Preparing Principals for Instructional Leadership: Integrating the Common Core Standards *RESEARCH*

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Abstract

Western Kentucky University has structured its own P-12 school principal certification program with a heavy emphasis on instructional leadership, starting with a strong understanding of the Common Core Standards and their role in providing a firm foundation for effective instruction. Educational research from the past 40 years reveals that effective school principals are "learning leaders" (Hallinger, 2011). Principals in high-performing schools devote much of their focus to the process of teaching and learning and dedicate their efforts to the improvement of both. Principal training programs must then make fostering instructional leadership a top priority (Jackson & Kelly, 2002). The purpose of this article is to describe the process of weaving concepts and skills for effective instructional leadership, including the central place of the Common Core, into the university's training for aspiring school leaders. Significance for practitioners in K-12 schools is discussed. Western Kentucky University's experience in training a new generation of school leaders can inform other university programs as they design and revise their own P-12 administrator certification curricula. Moreover, school districts, which are charged with the professional growth of practicing administrators, may also consider the instructional leadership framework utilized at WKU for on-going professional development. In this way, WKU's P-12 principal preparation program can be a model for both practitioners and other universities.
Keywords: instructional leadership, principals, common core standards, certification

Introduction

Educational research from the past 40 years reveals that effective school principals are "learning leaders" (Hallinger, 2011). Principals in high-performing schools devote much of their focus to the process of teaching and learning and dedicate their efforts toward the improvement of both. Principal training programs must then make fostering instructional leadership a top priority (Jackson & Kelly, 2002). Western Kentucky University has structured its own P-12 school principal certification program with a heavy emphasis on instructional leadership, starting with a strong understanding of the Common Core Standards and their role in providing a firm foundation for effective instruction.

Western Kentucky University is a regional comprehensive institution located in Bowling Green, Kentucky with a long history in the training and development of educators. Kentucky State Normal School was one of the institutions that eventually gave birth to WKU in 1964, and the university continues to offer undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs for the certification and training of P-12 teachers and school leaders (Baird, Carraco, & McDaniel, 2006).

The Department of Educational Administration, Leadership, and Research (EALR) offers a post-Master's degree program for certification of P-12 school principals. The recently revised, cohort-based program includes 18 credit hours of core education administration courses leading to Level I (provisional) certification, along with 9 hours of co-requisite courses in school law, school finance, and instructional leadership. An additional 12 hours of coursework leads to Level II (professional) certification and qualifies a teacher for Rank I status if he/she does not possess it already.

The faculty members of WKU's EALR department have designed a program curriculum with a strong foundation in

Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning
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into the Classroom, Summer 2013

instructional leadership. Core concepts and skills, discussed below, are first introduced in EDAD 684, Instructional Leadership, and reinforced in a spiral curriculum woven throughout the remainder of the program. WKU's instructional leadership framework begins with a solid grounding in curriculum, a centerpiece of which is the Common Core Standards.

Instructional Leadership: Promoting Teacher Expertise

Hallinger (2011) suggested the term "learning leader" as a broader way to conceptualize the role of school principals in promoting improvements in student outcomes than the traditional term "instructional leadership." As Hallinger notes, however, principal behaviors that contribute to teacher professional learning have the single biggest impact on student outcomes (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). This finding is consistent with Marzano, Frontier, and Livingston's (2011) definition of effective "supervision" as "the enhancement of teachers' pedagogical skills, with the ultimate goal of enhancing student achievement" (p. 2).

Marzano et al. (2011) offered this definition in their book, *Effective Supervision: Supporting the Art and Science of Teaching*. The authors further identify five conditions necessary for the enhancement of teacher pedagogical skills, including a) a well-articulated knowledge base for teaching, b) focused feedback and practice, c) opportunities to observe and discuss expert practice, d) clear criteria for instructional improvement and a plan for success, and e) providing recognition of expertise (p. 4).

The education administration faculty at WKU have adopted Marzano et al.'s (2011) definition of effective supervision as their operational definition of instructional

leadership. The principal certification program, therefore, places strong emphasis on the principal's role in building teachers' pedagogical skills through fostering the five necessary conditions for improving teaching expertise. The first of these conditions involves the principal's duty to foster a clear, common understanding of effective teaching practice, beginning with a strong curriculum.

Curriculum as a Foundation for Effective Teaching Practice

Marzano (2003) suggested that one characteristic which distinguishes effective schools is the presence of a "guaranteed, viable curriculum" (p. 22). A key component of a guaranteed, viable curriculum is "opportunity to learn," the extent to which all students have access to the same content, and the extent to which the intended curriculum is implemented and actually learned by students (Marzano, 2003, p. 23). The authors point out that variance in how teachers understand, teach, and assess curricular standards has a major impact on how much of the curriculum students actually attain, and therefore on achievement outcomes. Effective teaching, then, carefully and intentionally integrates the intended curriculum throughout the instructional cycle.

Danielson's (2012) Framework for Teaching, adapted for the Kentucky Department of Education, includes five domains, beginning with effective planning and preparation. Curricular standards are foundational to this domain, which includes the integration of a teacher's content knowledge, how that knowledge is translated into meaningful learning outcomes, and how those outcomes are communicated to students, taught, and assessed in a way that informs further instruction. Under WKU's definition of

Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning
Special Issue: Revitalizing Education: Bringing the Common Core State Standards
into the Classroom, Summer 2013

instructional leadership, a school principal has the key responsibility of ensuring a guaranteed, viable curriculum though effective classroom teaching practice.

The Common Core Standards help to address the need for a guaranteed, viable curriculum and its place in effective teaching in numerous ways. In addition to being more rigorous than many of the state standards that preceded them (Carmichael, Wilson, Porter-Magee, & Martino, 2010), the Common Core Standards lay out curricular concepts and skills that logically and sequentially build into large-grain learning progressions over multiple grade levels. The organization and sequencing of the Common Core increases the likelihood of concept mastery by students necessary for the next level of learning and provides an opportunity for more meaningful remediation and enrichment based on student progress toward the standards (Daggett, Gendron, & Heller, 2010).

The specificity of Common Core Standards also mitigates somewhat against the tendency for variance of instruction across classrooms, further ensuring that all students are exposed to the same, high-quality curriculum, and provides a better foundation for common formative assessments. Well-designed, formative assessments can provide rich data on student progress toward learning goals, which teachers can collaboratively analyze and use to further inform instruction.

While the Common Core Standards do still require thoughtful prioritization, they nevertheless offer an excellent starting point for enhancing effective teaching practice. Western Kentucky University's principal preparation program therefore utilizes the Common Core at the beginning of its work in developing effective instructional leaders who know how to support teachers in the improvement of their practice.

Preparing Principals for the Common Core Standards

Marzano et al. (2011) organized the concept of a well-articulated knowledge base for teaching into four domains: classroom strategies and behaviors, planning and preparation, reflecting on teaching, and collegiality and professionalism. As Marzano et al. (2011) noted, these domains closely resemble the first four domains of the Danielson (2012) Framework for Teaching in terms of organization of pertinent research and theory on teaching and learning. Furthermore, Popham (2009) provided an instructional decision-making framework which includes four stages: curriculum determination, instructional design, instructional monitoring, and instructional evaluation (p. 20). The four stages complement the curricular and instructional aspects of Marzano et al.'s and Danielson's models and are interwoven into WKU's principal certification program.

Mapping & Prioritizing the Common Core Standards

Teachers' knowledge of content and curriculum is a vital component of Marzano et al.'s (2011) knowledge base for teaching and Danielson's (2012) Framework for Teaching. Similarly, Popham's (2009) instructional decision-making framework begins with curriculum determination. In their foundation instructional leadership course at WKU, students engage in mapping relevant curricular standards for a wide range of content areas and grade levels (P-12). Many of the students enrolled in these courses are classroom teachers who individually bring expertise in specific grade levels and content areas. Providing a larger lens of curricular standards is particularly important to broaden their knowledge beyond the scope of individual expertise and

Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning
Special Issue: Revitalizing Education: Bringing the Common Core State Standards
into the Classroom, Summer 2013

prepare them for varied instructional leadership roles.

Since 2010, the Kentucky Department of Education, in partnership with regional educational cooperatives, has engaged content area teacher leaders throughout the state in a process of unpacking Common Core Standards, translating standards into student-friendly learning targets, prioritizing the standards, and then sharing their work with teachers in local schools where district leaders helped direct efforts to remap existing curricula (Kentucky Department of Education, 2013). WKU's principal preparation program extends this work with aspiring leaders by asking students to engage in a similar process, recognizing that the depth of implementation of curriculum mapping has varied greatly from school to school and that many teachers utilize content sources outside the Common Core (e.g., Kentucky Early Childhood Standards 3 and 4, Kentucky Core Academic Kindergarten Standards, Kentucky Core Academic Standards, QualityCore Standards, and Kentucky Occupational Skills Standards). Furthermore, other subject areas are awaiting the finalization of Common Core Standards (science and social studies). This variance in the depth of implementation creates an opportunity for WKU's principal candidates to lead additional curriculum mapping efforts in their schools, becoming more familiarized with curricular sources like the Common Core and engaging colleagues in collaboration.

Faculty members model the use of various mapping methods, including both the KDE protocol and locally-developed protocols. Students are shown steps for unpacking standards to determine learning targets, prioritize the targets, and sequence identified targets into learning progressions (Popham, 2008). As part of the fieldwork for the curriculum coursework, students subsequently engage in curriculum mapping activities applicable within their own classrooms and/or schools. Each student selects a unit of study which addresses one or more standards for a content area. Rubrics are provided to describe the criteria for curriculum mapping as well as quality indicators.

Furthermore, as Reeves (2007) has pointed out, mapped curricula may still represent more content than teachers can reasonably teach to proficiency in a single school year. This is what Marzano (2003) means by ensuring that a curriculum is "viable." Reeves (2007) emphasizes that teachers must collaboratively prioritize standards based on which standards are essential for readiness at the next level of learning. In addition to mapping curricula, WKU's principal candidates also lead a prioritization process to ensure that their proposed curriculum is viable. The curriculum mapping and prioritization component of the coursework concludes with professional reflection about the benefits, challenges, and lessons learned during the process.

Observing and Providing Feedback on Practice

Once a guaranteed, viable curriculum has been established, instructional leaders must provide focused feedback on teaching practice. Marzano et al. (2011) advocated five ways to encourage and provide focused feedback with teachers: self-ratings, walkthroughs, observations, cueing teaching and student surveys. Focused feedback and practice can have a powerful effect in adult learning. Within the educational leadership courses at WKU, students participate in focused observations of other teachers in actual P-12 classroom settings to learn aspects of guiding teacher

Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning
Special Issue: Revitalizing Education: Bringing the Common Core State Standards
into the Classroom, Summer 2013

effectiveness and growth. For example, students use formative observation tools to collect and analyze data on important aspects of instruction. Two areas of focus for observations are student engagement and teacher questioning strategies. Both areas were emphasized by Marzano et al. (2011) and Danielson's (2012) models and are crucial to student success given the rigor of the Common Core Standards. Following their observations, students engage in both individual and collective reflection about what was observed as well as their own experiences as observers within the classrooms.

As educators have explored the Common Core Standards, there has been an increasing need for what Marzano et al. (2011) described as opportunities to observe and discuss expertise. He elaborated upon five ways to provide such opportunities: instructional rounds, expert coaches, expert videos, teacher-led professional development, and virtual communities. Faculty members at WKU create opportunities for students in the program to engage in these methods related to implementation of the Common Core Standards. For example, students within a class may participate in an instructional round within a school for a full morning focusing on one problem of practice related to instruction in the Common Core. Alternatively, they may view expert videos to describe what they observed and correlate this with components of the Danielson (2012) Framework for Teaching. By engaging directly in these methods for observing and discussing expertise, these future instructional leaders experience the benefits for students and teachers.

Balanced Assessment

Assessing student learning of the Common Core Standards is especially critical in the current era of schooling with the results having increasingly complex implications for students, teachers, and schools. Although Michael Scriven coined the terms formative and summative assessment nearly four decades ago (Popham, 2009), educators have continued to explore these concepts and assessment practices while gaining greater insight into their relevance for teaching and learning.

In their groundbreaking meta-analysis, Black and Wiliam (1998) set the pace for educational researchers to explore the power of formative assessment for guiding teaching and learning. Stiggins (2008) distinguished between assessment *for* learning, which is synonymous with current research on formative assessment, and assessment *of* learning, which is associated with more traditional summative assessments (e.g., unit exams, benchmark tests, end-of-course exams, high-stakes assessments). Furthermore, Stiggins (2008) and Popham (2008) emphasized the need to promote assessment literacy among teachers and leaders. Popham (2009) described the intricate link between assessment and instruction in his decision-making framework and described appropriate uses of summative and formative assessments within the framework. Darling-Hammond and Pecheone (2010) outlined a model for balanced assessment with an emphasis on creating coherency between the Common Core Standards, learning progressions, and formative and summative assessments. Marzano et al. (2011) addressed assessment within their discussion of providing clear criteria and planning for success. In terms of criteria, these authors focused on two major areas for gauging effective teaching: (1) classroom strategies and behaviors and (2) value-added student achievement. Planning for success, according to Marzano et al.

Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning
Special Issue: Revitalizing Education: Bringing the Common Core State Standards
into the Classroom, Summer 2013

(2011), should include professional growth and development plans.

EALR faculty members at WKU strive to foster an understanding of "balanced assessment" for instruction and encourage the concept of developing assessments for learning as an integral part of curriculum development. WKU faculty believe future educational leaders must have a rich understanding of sound assessment practices that enhance student learning of the Common Core Standards and reflect, as accurately as possible, what students know and can do. Furthermore, WKU faculty promote embedding formative assessments within the teaching and learning process for students as well as adult learners.

Given the vital role of assessment within instruction, another key learning outcome for students in WKU's program is the ability to identify attributes of both summative and formative assessments and the functions of each as related to instruction of the Common Core Standards. After studying foundational research in assessment practices (e.g., Popham, Black & Wiliam, Stiggins), students in our program select and implement a set of formative assessment strategies within their own classrooms or schools as another component of their fieldwork. Following implementation, students write a summary of implemented practices as well as reflections about their experiences with formative assessment.

Conclusion

Aspiring school leaders at Western Kentucky University immerse themselves in the work of becoming instructional leaders, starting with an understanding of how to embed the Common Core Standards in school-wide curricula as a foundation of effective teaching practice. The long-term test of the program's efficacy will be in how these educators function as leaders of P-12 schools around the state. Data are still being collected in this regard, but anecdotally, graduates of the program report that they feel well prepared to meet the challenge of establishing a highly-effective teacher in every classroom, and have a stronger understanding of the role of curriculum, including the Common Core Standards, in effective teaching practice.

Western Kentucky University's experience in training a new generation of school leaders can inform other university programs as they design and revise their own P-12 administrator certification curricula. Moreover, school districts, which are charged with the professional growth of practicing administrators, may also consider the instructional leadership framework utilized at WKU for on-going professional development. In this way, WKU's P-12 principal preparation program can be a model for both practitioners and other universities, as it exemplifies the integration the Common Core and the Framework for Effective Teaching Practice in a structure that continually informs the leadership of school administrators.

Kentucky Journal of Excellence in College Teaching and Learning
Special Issue: Revitalizing Education: Bringing the Common Core State Standards
into the Classroom, Summer 2013

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