

Helping Struggling Teachers

BY WILLIAM SLATER

It is no secret that Christian school administrators wear many hats. Of all the duties a principal must perform, perhaps the most important is helping struggling teachers. Other needs may seem more urgent during the course of a busy day, but ignoring a teacher's need for assistance may not only seal the fate of an individual teacher, but may jeopardize the overall effectiveness of a school. Tucker (2001) states that whole-school improvement will not happen unless the instructional leader helps each individual teacher perform well. Though a principal may juggle many tasks in a day, helping teachers who are floundering must be given top priority.

Many educators consider the observation/evaluation process unpleasant. This misconception robs a school of one of the most important tools for school improvement. The evaluation process can be positive and rewarding. Fear and displeasure are unnecessary. Davis (1991) states that the secret is found in good procedures based on sound principles of evaluation. He elaborates by sharing that a "life-building atmosphere" will develop in schools where a positive plan for assisting teachers is in place.

Identifying a Struggling Teacher

The first step in helping teachers is to identify those with the greatest need. Occasionally a teacher may approach the principal and admit he or she is struggling, but this is rare. He or she may share his or her inadequacies with a peer; however, fellow teachers do not usually pass this information along to the administration because they fear they will be betraying a professional trust with a colleague. More often than not, the principal will be alerted to a teacher's inadequacies by a concerned parent who is registering a complaint. This is not the best way to discover a classroom teacher is having difficulties. Administrators should not be passive in identifying struggling teachers.

At this point, some presuppositions can be made about those who need help. First, beginner teachers often struggle. The first year in teaching is perilous for many reasons. No school of education can completely prepare a novice for what lies ahead in the classroom, even if a new teacher deserves the

"rookie of the year" award. Krueger (1995) relates that first-year teachers must have assistance because "each school has its unique features, and the student teaching experience in one school cannot touch all the unique policies and philosophies of a different school." A principal can safely assume that he or she will need to spend time assisting the first-year teacher.

Second, teachers who are new to a school may struggle. Even if a teacher comes to a school with years of experience the principal will need to devote time to that individual to help him or her through the initial year. In some cases the teacher may need spiritual and emotional support. This is especially true when a teacher has transferred to your ministry from another Christian school. Not only has the change brought about a new work environment, the teacher has also been uprooted from one church family and is being grafted into a new one. Being aware of the circumstances surrounding the change will be invaluable as the administrator works with this individual.

Not only should principals devote time to first-year teachers and teachers who are new to the ministry, he or she must also be ready to assist experienced teachers. Just because a teacher has been in the classroom for a number of years does not necessarily mean he or she has been steadily improving. Unfortunately, many teachers with ten years of experience have simply repeated the mistakes of their first year – ten times. Experience does not always produce expertise. Inadequate yet experienced teachers may provide the greatest challenge to an instructional leader attempting to bring about school improvement.

Last, expert teachers need ongoing assistance. Glickman (2002) observes, "Competent teachers . . . know that . . . no matter how well or poorly one is currently doing, one must always learn how to be better."

At this point you may be thinking, "It looks like all teachers are candidates for assistance." And you are right! The question now becomes, "Who is struggling the most and where should the principal offer assistance first?" The answer to these questions becomes apparent during the course of classroom observations.

It is the duty of the principal (or his or her designee) to observe classrooms to determine where assistance is needed. Wiles and Bondi (1991) state, "The primary job of a school supervisor is to improve the instructional experiences of students. This task includes . . . conducting evaluation[s] to insure that the intentions of the curriculum are being met." Classroom observation is foundational to determining effective teaching. Whether assistance comes in the form of encouraging a successful teacher or addressing the needs of an ineffective one, the starting point will most likely be the result of an administrative classroom visit. Because the classroom is where teaching takes place, it is paramount that the instructional leader spends time there. Other sources such as parent comments, lesson plan review, and conferencing with the teacher may provide a window into the value of the classroom experience, but all these pale in comparison to an evaluator's first-hand look at the delivery of lessons.

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Qualifications of an Instructional Leader

As with any professional task, success or failure is largely determined by the leader's educational and experiential capacity. An instructional leader must be thoroughly equipped to identify areas that need improvement and then help a faculty member who is struggling with some aspect of the teaching/learning process.

First, an instructional leader must be able to clearly define competent teaching. It is not enough to simply "know it when you see it." What if you don't see good teaching when you observe in the classroom? Will you "know it when you don't see it?" How can you assist if you are unable to diagnose the problem for the teacher? (An educational supervisor must be able to articulate the characteristics of sound instruction and explain the inadequacies of ineffective teaching.) Tucker (2001) argues that the most difficult part of drafting an assistance plan is describing the teacher's precise problem. An instructional leader must be adept at doing this.

A complete discourse on successful teaching is outside the focus of this article; however, the following outline provides the basic framework for competent instruction.

A teacher must

- know his or her subject.
- understand how students learn.
- plan lessons to meet the needs of the class as a whole and pupils as individuals.
- use a variety of methods to convey information.
- be able to manage materials, time, and students.
- evaluate student learning.

In conjunction with an understanding of pedagogy, the instructional leader must use evaluation instruments during observations that delineate strengths and weaknesses in

instruction. These instruments should be constructed by the school or adopted from other sources.

Second, the instructional leader must have a thorough knowledge of teaching methods (Davis, 1991). Many times the reason a teacher is struggling is because he or she lacks variety in lesson presentations, and the students are disinterested in the lessons. If the supervisor does not have a full repertoire of teaching methods, he or she will be unable to offer assistance.

Davis (1991) also contends that the instructional leader

must have a thorough knowledge of the curriculum. If the teacher does not have a full grasp of the curriculum, he or she may be delivering the material in a halted and disjointed manner. Worse yet, the teacher may be wandering aimlessly through the material and therefore not following the curriculum at all. Wiles and Bondi (1991)

elaborate on the importance of knowing the curriculum by explaining that one of the roles of a supervisor is to ensure that what is being taught is, in fact, what was intended by the curriculum planners. They go on to add that "To assume that the teacher will follow the planned curriculum simply because it exists is just unrealistic . . ." (Wiles and Bondi, 1991).

Third, an evaluator must have established a good personal rapport with the teachers (Davis, 1991). Just as good rapport is essential to a teacher's success in the classroom (Tatham, 1995), good rapport with teachers is necessary for the evaluator to move an educator toward improvement.

Finally, the administrator must be spiritually and emotionally fit. The job of teacher evaluation and assistance is taxing. (Sometimes teachers become defensive or hurt by attempts to bring about improvement.) Misunderstanding is possible. Within the framework of many Christian schools, subordinates often minister in other areas of the church as peers with the supervisor. This adds complexity not present in other school settings. We can add the importance of spiritual strength to Tucker's (2001) observation that principals need "emotional support in the challenging process of working with underperforming [sic] teachers."

After a classroom observation has brought a teacher's inadequacy to light, the principal must begin the process of remediation. This should include clearly communicated expectations, establishing improvement goals with the teacher, and monitoring the accomplishment of these goals.

Clearly Communicate Expectations

Both the teacher and the principal will quickly become frustrated if the teacher does not understand what the supervisor expects. Expectations should be clearly stated in a faculty manual or other reference material. A well-written job description is only a starting point in communicating expectations. The principal must also remember that communication is a two-way street. A post-observation conference is a good time for the principal to ask the teacher

to verbalize his or her belief about good teaching. This conversation may help the principal realize an area where the teacher's grasp of pedagogy is weak or inconsistent with the school's philosophy of education.

This dialog should continue as the principal defines his or her expectations and shares his or her vision of effective teaching. Tucker (2001) declares, "The first step in a fair evaluation process is the clear and explicit explanation of job expectations." She continues by stating,

Principals often underestimate the value of articulating their beliefs about what good teaching involves. Most individuals want to meet expectations if they have a clear understanding of them. Once expectations are clear, the normal supervisory process with observation and feedback can take place.

One-on-one discussions between the educational leader and the teacher are absolutely necessary in the evaluative process.

Set an Improvement Goal with the Teacher

As mentioned previously, communication between the teacher and the supervisor is vital. Its importance is not limited to noticing shortcomings in the teacher's understanding of pedagogy or philosophy but is also imperative because improvement goals should be set collaboratively. Glickman (2002) observes that instructional improvement is likely to be most meaningful when the individual teacher sees the need for change and takes major responsibility for it. He further concludes that collaboration "presupposes that a leader's or a teacher's individual ideas about instructional improvement are not as effective as mutually derived ideas." A collaborative approach is validated by the biblical principle that two cannot walk together unless they agree (Amos 3:3).

So what are the steps that lead to collaborative goal setting? First, the leader and teacher must reach consensus on the problem that must be corrected. This may be accomplished during the post-observation meeting or the supervisor may ask the teacher to take time to consider any areas of needed improvement and write them down. The principal may want to provide a short form that will help the teacher focus on a particular area. The form should provide samples of well-written instructional improvement goals and space for the teacher to write out his or her goal.

Next, the teacher and principal should meet once again to discuss the teacher's goal. At this point it is important for the supervisor to be very candid with the teacher. Most often the teacher will identify a worthwhile goal, but it is the leader's duty to refine or even change the goal if the teacher is off track. During this meeting both participants should be satisfied that the right goal has been identified and that there is mutual understanding of what the goal means.

This discussion should also address the resources the teacher may need in order to achieve that goal. It is shortsighted for the principal to conclude that the teacher can

reach the goal unassisted or without the aid of additional tools. Resources may include books, workshops, course work, or other professional training. It may also involve instructional materials or equipment the teacher can utilize in the classroom. Glickman (2002) suggests allowing the teacher to choose the sources of assistance he or she believes will be most helpful in achieving the goal.

A reasonable amount of time should be allowed for the teacher to use the resources supplied to bring about the desired change. Prior to the principal's first-hand evaluation, the teacher should be given an opportunity to make a self-evaluation. Thompson (1997) states that the evaluation process is better when self-evaluation is part of the equation.

Finally, the principal should plan classroom visits focusing particularly on the goal upon which the teacher and leader have agreed. There should be times when an observer visits a classroom to gather information on a myriad of different areas; however, during the remediation process, observations should focus on the accomplishment of the selected goal. Once the goal has been achieved, observations can become broader again. This approach assumes that the principal has correctly identified with the teacher the area in need of the most improvement.

Focus on One Improvement Goal at a Time

The reader will note that in the previous section there is emphasis on addressing *one* goal. That is by design. Though an instructional leader may observe more than one area of needed improvement, it is important to focus on one area at a time. This approach requires a great deal of patience and everyone may not agree that it is the most effective way to bring about change. In fact, Davis (1991) suggests focusing on three areas of improvement at a time. This author's conclusion, however, is that most often teachers are overwhelmed when presented with multiple areas of improvement. Experience has taught that as soon as one shortcoming has been addressed in a conference the teacher will unlikely be able to focus on much else. This emphasizes once again the importance of being able to identify the single greatest weakness and employing an effective plan for correcting the problem.

An assumption is made that the teacher in question does not pose an eminent hazard to his or her students, the school's reputation, or most importantly the testimony for Christ. Occasionally, a teacher must be removed immediately due to gross incompetence, but that scenario would be an atypical situation. All educators have strengths and weaknesses. Weaknesses are usually not eliminated in one fell-swoop. It is prudent for principals to exercise the patience necessary to address one concern at a time. This will promote positive morale among the faculty members and eliminate anyone feeling that the administrator is "lashing out" at individuals.

Monitor Progress

Once a collaborative goal has been selected with the teacher, it is important for the supervisor to monitor the

teacher's progress as he or she works toward accomplishing the goal. Proper monitoring will not be achieved in any one scheme, but should include a variety of methods. Reaching an instructional improvement goal should be viewed as an ongoing process, and tracking the teacher's development will require multiple contacts with the teacher both in and out of the classroom.

The first contact following the teacher's self evaluation should be a classroom observation mutually scheduled with the teacher. Scheduling this observation with the teacher is preferred over a random visit in order to allow the teacher to focus on the accomplishment of the specific instructional improvement goal. It would be rare for a teacher not to demonstrate improvement in the identified area during this visit if expectations have been clearly explained as discussed previously. This leads to perhaps the most important exchange—the post-observation conference.

Assuming improvement was observed, it is important for the instructional supervisor to use the post-observation conference as an opportunity to praise the teacher. It is time for the principal to "put on a coach's hat" and be an encouragement to the teacher. We turn to Scripture once again to apply an important principle of supervision. Prov. 27:21 states, "As the fining pot for silver, and the furnace for gold; so is a man to his praise." Praise is the key to refinement. No wonder Davis (1991) concluded, "Motivation and goodwill are by-products of a successful evaluation program." Teachers are eager to hear positive feedback about their teaching and this provides the principal an invaluable opportunity to do so. Morale among faculty will be strengthened as teachers receive encouraging responses from the administration.

This is not to say that the teacher has "arrived." It is simply one of the necessary steps toward improvement. During the scheduled observation the principal may have noticed only slight improvement or may have questioned whether the improvement was an exception rather than the rule in the classroom. That is why it is important to follow up with unannounced observations.

Unannounced visits may be either formal or informal evaluations. Timely feedback should be given to the teacher expressing approval or correction as needed. Correction should always be accompanied by suggested methods for improvement. To correct without offering specific suggestions may frustrate the teacher. It may be compared to sending a soldier to battle with no ammunition. As mentioned earlier, one of the requirements of a supervisor is having a full repertoire of teaching methods readily available to share with teachers.

Observations and conferences focusing on the identified goal should continue until the supervisor is convinced it has become an integral part of the teacher's professional persona. If the observation/conference cycle becomes stagnant in relation to the identified weakness, the administrator should consider methods not discussed here such as peer coaching, mentoring, additional professional training, etc.

Improving instruction is the most important task an administrator will assume. It is accomplished by actively being involved in teacher supervision. Though it is a time-

consuming task, it is rewarding and is vital to overall school improvement. ■

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