A Team Approach
For Improved Instruction

by J. Foster Watkins & Jane Bandy Smith

Someone in each school must be responsible for coordinating the staff's efforts to improve instruction. In its 1982-83 standards, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools initiated the requirement that a staff member be designated to provide such coordination. Considering the current budget strain faced by most schools, it is unlikely someone will be hired to serve in this capacity, so it seems sensible to delegate these responsibilities to someone already working in the school. It should be someone who knows the faculty and students, is informed about the school's total instructional program, and knows its goals and objectives.

The principal is the first person to come to mind who meets all those requirements. However, today's principals have so many managerial responsibilities that they have little time or energy to spend in the traditional role of 'principal teacher.' Another person in the school who fills the requirements of a school-based instructional improvement coordinator is the school's media specialist. We propose an approach to coordination of instruction improvement that combines the efforts and skills of both the principal and the media specialist. But how would this arrangement work?

How the Team Would Work

There are seven responsibilities of an instructional improvement coordinator that we identified through a survey of professional literature. These seven are:

1. Recruiting, assigning, and scheduling personnel;
2. Evaluating teachers;
3. Defining and articulating school goals;
4. Establishing communication with the school constituency;
5. Developing the curriculum;
6. Planning and analyzing instruction with teachers;
7. Providing staff development.

By analyzing this list, it is possible to determine which team member should have primary responsibility for each of the seven activities and which member should provide support. Items one and two involved personnel management, so the principal would have primary responsibility for these activities with the media specialist providing support. The principal would also provide leadership for items three and four, although these would be the responsibility of the total school staff. Items five through seven are consultative activities in which the media specialist could be delegated primary responsibili-

ty and would be supported by the principal. It must be emphasized from the outset that this proposal is made with the full realization that the principal will still be ultimately responsible for seeing that instructional coordination is provided. He or she would delegate, not abdicate, responsibilities to be shared by the school’s media specialist. Such an approach would allow principals to extend their leadership through more creative use of personnel, yet not diminish their influence.

Elements for Success

There are four important elements which can help ensure that the team approach to instructional improvement will work. First, if the media specialist is to assume primary responsibility for the three consultative activities, he or she must be relieved of many of the routine clerical tasks involved in operating the media center. Therefore, it will become necessary for the school to use aides, paraprofessionals, and automated systems to complete these tasks and, thereby, allow the media specialist the time to carry out the instruction-related consultative services.

Second, in this proposed role, it is important that the media specialist's primary goal be aiding teachers in solving instructional problems rather than assisting the principal to identify teacher weaknesses during the evaluation process. However, it should be recognized that efforts to separate the consultative and evaluative responsibilities completely would be contrary to the accountability movement. To be in strict adherence with the tenets of this movement, those in helping positions, such as the media specialist, must either be ultimately responsible for the improvement of those being helped or be involved in the dismissal process. Therefore, when a media specialist helps a teacher to improve instructional effectiveness through one of the consultative responsibilities, the media specialist has a record of the efforts made to improve the teacher's skill. Because the media specialist will have this information, he or she may be required to offer that evidence in a dismissal procedure. Willingness to cooperate in these procedures will be a new albeit unwelcome role for most media specialists.

A third element which must be considered is the attitude of teachers toward the media specialist being involved in the classroom instructional program.

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tifacts brought in from home. Our New England heritage was a help here.

Then a third grade class honored Steven Kellogg by writing and producing a play for him in which characters from all of his books took part.

Second graders excited over Roma Gans’ science books and her love of birds decorated a special cake (baked by the classroom teacher) with little paper birds they had drawn, colored, and cut out.

First and second graders often work up an “operaetta” by using familiar nursery and children’s song tunes linking original words with lines and action much to the delight of various authors being honored. For Oliver Butterworth it was “The Enormous Egg.” For P.D. Eastman “The Best Nest” was used, for Hardy Gramatky it was “Little Toot,” and kindergarteners did “Chicken Soup” for Maurice Sendak.

Third graders honored Ann McGovern with an original play, and fourth graders worked out a skit on monsters much to the delight of Tom Ayresworth. Susan Purdy has mentioned the class that used her recipe books to develop a bake sale project that taught them practical use of math.

The 1986 fair theme is “Alice and the Wonderland of Books.” At the time of writing, eighteen authors have accepted. A number of them are repeaters, some returning after a couple of years absence. For them, finding the fair moved to Farmingville Elementary School will be a change in location, but not in enthusiasm or fun.

Judy Hawes (and her husband) are going to be back last year, in line with their nature book interests, their escorts for the day dressed themselves up to look like lady bugs. No one knows what surprise will be ready for them this year.

Carla Stevens, Sam Savitt, Ann McGovern, Doris Mac- Clintock, Jean Van Leeuwen, and Catherine Barr are others. Fifth graders are working out a play for Jean Van Leeuwen. And the class that has invited Catherine Barr are writing stories for her which she will illustrate and leave the sketches for her class and their school.

Activities required to produce the Book Fair obviously require student written and oral use of language, art experiences, music, and social studies tie-ins. All of this curricular activity comes about naturally because the students see a purpose to it. Certainly, familiarity with books is increased, and the authors become true friends rather than mysterious unknowns. A number of the student performances, as well as author sessions, have been retained on videotape.

[It should be noted that when Barlow Mountain Elementary School was closed, and the school library media teacher was transferred to Farmingville Elementary School, the Book Fair project was not lost. Mrs. Nye continues it in the new setting, and a number of parents have encouraged the development of a similar project in Ridgebury Elementary School, where elementary school students were relocated.]

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shows that the most difficult aspect of having the media specialist function as an instructional improvement coordinator is in enlisting the cooperation of classroom teachers. Studies indicate that principals are more open to having media specialists assist teachers improve their instruction than are teachers. Therefore, if the media specialist is to be delegated consultative responsibilities, it is necessary for the principal to facilitate faculty acceptance of this role. It will be the media specialist’s responsibility, once the principal has evidenced his or her support, to make the role valued by teachers. Where this has been done, teachers now view the media specialist as an invaluable ally and instructional resource.

Communication is the fourth element needed for successful implementation of this concept. It is important in most activities, but it is crucial to the success of a team approach to improving instruction. The media specialist must be given adequate time to report on his or her delegated responsibilities. There will be many times when the media specialist will need direction from the principal, but chance meetings in the lunchroom or hall are not sufficient. Effective communication, therefore, requires advance planning, scheduling, and discipline in allocating time for the principal/media specialist conferences.

When these four elements are present, it should be possible for the media specialist and the principal to have a working relationship that uses the strongest capabilities of each. If put into place, this proposal offers a solution to a problem facing many schools where the principals are inundated by so managerial demands that they lose sight of their instructional leadership role. By effectively using the skills of the media specialist, the principal can, indeed, provide a well coordinated instructional improvement plan for the faculty.

References


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