

## Assistant Principal Professional Growth and Development:

A Matter That Cannot Be Left to Chance

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*Abstract; With the advent of recent standards for educational leadership and the increasing complexity of a principal's job, there is a dire need for assistant principals to participate in clearly defined and consistent professional development growth activities. This study examines professional development needs of assistant principals, including their perspectives toward such endeavors. This paper is intended to assist those planning and providing such programs in satisfying the needs of individuals as well as the larger educational enterprise. Using ISLLC and state standards as a guiding framework for professional development may provide useful input concerning the "what" of professional development for assistant principals. This in turn will hopefully increase assistant principals' instructional leadership skills as well as instill in them the desire to become principals.*

Assistant principals are vital resources available to support principals in a host of ways. This support becomes more necessary as principals continue to be inundated with additional duties and responsibilities

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associated with instructional leadership and reform efforts (Oliver, 2003; Weller & Weller, 2002; Teague, 2001). Assistant principals generally indicate they are satisfied with their positions and plan to stay in administration (Oliver, 2003); therefore, the need for their professional development is crucial to both enhance their instructional leadership skills as well as to instill in them the desire to become principals.

Developing instructional leaders and enhancing the instructional leadership skills of practicing administrators has been a long standing theme that pervades the literature associated with improving schools by focusing on student learning (Lambert, 2003; Teague, 2001; Marshall, 1992). This need has also been expressed at the district level where superintendents, "...express concerns about the skills of their current principals, and many acknowledge difficulties in finding effective, well-qualified principal applicants (Farkas, Johnson, Duett & Foleno, 2001, p.22). It is imperative that educational leadership preparation programs prepare candidates to enter the field of administration with appropriate knowledge, skills, and habits of the mind to be successful instructional leaders.

For the most part, professional development of assistant principals has rarely been mentioned in the literature. This oversight may be serious since these individuals are entry-level administrators and generally have a strong desire to become principals (Oliver, 2003; Oliver, 2001). Though given little attention, the need for assistant principals to acquire instructional leadership skills is not a new notion. Marshall (1992) recognized the need for assistant principal training to extend beyond the managerial aspects of their jobs, "Beyond this [managerial skills], assistant principals need to be prepared to fill roles and functions of administrators and to face the fundamental dilemmas in administration" (p. 89). A focus on management tasks seems to mitigate opportunities for assistant principals to acquire the needed skills associated with becoming instructional leaders (Oliver, 2003; Farkas et al., 2001).

School and community environments are changing and becoming more diverse, making it imperative that assistant principals be prepared to deal with the milieu confronting them in the absence of the principal or as their job responsibilities and tasks continue to change (NASSP, 2001). Brown and Irby (1997) found that, "Professional growth enables the principal to refine leadership practices and to increase school effectiveness" (p. 4). Assistant principals need the same professional growth experiences since they work in the same environment and may eventually become principals.

The Interstate School Leaders License Consortium's (ISLLC) Standards for School Leaders (1996), the Standards for Advanced Programs in

Educational Leadership (2002) offered by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), and a host of state educational leadership standards are imbued with the theme that, "The central responsibility of leadership is to improve teaching and learning.... to improve the performance of school leaders, thereby enhancing the performance of teachers and students in the workplace" (NPBEA, 2002, p. 8). As Murphy (2003) stated, "Standards for school leaders... provide the means to shift the metric of school administration from management to educational leadership and from administration to learning while linking management and behavioral science knowledge to the larger goal of student learning" (pp.18-19). The California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSELs) have been aligned with the ISLLC standards and "...are used as the basis of administrator development. The administrator who meets these standards is one who helps teachers meet their professional standards and helps students meet their content standards" (California School Leadership Academy, 2001, p. 2). The CPSEL's "now form the centerpiece for curriculum development for California's administrator preparation programs" (Standards of Quality, 2003, p. vii). Due to the constant change in roles and responsibilities, and the fact that many assistant principals were credentialed prior to the advent of new administrative standards, it is essential that the professional development of assistant principals emphasize the reculturing associated with ISLLC standards so that assistant principals can transition effectively into the role of instructional leaders.

#### Purpose

This longitudinal trend study focused on the professional development needs of elementary, middle, and high school assistant principals in Orange County, California. The primary question guiding the study was: Do assistant principals receive professional development? The objectives were to determine: (1) if districts provided professional development activities for assistant principals; (2) the nature of the professional development activities assistant principals were participating in; (3) the desire of assistant principals for professional development; and (4) assistant principals' perceptions of their needs for professional development.

#### Methodology

##### *Participants*

Assistant principals serving in elementary, middle, and high schools in Orange County, California were the subjects of this study. Orange

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County ranks as the fifth largest county in the United States. Respondents worked in districts ranging in student population from 2,550 to 61,200. Three school districts in Orange County were not included in this study because they did not have assistant principals. Assistant principals were surveyed in 2000, 2002, and 2004. The response rate to a questionnaire ranged from 68% to 80% (Table 1). Respondents varied in gender, age, and the number of years of experience serving as administrators.

#### *Instrumentation*

A questionnaire was developed and sent to all assistant principals in the participating districts. A cover letter was attached to each questionnaire that explained the study and procedures for completing the questionnaire, while providing assurances that responses would be confidential. Questionnaires could be returned via a self-addressed envelop or by fax. Participants were asked to indicate whether their district provided professional development activities for assistant principals and the nature of the activities if they were provided. Participants were asked to indicate if they felt the need for professional development activities. In 2000 and 2002, assistant principals were asked the nature of the professional development activities they desired. In 2004, assistant principals were also asked if they had a professional development plan and to identify areas that would enhance their professional growth.

#### *Analysis*

A longitudinal trend study methodology was used since the data were collected at different points in time in order to study changes. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2003), although the population may change somewhat and the same individuals may not be surveyed each year, "The responses obtained...could be considered representative of the population....The researcher would then examine and compare responses from year to year to see whether any trends are apparent" (p. 397). Since the response rate was relatively high, ranging from 68% to 80%, the responses were considered representative of the population being studied in any given year. Data were entered on a SPSS spread-

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Table 1  
*Assistant Principal Survey Respondents*

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Year of Survey	Number Surveyed	Responses	Response Rate
2000	429	344	80%
2002	433	332	77%
2004	390	265	68%

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sheet of analysis. Data addressing district provision of professional development activities, the nature of district professional development activities, assistant principal desires for professional development activities, and assistant principal professional development needs were analyzed through computation of frequencies and percentages and cross-tabs was used to compare the data by grade level by year.

Results

*District Provision of Professional Development Activities*

Respondents at all levels indicated some involvement in district sponsored professional development activities (Table 2). The percentage of involvement in such activities increased at all levels from 2002 to 2004, after declining from 2000 to 2002. Management items, such as legal updates, personnel procedures, assessment procedures dominated professional development activities for assistant principals in 2000 and 2002. In 2004, student learning and curriculum and instruction were emphasized more, however, management items still predominated professional development provided by districts for assistant principals.

*Assistant Principals Desire for Professional Development*

The majority of the respondents indicated that ongoing professional development activities would assist them as practicing administrators (Table 3). A higher percentage of elementary respondents indicted the need for professional development activities than those at the middle and high school levels. Respondents at all three levels indicated the provision of such knowledge should be made available from various sources. They indicated that time (e.g., during the working day or weekends), location (e.g., on-site or at the district office) and mode of delivery (e.g., short seminars or on-line courses) should be taken into serious consideration in the design of professional development programs. Time to dialogue and

Table 2  
*District Provision for Assistant Principal Professional Development*

Provision of Activities	2000		2002		2004	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Elementary	33/32%	66/67%	20/22%	70/78%	26/40%	39/60%
Middle	27/33%	55/68%	18/22%	62/78%	32/45%	39/55%
High School	39/37%	101/63%	28/18%	124/48%	68/55%	53/55%

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

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reflect on concepts and issues presented were designated as essential components associated with such activities if they are to be meaningful.

#### *Areas Assistant Principals Identified for Professional Development*

2000 through 2002, Respondents identified areas in which they desired additional professional development activities (Table 4). In 2000 and 2002, they identified teacher supervision and personnel matters as their first priority. Curriculum and instruction ranked fifth in 2002 and 2000. Additional areas for professional development activities focused on management topics (finance, scheduling, law, conflict management, communication, and discipline), rather than emphasizing instructional leadership skills.

2004. In 2004 (Table 5), respondents indicated student learning, instruction, and curriculum were much more important as areas needing professional development than they did in 2000 and 2002. Areas associated with management tasks were not deemed as important as they were

**Table 3**  
*Assistant Principal Desire to Participate in Professional Development Activities (n/%)*

	2000		2002		2004	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Elementary	92/93%	7/7%	77/86%	13/14%	58/89%	1/11%
Middle	74/95%	2/15%	64/82%	14/18%	61/86%	10/14%
High School	144/88%	17/12%	128/71%	52/28%	94/76%	29/24%

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

**Table 4**  
*Areas Identified by Assistant Principals for Additional Professional Development*

Area	2002			Area	2000		
	Elementary	Middle	High School		Elementary	Middle	High School
Supervision/Personnel	56/61%	46/55%	79/50%	Supervision/Personnel	77/78%	70/84%	77/46%
Finance	42/46%	28/34%	55/37%	Communication/Public Relations	75/76%	42/51%	52/32%
Managing Conflict	34/37%	23/28%	44/28%	Managing Conflict	72/72%	39/47%	47/29%
Law	29/32%	26/31%	55/35%	Law	70/71%	41/49%	45/28%
Curriculum/Instruction	25/27%	30/36%	47/30%	Scheduling	59/60%	45/54%	28/17%
Discipline	24/26%	22/28%	34/22%	Curriculum Instruction	60/61%	29/35%	36/10%
Scheduling	10/11%	36/43%	68/43%	Finance	53/54%	39/47%	55/34%

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

in 2000 and 2002. Professional development activities related to management skills and knowledge were still, however, deemed as areas of need.

*Professional Development Plans*

In 2004, over fifty percent of assistant principals responding to the survey indicated they had a professional development plan, while well over a third did not (Table 6). This was true for all three levels.

Conclusions and Recommendations

*District Provision of Professional Development Activities*

It appears that the majority of assistant principals were in districts that provided growth and development activities. These professional development activities emphasized management processes rather than areas associated with educational leadership.

*Recommendation.* Districts and educational leadership programs are

Table 5  
*Importance of Areas Needing Professional Development (2004) (n/%)*

Areas	Extremely Important	Very Important	Important	Slightly Important
Student Learning	146/56%	67/26%	29/11%	6/2%
Instruction	127/51%	47/39%	35/14%	12/5%
Curriculum	92/37%	82/33%	57/23%	18/7%
Communication	90/36%	102/41%	46/18%	14/6%
Teacher Supervision	86/34%	97/39%	56/22%	13/5%
Ethics, Law and Policy	86/34%	66/26%	67/37%	31/12%
Decision Making	79/32%	96/38%	54/22%	22/9%
Assessment & Evaluation	80/32%	89/36%	59/24%	22/9%
Community relations	63/25%	100/40%	65/26%	22/9%
Time, Mgt. Tasks	50/20%	86/35%	73/29%	39/16%

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

Table 6  
*Assistant Principals with a Professional Development Plan (2004)*

Level	Plan	No Plan
Elementary	26/53%	23/46%
Middle	32/57%	24/43%
High School	68/67%	34/33%

Note: Percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding.

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encouraged to establish comprehensive professional development programs for assistant principals. NASSP (2001) suggested the main purpose of such a program “should be to help assistant principals perform more effectively in current roles, as well as prepare themselves to assume a more advanced role in the future” (p. 14). This would place greater emphasis on instructional leadership skills and less on management.

*Recommendation.* As Lambert, Walker, Zimmerman, Cooper, Lambert, Gardner, & Slack (1995) pointed out, “Staff development is seen as an ‘outside-in’ process in which knowledge is assumed to lie outside the person.... Participation and professional development are seen as one organizing concept. Learning means access to multiple, sustained opportunities for preparation” (p. 55). Districts and educational leadership programs are encouraged to ensure that assistant principals have the opportunity to attend conferences, workshops, conventions, and institutes that focus on instructional leadership. Professional development activities should also include peer study groups, support networks, and the use of personal journals. Assistant principals should be encouraged to maintain memberships in professional organizations.

#### *Assistant Principal Desire for Professional Growth*

Assistant principals’ at all three levels indicated a strong desire to participate in professional development activities. Although their desire for professional activities decreased from 2000 to 2002, it increased from 2002 to 2004. Respondents in 2000 and 2002 indicated a need for professional development in areas associated with management skills whereas in 2004 their designated needs shifted to student learning, instruction, and curriculum; refocusing on the instructional leadership domain. Because of these findings, leadership preparation programs would be wise to make available offerings that appeal to and meet the needs of assistant principals for “post-credential” professional development of skills and knowledge.

Professional development programs need to move beyond merely offering information and encourage assistant principals to “step outside the box” and experience being instructional leaders as well as managers. The comments of respondents called for such activities to be made available from a variety of sources and offered in a variety of ways. Assistant principals indicated that time, location, and mode of delivery, as well as topic relevance should be considered in the design of professional development programs. Otherwise they indicated such activities merely represented “one more thing to do” and often had little relevance to their growth as instructional leaders. It is imperative that school districts and leadership preparation programs ensure that professional

development activities are personalized to individual needs, as well as to organizational goals (Barth, 1997).

Professional development must be provided for assistant principals on a continuous basis; one shot sessions without substantive content or application need to be avoided. Approaching professional development in this manner will hopefully allow assistant principals to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the skills, knowledge and habits of the mind needed to become effective instructional leaders. Investing in long-term professional development for assistant principals allows districts and leadership preparation programs to demonstrate their commitment to quality education with a focus on student learning.

*Recommendation.* Instructional leaders must be aware of the relationship between theory and practice. Weller and Weller (2002) asserted that, "Less appealing to most practitioner-oriented students of leadership, theories and research provide the essential foundation on which good practice is derived. Those ignorant of theory and research are akin to those who are ignorant of history: doomed to repeat the mistakes of their predecessors" (p. 16). Districts and professional leadership programs must ensure that assistant principals review research and reflect and discuss concepts and various points of view in their quest to attain competency as instructional leaders.

*Recommendation.* Up to 24% of the respondents in 2004 indicated they have no desire to participate in professional growth activities; however, districts should encourage them to do so. Progress along these lines must include districts determining if these individuals should remain as a part of their leadership team, particularly those seeking to become principals.

*Recommendation.* It is crucial that assistant principals have mentors who serve as high-quality models of instructional leadership. Besides modeling instructional leadership, mentors must be available and willing to share their knowledge concerning issues effective instructional leadership with their mentees. Mentors must also instill the value of continuous and substantive professional development in their mentees.

#### *Professional Growth Plans*

It is essential that the professional development of assistant principals not be left to chance or sporadic activities. Fine and Raack (1995) stated that school improvement is supported by professional development that involves all school leaders in planned, integrated, career-long learning.

*Recommendation.* The establishment of a professional growth plan is suggested as a means to ensure that continuous growth and development activities are planned and not left to chance. As Calabrese (2000) stated,

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“A professional growth plan is a critical component to competence. It supports the continued evolution of competence. Those without effective professional growth plans drift and operate with a chance-driven paradigm” (p. 192). Recognizing that professional development takes place over time, that individuals proceed at different paces, and that jobs, personalities, and locations differ; therefore, revising and evaluating progress should be a part of any professional growth plan and should be scheduled to take place on a regular basis. Performance assessment, such as a portfolio, may also be a formal part of the assistant principal’s professional development plan. There are a number of examples of professional development continuums and rubrics that can be used with assistant principals to establish continuous development plans (Hessel & Holloway, 2002; California School Leadership Academy, 2001).

*Recommendation.* A focus on student learning dominates state and national standards. Since standards are a major influence on administrative preparation programs in most states, and continue to evolve overtime, it might be most prudent to use them as a framework for designing professional development programs for assistant principals. It has been suggested that:

The ISLLC standards and those set by state policy makers and national associations provide useful input on the ‘what’ of professional development for school administrators. These standards can help administrators identify the knowledge and skills they need in order to become more effective. (Educational Research Service, 1999, p. 2)

An orientation of this nature would ensure that instructional leadership skills and management skills were integrated, to focus on outcomes emphasizing student learning. Professional development plans could easily be structured according to this type of framework as could the evaluation of the performance and progress being made by assistant principals. Individual strengths and weakness could be identified and appropriate recommendations offered.

#### Educational Importance of This Study

This study is significant in that it examines an area given little recognition in the literature—the need for continuous professional development for assistant principals. The study indicates that assistant principals recognize the need and have a desire for professional development. However, assistant principals expressed concerns related to time and content of such development activities. This is particularly important in view of the current emphasis on reculturing instructional leadership

with a distinct emphasis on teaching and student learning. This orientation is touted on the national, state, and local levels. Although educational leadership standards for administrative candidates and principals are becoming more defined and prescribed, assistant principals are often not mentioned with the same vigor and their inclusion is at most implied. Hopefully, this study points out that rather than leaving ongoing professional development to chance for assistant principals, school districts and educational leadership programs must provide programs and offerings that address their instructional leadership needs as well as enhance their management skills. ISLLC and state standards offer excellent frameworks within which to design and monitor such professional development activities to ensure that they produce effective instructional leaders. Developing instructional leadership skills among assistant principals will hopefully assist the rebuilding and reculturing of educational leaders committed to student learning. This study indicates that assistant principals are not opposed to a well defined program that would accommodate such an end. If provision is not made for quality professional development programs for assistant principals, the reculturing and rebuilding of instructional leaders, called for in state and national standards, may be postponed to another day.

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