

Modeling Best Practices: Easy Tips for the Overworked Administrator

Patrick Flynn, Co-Founder, Constructivist Design Conference[®]
Don Mesibov, Director, Institute for Learning Centered Education
Paul Vermette, Niagara University
R. Michael Smith, Niagara University

Abstract

In this editorial piece, the authors ask school administrators to reflect on their practices and adopt leadership strategies based on constructivist theory. The authors argue that because constructivism has been confirmed in recent decades as the foundation for effective educational practice, it must be extended to administrative practices as well as pedagogy. Ten elements of essential administrative practices are suggested.

Introduction

No wonder there is a nationwide shortage of administrators. The job description calls for brilliance in business management, employee relations, the law, interpersonal relations, maintenance of discipline, and pedagogy. As if this weren't enough, the average good administrator finds herself less knowledgeable about effective teaching strategies than those new teachers who have graduated from some of the more progressive institutions of higher learning. (For the first time in over a century, the teaching strategies that were relied upon when most administrators were classroom teachers are as passé as the horse and buggy.)

Nevertheless, if our schools are to meet the needs of the twenty-first century generations of children, then administrators must be instructional leaders who know how to immerse their staffs in such pedagogical concepts as cooperative learning and constructivism. Our suggestions take into account the unreasonable workload expected (demanded) of today's good administrator, but they also

require that administrators have a basic understanding and model “best practices” such as those consistent with constructivist theory. In this article, we provide such information and suggestions in a manner that busy administrators can understand and implement easily. Some of this may require the effective administrator to think out of the box.

For more than twenty years, researchers have challenged professional educators to move away from “one-shot” staff development. There appears to be a growing consensus that staff development should be focused, have continuity, be teacher-driven, and should model the environment that it is asking teachers to create in their classrooms. A surprisingly large number of educators will agree wholeheartedly, and yet too many districts continue to provide the kind of staff development old timers recognize from years gone by – teachers sitting passively, listening to someone present on a topic that was not the subject of the previous staff development day and that will not be revisited on the next.

The authors believe that research is unequivocal in establishing that constructivist theory should be the foundation for classroom practice, professional development, and administrative behaviors. Constructivist theory is based on the premise that people do not learn by being passive recipients of information; rather, they must be actively engaged with information in order to understand and be able to apply information competently, and they must be challenged to think at higher levels than simple recall. Certain classroom, school, and district environments are more

conducive to encouraging practices based on constructivist theory than others. In this article, the authors shall attempt to define the behaviors of administrator who wish to create a constructivist environment.

Considerations

Here are some questions for the good administrator to address:

- Do staff meetings model the strategies of a constructivist classroom? In other words, if the administrator is asking staff members to create a constructivist classroom, is this environment being modeled at staff meetings?
- How often does the administrator ask questions of staff members relative to the number of times the administrator gives instructions?
- Does the administrator frequently run errands for staff or assist staff in the implementation of new concepts or ideas?
- Does the administrator make decisions and then try to encourage staff to implement them, or, does the administrator design the questions and structure the dialogue for the purpose of facilitating important decisions from the staff?

The Constructivist Administrator

A constructivist administrator is one who understands that his main job is to support the teachers in their quest to make student learning the focus of the classroom. This involves providing school-based and/or classroom based professional development that assists teachers in this mission. This means:

- Bringing teachers together to make educationally sound decisions.
- Facilitating parent involvement.
- Learning what constitutes sound constructivist practices and encouraging teachers through engagement with these practices and through modeling.

How do we recognize constructivism in an administrator?

- A constructivist administrator can articulate what is expected in a constructivist classroom and what should be expected of a constructivist teacher.

- A constructivist administrator conducts staff meetings as constructivist classrooms should be conducted.
- A constructivist administrator evaluates teachers as a constructivist teacher should evaluate students: multiple assessments, blending of administrator set goals and teacher set goals, effective use of the strategies of a constructivist teacher.
- A constructivist administrator recognizes that there are a variety of methods for achieving the goals he/she has set for teachers and allows teachers flexibility in achieving student learning objectives.
- A constructivist administrator is a gopher, respecting the expertise of the teaching staff, making every effort to provide them the resources THEY feel they need, making every effort to provide them with information about teaching strategies, materials, and other resources.
- A constructivist administrator is a cheerleader. At a workshop for 15 administrators in the Niagara Falls City School District, A trainer for a Total Quality Management Program (TQM) was asked, "What do you view as the most important function of an administrator as an instructional leader?" The response was quick: "The most important role of the administrator is to be a cheerleader. Education reform is damn difficult. The teachers can do it, but they need their leaders cheering them on."

Two Important Questions

Here are two important questions for an administrator to ponder:

- **Would you be comfortable if your teachers conducted their classrooms the way you conduct your staff meetings?**
(If you don't model your message, you are communicating something else.)
- **Do you make sure there is food and beverage every time you ask staff to meet, even if your presence is not required at the meeting?**
(This may seem like a small point it's not. How the room looks, the seating arrangement, and the provision of food and beverages all send a message. The message is either, "We care, and we set a place at the table for you," or it is, "It's just another day at the office.")

Leadership to Raise Student Achievement

Here are ten essential elements for enabling an administrator to serve as the catalyst for raising student achievement:

1. Beliefs

Is there a list of beliefs that reflect the collective view of yourself and your building staff that address:

- What do we believe about how people learn?
- What do we believe about how teachers should teach?
- What do we need to do to continuously check for alignment of teaching strategies with what we know about how people learn?

The list is important, but not as important as the process that everyone goes through to create the list. Short-circuiting the process by simply asking people to react to a list generated by others, or by handing out the list as part of an orientation package for new hires defeats the primary purpose.

2. Vision

Is there a concise, well-articulated vision of the kind of building you and your staff would envision as the best possible environment for improving student achievement through alignment with your beliefs about how people learn?

3. Recognition

Are teachers afforded the time to learn with and from peers? Are they given the opportunity for trial and error? Do they believe they have administrative support for learning and applying new strategies and do they actually have it? Are teachers encouraged to gain exposure to good models of best practices – both in their own classrooms, in peers' classrooms, in neighboring schools and at conferences and workshops? Can you, as the administrator, list six specific

behaviors, of yours, that have been directed at addressing the implications of these questions?

4. Focus

Is there a meaningful focus on staff development? Does it often occur in the classroom? When it occurs on a staff development day, is it one-shot, or does it have a beginning, a middle, and a continuation? Is professional development teacher driven? If it is teacher driven, are teachers challenged with new information *before* they influence the course of staff development? Or are teachers expected to drive staff development in enlightened directions while relying solely on their prior understandings? Does staff development reflect the collective beliefs of the staff and does it model the classroom practices we are encouraging teachers to use? How often do we provide “one size fits all” staff development, and how often do we have options and create an environment where teachers are working individually or in small groups on narrowly focused topics or strategies? Do teachers have the opportunity for intensive, yearlong focus on one major strategy such as cooperative learning, performance assessment, reflection, etc., where they can participate in workshops, have strategies modeled in their classroom and really become involved with the strategy until they feel comfortable with it?

5. Modeling

Are staff meetings conducted the way the administrator wants teachers to conduct their classrooms? Are teacher requests and suggestions handled the way the

administrator would want the teacher to respond to student requests and suggestions? Are the collective morale and attitude of the staff reflective of what the administrator would hope to see as the morale and attitude of the student body? If not, what steps are being taken to address this inconsistency of what is being modeled with what is desired of students? What kind of impression is created in the mind of the visitor to your building upon entering the building, seeing the signs, and perusing the hallways and hall walls? If I am a member of a minority group, what will I see in my classroom and/or the hallways or offices that will say to me that a place has been set at the table for me? What can you point to that reflects your application of research indicating that parental involvement and support is the most significant factor affecting student achievement?

6. Continuous Improvement

With reference to having a vision of what a district would look like that creates an environment conducive to raising student achievement, along with a set of objectives for achieving that vision, do you have a well articulated assessment process for determining, along the way and at the end of the year, how well you are doing? Is time set aside and is there a process for reviewing the assessments of your objectives at year's end for the purpose of setting the following year's objectives? Is there a process for occasionally revisiting your belief statements since they may change as you are confronted with new data that may conflict with your prior understandings? And finally, do the measurements you have designed to assess how well you are moving toward your vision, as an administrative team, model the kinds of assessments you want teachers to be using in the classroom?

7. We are all teachers, and we are all learners.

Do you believe this, or do you believe that we reach a point in our lives where we best serve humanity by sharing what we know and not wasting our time with new learning? If you do believe we are all teachers and we are ALL learners, how is this reflected in your school environment and in your day-to-day practices?

8. Assessment

We have suggested that authentic/performance assessment is the engine driving school restructuring. Multiple forms of assessing student performance should be the primary measure of student competence. Many of our best teachers have not had the benefit of:

- Seeing a process of multiple assessments modeled for them when they were K-12 or university students,
- Being trained, in college, to use multiple forms of assessment.
- Being part of a staff where utilization of multiple forms of assessment is part of the culture of the educational process.

Most administrators, staff developers, teachers, and other proponents of multiple forms of student assessment grossly underestimate the length and depth of the journey required for a good teacher to become proficient and comfortable with these strategies. If we want our system of assessments to change sooner rather than later, we must:

- Identify this as a priority
- Focus staff development opportunities on the strategies and concepts that will bring the most bang for the buck
- Get away from one-shot staff development; if a strategy or concept is identified as a focus for staff development, then teachers must be able to

receive prolonged support within the classroom as well as on days devoted to staff development.

It is the role of the effective administrator to be aware of these important aspects of effective teaching and to see that they are addressed in staff development sequences.

9. Eyes on the Prize

Too often administrators do not empower their expert staff members because “I’m the one who is responsible.” The inference is “I have to keep control.” The administrator is responsible, but for what? Is she responsible for controlling all decisions? Or, is she responsible for seeing that the most effective decisions possible are made in order to raise student achievement? Sometimes the most effective decision for an administrator is to delegate decision-making authority if that will result in a better quality decision and more effective implementation. A school superintendent once said, “The more control I delegate, the more power I have.”

10. Think Sequences

People (teachers as well as students) require frequent implementation of a new concept if they are to reach a point where, like with a bicycle, they can leave it for a while and pick up where they left off when they revisit it. Think of how you learned to use a computer. Did you receive a lesson or two, stay away from computers for six months, and then try to sit down and recall what you had been taught? More likely, you were at the computer every day, for a while, and –

through usage- you reached the point where accessing e-mail, using fonts, saving your work, and other functions became second nature. Staff development intended to help teachers hone new strategies such as cooperative learning, authentic assessment, portfolios, or the like must similarly give teachers opportunities for implementation, with coaching, until the strategies become second nature. Here is a worthwhile, inexpensive proposal for staff development to train teachers in the use of a strategy that may be unfamiliar to many staff members

:

1. **Think in terms of a year-long sequence.**
2. **Don't try to involve the entire staff in training to hone the same strategy.** It is more valuable to develop a pocket of teachers who are competent with, for example, cooperative learning; then develop another pocket of teachers competent with reflective activities, and another few teachers who have mastered performance assessment, and so on. This will give the school expertise in many strategies that can be used effectively, and each pocket of expertise will grow and spread. Therefore, instead of trying to train everyone on the same strategy, at the same time, seek groups of three to eight teachers who are willing to make the year-long commitment, assign them a facilitator (in-house if funding precludes hiring an outside facilitator), and let each group focus on a specific strategy.
3. **If funding permits, augment training on staff development days with a couple of days in the summer and some after-school time during the year.** Offer a stipend for any summer or after-school work, but offer it as part of a package that includes the commitment, in advance, to all scheduled sessions in the sequence (i. e., two days in the summer, three staff development days, two-half-days, and three sessions, after school, of two-hours, spaced between the other meeting times).
4. **Utilize the following agenda for every session whether it lasts an hour or a day:**
 - a. Reflect on what the teachers tried out in their classrooms prior to the session; was it successful? What was the evidence of student learning? What would they do differently?
 - b. Share new information (research) about whatever strategy is your

- focus.
- c. Ask each teacher to build an aspect of this strategy into a lesson they will teach before the next time the group meets.
 - d. Repeat the process at the next meeting: 1) reflect on how the lesson went, 2) share some new information and discuss it, 3) plan to try the same strategy in another lesson or to move on to another aspect of the same strategy.

If you are using performance assessment as the focus of your year-long sequence, you might address rubric design in your first few sessions, with teachers attempting to use rubrics, in class, between sessions. Then you might move on to the design of assessment activities that utilize rubrics, and, then to unit design by the end of the year. If the sequence is about cooperative learning, you could address such activities as *pair-share* at one session and try that in the classrooms, then move on to group roles and procedures, then address grading of cooperative work, and continue on to different aspects of cooperative learning at each meeting.

While this may be a new paradigm for staff development, there is a compelling need for administrators to implement it, and not just nod in agreement when researchers cite the inadequacies of traditional forms of staff development.

Here's an additional ingredient to put into the recipe for successful staff development: *staff development in the classroom*. Have the staff development sequence facilitator visit classrooms to model strategies requested by teachers, to team-teach, or to observe for the purpose of offering feedback. We are not suggesting that classroom visits of this nature be forced upon teachers. However, effective teachers welcome interaction in the classroom with other professionals

as long as they feel the intent is professional growth and not high stakes assessment of their teaching practices.

If you follow this recommended sequence with a small group of teachers for a year, you will have a nucleus of teachers in your school who are skilled with the cooperative learning, performance assessment, or any other methodology you chose. If you also offer this sequence to develop in-house experts in other strategies for the constructivist classroom such as authentic assessment, reflective activities, portfolios, etc., then you can involve a large number of teachers in effective staff development by having them each engage with a small group and a facilitator to have the kind of in-depth discussions, training, and practice that research indicates are necessary for sustainable professional growth. As indicated earlier, once you have a small nucleus of teachers with expertise in key strategies, other teachers will be able to observe, dialogue and adopt without the need for all of them to have the same degree of training.

Conclusion

The authors believe that by becoming more constructivist in their administrative practices, educational leaders can accomplish their primary goals – student achievement, professional development, and an effective school environment – much more effectively. School administrators are urged to reflect and act on the questions and statements in this article to see how they can help to create better schools for the students, teachers, staff members, and parents whom they serve.