

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 299 672

EA 020 385

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TITLE Teachers' Perceptions of the Principal's Role.  
PUB DATE 87  
NOTE 10p.  
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Principles; \*Administrator Role;  
Elementary Secondary Education; \*Instructional  
Leadership; \*Occupational Information; \*Principals;  
Public Schools; \*Teacher Administrator Relationship;  
\*Teacher Attitudes

ABSTRACT

To gain an insight into teachers' perceptions of the role and responsibilities of school principals, 143 teachers from a large metropolitan area were surveyed. They were asked to respond to the following four questions: (1) What do you believe are the most important functions of the principal?; (2) What do principals say to teachers are the principals' important functions?; (3) What do principals demonstrate are their important functions?; and (4) What could principals do to make the teachers' job better? An overwhelming majority of teachers responded that the principal's chief role was that of instructional leader. Other important functions included that of building manager, public relations with parents and the community at large, and setting the tone or climate for the school. Administrators communicate to staff that they see their role as one of instructional leader but also report that most of their day is spent in administrative and discipline tasks. There appears to be a dichotomy between what principals say are important functions and what they demonstrate, with teachers reporting that administrators are overly concerned with nonacademic matters almost to the point of neglecting the real purpose of the school, that of educating students. The suggestions made by the teachers include more visibility on the part of the principal, more concern with academic matters, more visits in the classroom, and more support in related matters. (LMS)

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## TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE

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Although all educators have felt the pressure of the "back-to-basics" movement and the press for reform in education, elementary principals have been particularly hard hit. In addition to the tradition responsibilities of maintaining and operating a school, a modern principal must also deal with teacher, student, and community militancy. Part of this criticism could be a lack of uniform definition of the role of principal.

Historically, the position of the elementary principal has evolved from the uncomplicated tasks of the headmaster of colonial schools who taught and disciplined children, to the principal of today who is administrator, community relations expert, and plant and personnel manager as well as disciplinarian.

The duties of the principal steadily increased from the 1830's when the number of schools in cities became more than the superintendent could handle, until the twentieth century when these duties were limited in scope to discipline, routine administration, and the grading of pupils. Among the new roles which developed during the early 1900's was that of supervisor of teachers. By the 1950's, the principal was also viewed as the

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instructional leader. He was expected to select materials and teaching methods according to his philosophy of education. This, in turn, gave rise to the roles of facilitator of change and race relations during the sixties and seventies.

Current literature does not define the role of the elementary principal of the eighties, but it generally describes a number of functions which vary from source to source. Among the most commonly accepted functions are: leader and organizer of instructional programs, supervisor of facilities and services, administrator of finances, organizer of records, and maintainer of school community relations. Guidance counselor and pupil control agent are also frequently mentioned as separate roles of the principal.

The elementary principal's own concept of the role varies according to his/her situation. In general, principals seem to consider themselves to be administrators. While some feel they are leaders of educational teams, others regard themselves as extensions of the superintendent. Barth (1980) in his studies of activities of principals indicates that they do indeed spend 58% of their time on activities related to instructional leadership.

Elementary classroom teachers work most closely with principals and are most affected by them. Their concepts of the role of the principal as well as their criticisms of how the role is filled are based on these daily encounters. Thus, in order to gain an insight into teachers' perceptions of the role and responsibilities of school principals, 143 teachers from a large

metropolitan area were surveyed. These teachers were asked to respond to the following four basic questions:

- (1) What do you believe are the most important functions of the principal?
- (2) What do principals say to teachers are their principals' important functions?
- (3) What do principals demonstrate are their important functions?
- (4) What could principals do to make the teachers' job better?

As anticipated, the teachers overwhelmingly stated (90.2%) that the most important role of the principal should be that of instructional leader. Included in this area of responsibility were behaviors such as taking a major part in curriculum improvement, suggested teaching techniques and/or materials to assist teachers improve their skills, and keeping abreast of and informing teachers about innovations and/or current trends in education.

One somewhat surprising aspect of the instructional leadership role was that teachers would like to have principals spend more time visiting classrooms. These visitations are not to take on the character of a formal evaluation, but rather for the principal (1) to become thoroughly familiar with the academic program; (2) to get to know the students and their personal, social, and academic characteristics; and, (3) to be able to make informal suggestions to teachers for improving the ongoing classroom activities.

The second most important function of the principalship was that of building manager as stated by 56.6% of the teachers surveyed. They felt that the administrator should provide for an aesthetically pleasing, clean, and smooth-running physical plant. In addition, they felt that the budget, scheduling, and all other administrative tasks were included in this category. The tone of the teachers' responses was that the person fulfilling this aspect of the principalship need not have a strong educational background or even be an educator.

Good public relations not only with the parents of youngsters attending the school, but also with the community at large was deemed important by 45.5% of the participating teachers. They indicated that a major part of the responsibility in this area was projecting a good image of the school and the ongoing academic program. Teachers said that the community should be "educated" regarding current teaching/learning practices as opposed to the experiences remembered by parents and other taxpayers several decades earlier. The educators felt very strongly that if the community were aware of and understood the recent improvements and upgrading of academic activities, there would be more support for public education from all segments of society.

Setting the tone or climate for the school was the next most important function of the elementary principal reported by 46.1% of the teachers. It was strongly implied that if the principal sets and demands high but attainable academic and social

standards and goals that the teachers, support staff, and students would make a concerted effort to achieve those standards and goals. However, many teachers indicated that a number of principals through their actions strongly demanded a "don't-rock-the-boat" attitude. Others stated that the principal's laxity in enforcing school and/or board policy filtered down to and had a direct effect upon the teachers' academic and social expectations of the youngsters in their charge.

About one-third (35.5%) of those surveyed viewed a significant function of the principal as that of "chief" disciplinarian. They felt that the changing attitudes in society, more one-parent homes, and greater numbers of households with both parents working has greatly increased the amount of disruptive student behavior. The teachers indicated that all too often a greater "power or authority" was needed to deal with these situations.

Other aspects of the role of principal included evaluation (28.6%), dissemination of school law and board policy (19.5%), communicator (16%), support of teachers (15.3%), humanistic (10.4%). Other roles that received less than 10% of the teachers' responses were decision maker, morale builder, fair/consistent, innovator, cooperative relationship with staff and facilitator.

As has been documented in the preceding paragraphs, teachers have definite ideas about what posture they would like to see

their immediate superiors assume. These principals, on the other hand, communicate in a variety of ways how they view their role as building administrators. Seventy-nine (79%) of the teachers involved in this survey reported that their principals say that their major function is that of instructional leader. The administrators indicate that they are highly involved and concerned with improving all aspects of the academic programs in their buildings.

About one-half (50.3%) of the principals communicated to the teachers that both the roles of "chief" disciplinarian and building manager were high on their priority list. In the case of the disciplinary function, these principals considered themselves to be the revered authority in the school. In several instances, teachers reported that the principals often times did not totally support the teachers and/or their views regarding individual discipline cases. At other times, principals were either too busy or did nothing about the specific problem child referred to them by the teacher.

Teachers reported that principals openly say that an extremely large portion of their time is spent "running the building". Principals indicate that the pure administrative aspects of their job consume most of their working day, leaving them little time for other things. Other areas of responsibility that principals communicated as important aspects of their job are public relations (41.2%); evaluator (34.2%); set "tone" of

school (12.5%); communication (6.2%); counselor, facilitator and mediator (3.4%).

It is interesting, but not surprising, to note that what administrators say are important functions and what they demonstrate are two very different roles. For example, 79% of the teachers surveyed indicated that even though principals talked about the instructional leadership role being of primary importance, the actual attitude and on-the-job performance demonstrated that much more time, energy, and effort was devoted to the building manager role. Teachers reported that administrators were overly concerned with non-academic administrative matters almost to the point of neglecting the real purpose of the school, that of educating students.

Almost 70% (69.2%) of the teachers reported the principals' role of disciplinarian as significant in their list of demonstrated principal roles and 60.1% reported the public relations role as very important. It is very interesting to note in light of the way principals described the importance of the role of instructional leader (79%), that only 15.3% of the teachers queried felt that principals demonstrated their function as instructional leader.

A few of the reasons teachers gave for this opinion were that principals (1) were too absorbed with "clerical type" matters; (2) were not knowledgeable about the ongoing curriculum; (3) lacked recent classroom experience; (4) possessed very little, if any, information regarding current trends in

education; and (5) were extremely lacking in teaching techniques and methodologies other than the information dissemination (lecture) strategy. Teachers very strongly indicated that they did not feel confident seeking assistance from their principals regarding academic matters. Other roles demonstrated by principals included evaluation (31.4%); and communication, facilitator, set "tone" of school (2.7%).

The authors feel that one of the most important aspects of this survey has to do with the teachers' suggestions regarding what the administrators can do to assist the teachers in fulfilling their responsibilities. About one-half (50.3%) felt that more visibility on the part of the principal - being seen more by teachers, staff, and students - would create a greater feeling of security among all concerned. The educators indicated that the administrators unnecessarily busied themselves with paperwork and other tasks so that they wouldn't have to be concerned with academic matters. Most teachers responding to this point indicated that they felt that the principals were not competent to handle matters in the academic area.

Teachers (44.7%) indicated that they would like to have more support from their superior in areas such as discipline, curriculum matters, evaluating student progress, and in instances where there were serious problems different from their own, and almost one-quarter (22.3%) suggested an open-door policy. Other suggestions from teachers to principals included more relevant, interesting faculty meetings and more positive reinforcement

(19.5%); support teachers with discipline (13.9%); equal treatment for all teachers (11.1%); relieve teachers from non-academic duties and exhibit respect for teachers (8.3%); and be more organized and do not tolerate incompetency (1%).

It should be noted that the recommendations listed above are very practical in nature rather than idealistic. It appears that if these suggestions were considered by elementary principals in a positive vein and then implemented, it would provide greatest benefit to the most important people concerned in the educational arena - the students.