

# 6.

## Administration and Policy

### Perspectives for Effective

### Schools

We have reviewed some of the research on characteristics of effective schools and come to the conclusion that effective schools are built on leadership and a positive school climate. Now we would like to illustrate how one principal enhanced the effectiveness of his school by using the ideas of leadership and school climate to focus a school improvement effort. To do this, we first introduce the metaphor of schools as "loosely coupled" systems, hypothesizing that effective schools tend to be more tightly coupled in areas suggested by our model. Next a story is offered to illustrate how Bill's beliefs about leadership and school climate led to changes in student and teacher behaviors that helped improve student achievement. We conclude with a list of implications for superintendents and school boards.

#### Loose Coupling

During the last 80 years, public schools have mushroomed into ever larger and increasingly more complex institutions. And yet, at the classroom level, the structure of school has hardly changed at all: one teacher meets with 20 to 35 students in a classroom. The difference is that there are more classrooms in schools now.

When pieces of an organization, like classrooms, can be added or taken away without substantially affecting the whole, this suggests that the organization is loosely coupled (Weick, 1976; Firestone, 1980). Corbett (1982) defines coupling in this context as "the extent to which action by one person requires or leads to action by another." For example, if there is no relationship between the actions of one classroom and those of another, then a school is considered loosely coupled. If individuals are more interdependent, as in team teaching, the unit is more tightly coupled. A loosely coupled system, in other words, is not like an assembly line where, when one part is lacking, the whole line must shut down.

Schools benefit in many ways from being loosely coupled. Structurally, there needs to be some way to divide children into manageable groups that won't disrupt the school. In no other place in American society are so many people packed into so small an area as children are in schools. For five to six hours a day, 180 days a year, each classroom houses up to 35 students plus a teacher. Small, loosely coupled groups make schools more manageable; if one classroom is chaotic, other classrooms will not be affected.

In a loosely coupled school, one can add or subtract courses in the curriculum and continue school even though teachers, principals, and students change or at times don't perform up to par. Schools can be combined when student enrollment is declining or new ones built when the number of students increases. In a loosely coupled system, internal changes don't have a large impact on the organization as a whole. One Friday afternoon, when the buses were running late, a quarter of the faculty was out on an inservice activity, and the ovens in the cafeteria weren't working, a principal we work with described his school as completely uncoupled. Of course, the fact that all this could happen and school remain in session is one of the positive properties of a loosely coupled system.

In many other ways, however, loose coupling presents problems for a school. Teachers may not know what their colleagues are teaching in the classroom next door. Principals may have difficulty generating consensus on school rules in a large faculty and among a large student body that changes once every three to six years. Given that schools strive toward many different goals, accountability in a loosely coupled school may also be a problem. Coordination may be difficult, as connections between people in the school may rest more on happenstance than on design. As a result, planning in such areas as curriculum may suffer.

Descriptions of effective schools suggest that certain couplings or connections are necessary if schools are to be effective in producing

academic achievement. These crucial couplings can help school administrators order their many competing priorities.

The school's schedule of time use is one such area. The time schedule is a plan of how different subunits in a school are coupled or coordinated. Let's use as an example a school where there are four teachers for each grade, 1-4, and two kindergarten teachers. All teachers must have lunch and planning periods during a school day that begins at 8:30 a.m. and ends at 2:45 p.m. Their classes must be scheduled for regular sessions with special teachers in library, art, music, or physical education, who also need lunch and planning time. The six school aides must be equally divided up among the classroom teachers. Provision must be made for serving breakfast to 150 students and supervising the playground and bus loading. And then, the Chapter I teachers need to have access to students who must be pulled out of class for special help—but not during instruction in math and reading. Special education students need to be mainstreamed. There must be special schedules for assemblies and holidays, and a schedule for bathroom breaks and recess.

The image presented here is one of a tightly coupled environment that is constrained by time. The schedule is tight, usually figured to the minute. Such coupling, while necessary, may not be sufficient to produce student achievement above expectations.

Although it is easy to understand why many principals get seduced into spending most of their time managing such a situation (and schools do need full-time management), we suspect that simply managing it is not enough. The school effectiveness research gives us hints about what else is important. Effective schools have time for teachers to plan and meet together, time for systematic supervision of classes, time for students to cover the content that is tested. From case studies of leaders of effective schools, it appears that they are able to structure at least some of their time in these areas.

What we are suggesting is that there are ways to manage efficiently—to run the organization smoothly—while ensuring that a school is also effective; that it produces high student achievement through coupling the "right" areas: student success, involvement, and coverage. The criterion of effective management should not be how well a principal maintains the school's time schedule, although that is important. Rather, the criterion should be promoting student success, involvement, and coverage—the benchmarks of an effective school.

In the following story, the principal's goal is to ensure high engagement and coverage of appropriate academic content. The story describes this principal's attempt to couple his organization around engagement and coverage.

## Bill's Story

When I first accepted the position of principal, each wing of the school was running a separate K-4 program, using different texts and different teaching strategies. The three wings were very competitive, each claiming superior results and philosophy. Children were selected for each wing on the basis of a draft. The wings were led by a head teacher in charge of purchasing and staff supervision. The head teachers met with the superintendent as a group; even though I was the principal, I was not involved. It took me almost six months to figure out what exactly was going on in each wing of the school.

One wing had a nongraded philosophy where students progressed through the curriculum at their own pace. Another wing grouped everyone within the grade according to ability and then had all kids change groups about six to eight times a day. Teachers in that wing taught only certain subjects. The third wing had self-contained classrooms for reading and math, but the rest of the subjects were divided among the teachers, each of whom saw all the students. The halls in each wing were always full. I really couldn't tell exactly where kids were if their parents wanted to find them. That's not a happy situation for a principal.

In the beginning, if a parent asked me to describe the school program, I couldn't do it. And when I could, it was complicated and contradictory. At one point, I remember trying to explain why one child, whose mother thought she should be going to middle school, was destined to spend another year at the primary school. It turned out that the girl had repeated second grade, but the system was so unclear that her mother never realized it. The girl herself had no clue either, as the situation was ungraded.

### Consensus Building

It seemed to me that the school's professional staff needed to build a consensus around the goals and direction of the school. We formed committees—led by the head teachers and myself and centered around the subject areas of reading, math, social studies, and science—to determine what essentials all children should master. I used the state's minimum competency program as a base, along with four or five of the texts used in the various wings. We also took a look at the standardized test specifications. After a year, we had a list of units with objectives in each subject that almost everyone agreed children should master. By focusing on content areas, the staff became more tightly coordinated.

During the day, the wings had 45 minutes for group planning, led by the wing leaders, while their children went to gym, music, library, or

art. After discussion with the wing leaders, we moved to a grade-level plan, where the wing leaders became grade-level leaders. We tried this out initially when the committees met to decide units and objectives for each grade level. During the second year, after discussion with the team leaders, I switched everyone into self-contained classrooms with one teacher teaching the four major subjects to one group of students. We kept the planning time for the grade-level teams, as we needed to build a new consensus with these groups. The leaders of each wing now shouldered the leadership for grade-level meetings. After a few months they reported that the team meetings concentrated on curriculum, as everyone now had the same curriculum content to teach. The system now focused on teaching agreed-on standard curriculum, and not everyone was pleased with this change. However, I figured that it's easier to coordinate curriculum and instruction within grade levels, rather than having three wings, each with their separate way of doing business. In addition, this system encouraged teachers to take responsibility for a particular group of children and their learning. After a year, not as many students were getting lost between the cracks in the curriculum.

### Feedback

Now that the professional staff agreed on the objectives students should master, I asked teachers to schedule when they would cover the objectives. Then I monitored their lesson plans to see that they were keeping up with their schedules, so that all students would have an opportunity to cover the material everyone had decided was important—the material that was on the standardized tests.

This year, I had a way of tracking coverage, as teachers turned in their mastery tests on each objective. Then I compared the dates they completed the units to their schedule of objectives. Most were able to keep up or catch up when they fell behind. I think it had something to do with my knowing where each teacher was and showing I was concerned.

The grade-level leaders and other teachers on the grade-level team provided feedback that reinforced our consensus about what children should master. The grade-level groups discussed instructional strategies and did daily problem solving centered around teaching and individual students. Most groups tend to plan together, and a few teams are now submitting group lesson plans. The group leaders report that they feel more successful because their roles are more closely linked to decisions about curriculum and instruction. This feedback helps to reinforce our school's academic emphasis.

Discipline presented problems when I took over the school, but the

problems were reduced when everyone changed to self-contained classrooms. Students were no longer in the halls so much of the time, and individual teachers had responsibility for a limited number of students. But we also developed a consistent set of rules for the school during the second year. We took a day in the summer to list routines kids were expected to follow for such classroom activities as sharpening pencils, going to the bathroom, getting and putting back instructional materials, and changing groups. This was one of the first activities the teachers completed as grade-level teams. The teams developed games to teach children these classroom management skills.

We also reviewed the rules with students through a demonstration. During the first couple of days of school, I stopped by each teacher's classroom to see how the program was being carried out. I believe that providing clear feedback to students on the rules, developing consensus about the rules, and making sure everyone received feedback on their implementation may have contributed to fewer discipline problems.

### Modeling

When I took the job as principal, I had an image of the kind of school I wanted—almost a feeling that I carried around inside my head. Of course, the trick is to forge the everyday life of the school so it matches the image. Every month I try to put my excess energies into making reality more like my image.

By being firm and decisive, I try to set a businesslike tone that communicates, "We are here to learn and to teach. We know what it is that students are expected to learn. We know that order is necessary for children to learn. We're proud to be part of an organization that is succeeding and improving." Those four sentences summarize my own image about what a school should be and what I am trying to mold this school toward.

I try to use myself as a model for others. I work longer hours than most, and I build regular classroom visits into my schedule. Once a month I meet with grade-level groups of teachers during planning time to discuss problems and possibilities for the future. At lunch time, I spend a few minutes chatting with staff, while making sure order is maintained in the cafeteria. Faculty meetings center around program improvement and sometimes use the talents of our own staff. Reviewing and commenting on lesson plans and on teachers' and students' success in mastering objectives receive top priority one afternoon a week. While each of these activities overlaps with the next, the redundancy provides me with the knowledge I need to keep tabs on what is happening in the school. I do a lot of listening.

### School Climate and My Beliefs

I believe a school should be a safe place where children go about the interesting business of learning in an orderly environment, a school with an academic emphasis and expectations for success. I believe that the leader of a school, usually the principal, creates the school environment. And creating an environment for learning depends on putting your time where your mouth is.

For me, there is a hierarchy of needs to attend to. First, I am concerned about an orderly environment. Is the school safe? Are children physically safe? I keep tabs on the playground, the cafeteria, the classrooms to look for things like spilled food kids could slip on, loose tiles, holes kids could trip in. But my idea of safety goes beyond just the physical. I try to find out whether kids feel safe in the restrooms, on the playing fields, in the locker rooms, in the gym, coming and going from school, and most important, in the classrooms. I keep records of fights and office referrals and sit down once a month to take a look at developing patterns to make sure the kids, their teachers, and, at times, their parents get help from grade-level teams or others in resolving those problems.

Is the school environment orderly? I look for teachers and students being quiet in the halls during classes; between classes a friendly jostle is one thing, but no running or pushing. The teachers know I expect this and do a fine job. In the classrooms, a busy buzz is not uncommon, and I look to see if students are engaged and if the teacher is providing appropriate materials and classroom routines. For beginning teachers and those having difficulty maintaining order, I spend extra time supervising in their classrooms and conferencing with them afterwards. Grade-level leaders and their teams help new teachers understand the school's routines, so most new teachers make a smooth transition. I also check my own management to see what decisions I make that may disrupt school routines, such as use of the intercom, frequent school-wide assemblies, and scheduling such things as special area teachers, substitutes, and physical exams.

Is success expected? All students can succeed if given the time, the appropriate material, and the support and structure they need. I monitor report cards, teachers' unit test results, and standardized tests carefully to determine patterns of success in each class. While in classrooms, I check to see whether teachers are giving all children opportunities to participate, or spending more time with some kids and less with others, or just ignoring some kids. Grade-level leaders share with their teams strategies for increasing student success through increasing teacher interaction with all students. I try to listen carefully when teachers talk about their "problem" students, looking for evidence

that the teacher has found ways to use some of each problem student's abilities and attitudes to help ensure that student's success.

I also take a look at how my own behavior supports students' and teachers' success. A supervisory system built on student engagement, content coverage, and success is one way I hope to ensure that the school is effective. Through modeling, feedback, and consensus building, the beliefs I hold about schools are becoming more of a reality. The norms of a safe and orderly environment with an academic emphasis are now widely held; as a school, we all appear to be reading off the same script.

## Implications for Superintendents and School Boards

In our review of research on effective classrooms and schools, we found little attention paid to the superintendent, the central office staff, and the school board. Indeed, in some cases, schools were effective because they buffered themselves against "interference" from the district's influence and requirements. This suggests that many school systems may be very loosely coupled, with little coordination between individual schools and their programs. In such systems, effective schools may be created by dynamic principals, but ineffective schools go unchecked. Where that is the case, superintendents and school boards need to create management and policy structures that will couple the school system internally for increased student achievement.

School boards and superintendents set the long-term direction of a school system. They control powerful organizational incentives, such as management structure and objectives, compensation plans, promotion criteria, accountability systems, and planning designs. Unfortunately, however, not all school systems gear these incentives to enhanced student achievement: at times, promotions result from lack of performance on the administrator's part; teacher planning time is reduced in times of austerity; raises are based on longevity rather than merit.

When the board and the superintendent have developed a consensus on the school system's focus, on the other hand, then the organization is more likely to be structured so that student achievement increases. Coupling school systems for increased achievement requires attention to the following policy and management areas:

**1. School district philosophy.** That musty document needs to be reviewed and perhaps rewritten to show that student achievement is to receive priority in the school district, if this is the consensus of the board and superintendent.

**2. Policy analysis.** The policy manual should be reviewed to determine which procedures support student success, involvement, and coverage. Research reviewed in previous chapters suggests that the individual school may need more autonomy in hiring staff and expending funds if it is to be effective. Conversely, more accountability of administrators and teachers may need to be built into job descriptions, evaluations, and salary schedules.

**3. Goal setting.** The school board and superintendent need to reach a consensus not only that student achievement is important, but that it can be improved. Goals for the district should center around that improvement. (See Appendix 2 for an example from Kent, Washington, School District No. 415.)

**4. Financial structure.** The district's financial structure should be reviewed to determine how its policies and procedures impact on student involvement, coverage, and success. For example, if staff development is a centralized function funded through the central office, then it is not likely that such money will address all schools' individual needs for increasing student involvement, success, and coverage. Instead, the schools may need line items in their budgets for staff development to support changes deemed appropriate at the school level. Acquisition of curriculum material and equipment could be funded in a similar fashion.

**5. Accountability.** The superintendent should be held accountable to the board, not only for how district funds are spent, but also for student achievement. A quarterly report on student involvement, success, and coverage should be considered as important as a financial statement. The school board should go on record as being accountable to local citizens for improving student achievement. The superintendent should be held accountable by the board for principals' performance.

**6. Speed of results.** Change happens relatively slowly. The changes we describe would take most school systems a minimum of five years to implement, and longer in larger school systems.

**7. Superintendent's contract.** The average term of a superintendent's contract is approximately three years. Ironically, substantial changes in schools take much longer. School boards that want consistent leadership should consider longer term contracts with superintendents.

**8. Teacher contracts.** Contracts between the board and the teachers association should be reviewed to determine which provisions help or hinder student involvement, success, and coverage. The length of the

teaching day, planning time, staff development, curriculum development, sick leave, and termination procedures could all impact on student achievement. In some cases, adequate student involvement may hinge on a longer teaching day with provision for teacher planning time.

## Summary

How a school system is run gives messages about what is important. A school that is loosely coupled may not engage students successfully enough so that they fulfill the school's expectations. A loosely coupled school may have no organizational press for achievement. On the other hand, effective schools tend to be coupled or coordinated to produce student achievement. In our story, Bill used the three leadership processes of consensus building, feedback, and modeling in building a school that is instructionally coupled. Brief suggestions about the role of superintendents and school boards in helping to develop instructionally coupled schools concluded the chapter. The next chapter focuses on assessing the effectiveness of your own school.