Then start slowly, Whitaker recommends, because she understands that these types of visits can be difficult for some administrators. "Many principals are very uncomfortable; they don't know what to do with themselves in a classroom...unscripted if they are not filling out forms or passing out paychecks."

A good first step is standing in a classroom doorway for two to three minutes, listening, observing, and smiling. "You want to show school is a great place to be and learning is great," according to Whitaker.

Principals and coaches also might want to start by visiting a teacher with whom they have a good rapport.

She also suggested leaving the clipboard and legal pad in the office. "Don't make it look like a formal visit."

SHARING GOOD NEWS, WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

During her principal days, though, Whitaker often carried a planner with her during her observations so she could jot down the name of a book a teacher read aloud or a strategy someone used so she could include the information in a faculty memo she distributed on Fridays. She also kept sticky notes handy, so if she saw a teacher using a particularly effective teaching strategy or behavior management approach, she could immediately write down a compliment and stick it on the teacher's desk, before she got back to her office and became distracted.

A weekly newsletter to faculty is a good way to share some of the effective lessons and instructional practices principals and coaches see, and to recognize teachers. Literacy coaches also can contribute to the newsletter by including their own observations as well as teaching tips. Whitaker said her research has shown that weekly memos to staff are effective if the memos are regular, positive, and instructional.

Still, with so many specialists in schools these days, principals may be reluctant to get involved in instruction, thinking coaches, department heads, curriculum directors, and others are taking care of everything. "But they must be team captains -- they need to show the staff that this is important to

them," Whitaker said. "Principals can find a million reasons not be in classrooms. But it is amazing the tone it sets in a building when the principal starts to show interest in instruction."

Article by Ellen R. Delisio
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- Respects and nurtures the ir and leadership capacity of te principals, and others.
- Enables teachers to develop expertise in subject content, strategies, technology, and c elements essential for teach standards.
- Promotes continuous inquiry improvement during the sch
- Is planned collaborativelv bv

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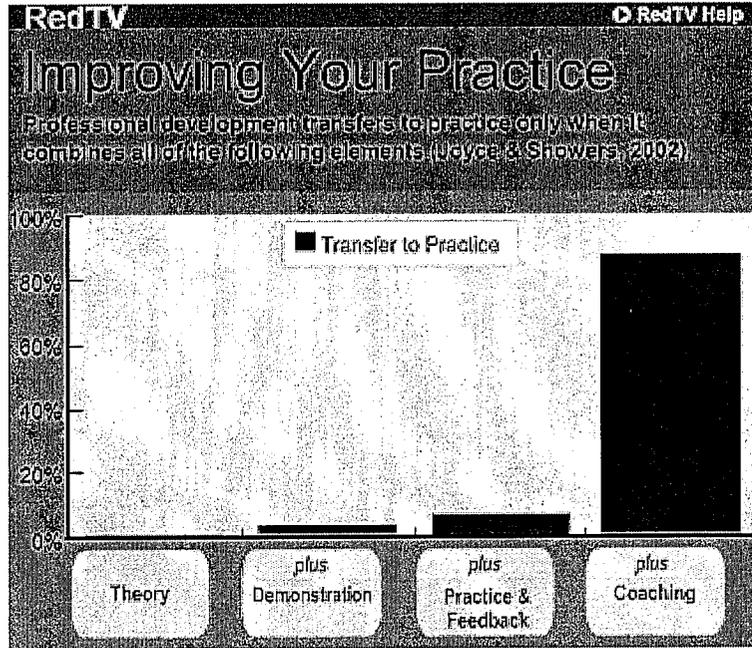
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