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3

Principal Expectations as Curriculum Leader

Shoot low, Sheriff, I think she's ridin' a Shetland!

—Bob Wills (Country Music Television Inc., 2008)

Shoot Low, Expect Less

Bob Wills, the King of Western Swing, humorously verbalized—as an intro to the musical number *Deep in the Heart of Texas*—what some principals may be tempted to do when working with curriculum. That is, “shoot low” to minimize potential instructional repercussions. In other words, a principal may intentionally, or unintentionally, lower curricular expectations in anticipation that teacher leaders will maximize the difference with effective classroom instruction, as a method of increasing student achievement and, thus, concealing a principal’s ineptitude relative to curricular leadership.

Does this leadership approach accurately epitomize how many principals initiate curriculum leadership? Such is a relevant question with a possible and revealing answer. The late Allan Glatthorn, noted author and curriculum specialist, once acknowledged, “When I told a friend that the title of one of my books was *Principal as Curriculum Leader* (Glatthorn & Jailall, 2009), she responded, ‘That’s an oxymoron

if I ever heard one'" (Glatthorn quoted in Cunningham & Corderio, 2006, p. 228).

The "shoot low" principal expectation can only generate an "expect less" curricular leadership model. Principals who lead with this mindset commit an academic injustice to their students. They know better. Research over the decades strongly supports the precept that principals have a profound effect on student achievement if high curricular and instructional expectations are the norm (Cennamo & Kalk, 2005; Reeves, 2006; Schmoker, 2006; Tanner & Tanner, 2006; Wiles, 2009). Additionally, principals must be directly involved in the planning, design, evaluation, and renewal of curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (Fullan, 2008; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Any less of a principal expectation asserts an age-old adage—"Boys, we're getting nowhere fast!"

Understanding Principal Expectations in Curriculum Development

Principals must establish curricular expectations based on personal content knowledge, an understanding of instruction and instructional strategies and activities, and an awareness of how to properly evaluate curriculum design. Content knowledge includes research methods, data analysis, and skill mastery. Instructional understanding includes a comprehension of methods, materials, strategies, and techniques essential to effectively implementing curricular approaches at the school-site level. The evaluative piece of curriculum leadership relates to the principal being cognizant of differing assessment tools such as diagnostic, placement, formative, summative, and accreditation.

Curricular leadership demands high principal expectations. High expectations propel every individual in a school to greater levels of efficiency and excellence. High expectations nourish a "yes we can" attitude and build organizational confidence for student academic excellence. High curricular expectations correlate with data-driven analysis, research-based decision-making, student-centered initiatives, and best-practice results. High expectations create accelerated curricular and instructional approaches that, in turn, increase student achievement and success. Effective principals establish and follow through with the highest of curricular and instructional expectations: expectations that are appropriate, positive, and realistic. High expectations hold all members of the learning community accountable

for providing effective instruction. When personnel and students are motivated, challenged, and provided opportunities to excel, the result is curricular excellence that equates to relevant instruction, interesting content, meaningful learning, and increased student achievement. High expectations are an essential, if not a critical, aspect of the curriculum development process. Low expectations, on the other hand, fulfill a dead-end prophecy. Consider the following account.

Why Waste Our Time, Part I

Elvin Bealittle served as principal at Union Elementary School and had, for many years, been a strong proponent of ability grouping and tracking. This was Mr. Bealittle's expectation and all followed his lead. This less-than-stellar expectation resulted in a dismal instructional setting. Teachers decided which students were in a particular ability group. Students who were generally poor, minorities, from broken homes, or whose parents were labeled "druggies" were placed in the low-ability groups. Teachers had minimal expectations for these students. These students weren't expected to do much more than the simplest of instructional tasks—worksheets and independent seatwork focusing on the most basic of skill orientations. The expectation was implicit: Remain in your seat, do your work, be quiet, read the assigned text—if you can—and answer the questions at the conclusion of each chapter. The principal had a demeaning term that he used to describe these students—lazy!

To further exacerbate the problem, the teachers did nothing to facilitate higher-order thinking, let alone teach at a challenging level. The teachers knew many of the students' families, as they had taught either their parents, siblings, or both. The teachers had long since determined that these particular kids, like the students' family members, would most certainly drop out of school. "Why waste our time" was a familiar line of reasoning as voiced by many of the faculty at Union Elementary School. Mr. Bealittle often stated, "These kids won't amount to a hill of beans. Do we really expect they'll contribute to our community?"

A culture of low expectations creates low achievement. Whose fault was it that the students in the "low groups" at Union Elementary School were far from successful? Can the students be blamed? Certainly not! The fault lands squarely on the desk of the curriculum leader—Mr. Bealittle.