

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAMS TO THE RESCUE

Developing a
shared vision is
key to success

BY SANDY AUSTIN, DONNA
ANDERSON-DAVIS, JASON
GRAHAM, AND MICHELE WHITE

It's a new school year, and you have made a resolution to work more with teachers to improve teaching and learning. Your excitement turns to focused determination as you remember all of your other responsibilities as a school principal. You ask yourself, "How can I get into classrooms more and plan supports for teachers?"

You are not alone if you feel that the daily crush of your noninstructional tasks is insurmountable. According to a Stanford University observational study "Principal's Time Use and School Effectiveness," principals spend only about 10 percent of their day on instruction-related tasks. Based on research and experience, it is evident that without effective leaders who are able to focus on improving instruction and instructional leadership, meeting the needs of all students will remain out of reach. As a principal, how do you keep from feeling overwhelmed?

Form an instructional leadership team of teacher leaders to identify teaching and learning challenges in your building. This same team can be used to support teachers in solving these challenges. Such a team can help build its own instructional leadership skills while expanding your capacity to provide the kind of support that your teachers and students need and deserve.

Rethinking Instructional Leadership Teams

While the idea of using an instructional leadership team (ILT) for distributed school leadership is not new, in the past ILTs might have been more focused on noninstructional activities, such as creating strategic plans for schools, figuring out discipline plans, or serving as a communication avenue for the principal. The new concept of instructional leadership teams—teams focused on addressing student problems of teaching and learning—provides a promising approach. Yet, it is challenging to put it into action.

In trying to solve this challenge, the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership in Seattle partnered with the Tallahassee-based Florida Association of School Administrators, the Florida Department of Education, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation on a project with seven school districts to establish effective school-based ILTs.

We defined ILTs as a team of teacher leaders and a principal who collaborate to focus on the improvement of teaching and learning. This theory of action guided our work: *If the principal has an instructional leadership team to collaborate with to identify teaching and learning challenges and to support*

teachers to solve those challenges, then teachers will be better able to improve their instructional practices. And students—especially students not making progress—will be able to learn at higher levels.

Best Practices for School-Based ILTs

We based our support around what we consider to be five best practices for establishing effective instructional leadership teams:

1. **Recruit a diverse group of teacher leaders** who are continuous learners, collaborative, and have a shared understanding of effective teaching and learning.
2. **Develop a common understanding** of the attributes and actions of a highly effective instructional leadership team.
3. **Identify a narrow student learning problem** and contributing teaching problem of practice that the school needs to solve.
4. **Set team and personal goals**, and engage in professional development.
5. **Gather ongoing data**, and continually assess the team's effectiveness in meeting its goals and solving the identified problem of teaching and learning.

Take, for example, a school with a goal of improving writing instruction. After recruiting ILT members, the team assessed student data and found that seventh graders were struggling with writing arguments to support claims. To solve the student problem, the first thing the ILT did was go into classrooms to determine the teaching problem that needed to be solved. They worked with their district writing specialist to determine what effective teaching would look like for seventh graders when writing arguments. ILT members observed teaching, brought professional development resources to the effort, and monitored impact.

Along the way, team members set both personal and team goals. They attended to their own professional development over the course of a year using a series of whole-group content sessions, classroom walk-throughs, and several job-embedded coaching sessions, all conducted by an external support provider.

During these sessions, the team worked on the following:

- Understanding the importance of teacher leadership and the crucial role teachers play in improving teaching and learning
- Identifying high-quality instruction
- Observing and analyzing instruction in a nonjudgmental way, focusing on what the teacher can do versus what is lacking
- Planning professional development and school improvement

These facilitated sessions were critical to developing clarity around the overall team role, outlining the roles for individual team members, and developing specific steps to achieve the vision articulated by the team.



TO LEARN MORE ...

Check out these websites:

- **Characteristics of Instructional Leadership Team Members**
<http://info.k-12leadership.org/ILT-characteristics>
- **Framework for Effective Instructional Leadership Teams**
<http://info.k-12leadership.org/ILT-framework>
- **Instructional Leadership Team Growth Continuum**
<http://info.k-12leadership.org/ILT-continuum>

LAUNCHING LEADERSHIP TEAMS

For principals beginning this journey toward establishing instructional leadership teams, consider this advice:

1. Slow down and think of instructional leadership teams as a multiyear process.
2. Focus on building team capacity, especially in the team's first year.
3. Address one high-priority student learning need and contributing teaching problem of practice.

Lessons Learned

In putting instructional leadership teams into action, three key questions emerged:

- What are the characteristics of effective ILT members?
- What do effective team practices look like?
- As teams build skill, how do they decide which areas to improve?

We learned in working with the districts that it is important to spend quality time thinking about who makes a good team member. As such, we developed a tool called Characteristics of Instructional Leadership Team Members to help principals articulate the skills, knowledge, and dispositions they were looking for. Once the team was established, this document was used by team members to set personal goals, so they could continue to learn how to be as impactful as possible.

Many principals also felt that they needed to have a clear framework, so they could create a shared vision of practices for an effective instructional leadership team. We created a Framework for Effective Instructional

Leadership Teams to not only help teams develop a shared vision, but also to help create shared practices. If the team discovered that they did not possess a particular characteristic, then the third tool, an Instructional Leadership Team Growth Continuum, helped them pinpoint improvement strategies.

New Tools

The Characteristics of Instructional Leadership Team Members tool articulates the following skills and knowledge that need to be present or developed in order for teacher leaders to flourish:


- A continuous learner
- Effective working with adult learners
- An effective communicator
- Collaborative
- Knowledgeable about content and pedagogy
- Knowledgeable about assessment and data
- A systems thinker

The Framework for Effective Instructional Leadership Teams describes the following key actions of ILTs that effectively ensure that the

school community works together to continually improve teaching and learning:

- Focuses on improving teaching and learning schoolwide
- Collaborates to ensure team success
- Develops effective structures and processes to stay focused on teaching and learning

The Instructional Leadership Team Growth Continuum describes what growth in an ILT's practice might look like over time. Based on some of the key actions of the framework, the continuum helps participants answer the question, "If we're right here on the continuum, what's the next little step we can take to get to the next higher level of effectiveness?"

The development of instructional leadership teams and what we have learned about their formation and function cause us to feel optimistic. For the previously overwhelmed principal, now there is a whole team of teacher leaders that can provide support, enabling the principal to be the instructional leader that teachers and students need and deserve. 

Sandy Austin is project director with the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership in Seattle, and **Donna Anderson-Davis** was formerly with the center. **Jason Graham** is senior educational program director with the Florida Department of Education in Tallahassee, and **Michele White** is chief operating officer of the Florida Association of School Administrators in Tallahassee. The authors led a project in Florida supporting school-based instructional leadership teams.

Copyright of Principal Leadership is the property of National Association of Secondary School Principals and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.