

Where Are the Principals?

Romeo O. Marquis
© 2008. All rights reserved.

(At the end of this article you will be invited to share your opinion on my blog.)

At no time has the principal's leadership role been so important. Yet somehow, when it comes to instructional technology, many principals seem to play a relatively passive role. Whether the principal has been moved into that role by others or has individually opted to seek that role varies from school to school. Either way, this pattern is not a good one. Even with the expertise and energy of district technology directors and school based instructional technology specialists, the principal remains responsible for daily school based leadership, supervision and evaluation not only in other academic areas but also with regard to instructional technology. Fortunately there are some excellent principals who *do* recognize their roles in this important area. However, where are the others?

For years we have known that "the principal sets the tone of the school." When a principal embodies a passive role relative to instructional technology, that principal tells teachers students and parents, "Technology is not important enough for me to learn more about it and to take responsibility for promoting it within my school." Even district level technology directors and school based instructional technology specialists would be more able to achieve their goals if principals were members of the district's technology leadership team.

We have known for quite some time now that *technology integration under the influence of effective teachers does have a positive impact on student achievement*. We don't need more studies to tell us that. Rather, we need principals who in their own schools can make the rubber meet the road on a systemic level. Without the principal's active leadership and support, we will continue to see only pockets of excellence created by innovative teachers rather than systemic school based change led by a principal.

When I work with teachers, which is most of the time, I often ask them to identify the most significant barriers they face when trying to integrate technology as fully as possible. Of course they refer to insufficient funding. No argument there! The next response after insufficient funding? My principal doesn't "get it."

Consider a school district in which each school operates on a school based budget plan based on per-pupil allocation. Two middle schools about the same size with similar grade structures have the same level of per-pupil allocation. One of the schools is a model of technology integration while the teachers in the other school complain that they can't get the technology they need. The difference? The principal! In another district two elementary schools are in the same situation. One is an example of technology innovation and the other is not. Again we see what happens when a principals "gets it" or not.

These are *not* hypothetical situations. Both districts are in Massachusetts and one is a high needs district. In the two technology rich schools, the principal is a technology champion. In each of the districts there is a director of technology at the district level and in each school there is an instructional technology specialist. However, as we can see from these examples, the principal's leadership is as essential in technology as it is in other academic areas.

I use the term "academic" in my reference to technology integration because true technology integration is not really about computers and wires and hard drives. These are only tools that help us reach higher academic goals and should be recognized as such. There can be no more important responsibilities of a school principal than student safety and academic achievement. That's what *instructional* technology integration is all about. Therefore, the principal must exert the same level of leadership relative to technology as he does relative to English, math, science, and so on.

Except for funding, the barrier to instructional technology integration that most teachers identify is their principal. As I mentioned earlier, there *are* some notable exceptions. The examples above do not describe hypothetical situations. They are real examples taken from school districts in Massachusetts. Insufficient funding *is* a pervasive problem that must be addressed even in those schools. On the other hand, we shouldn't use it as an excuse to refuse to innovate and adapt to the needs of today's students. Fortunately, some principals "get it" when it comes to doing what's best for kids. This is about teaching and learning first, and only then about hardware and software. The principal in the technology enabled school not only manages the issue of money, but also manages the age-old problem of lack of time. These principals *do* exist. However, in my experience they are a minority. Where are the others?

What, then, is really happening? Here are some scenarios. As you study them, determine your level of agreement or disagreement with each. Perhaps you would like to combine two or three of the items, or perhaps you would like to add two or three of your own.

1. Principals are being intentionally excluded from instructional technology planning and implementation.
 Agree Disagree Not sure
2. Principals themselves feel overwhelmed and therefore push instructional technology planning and implementation to the side, leaving these decisions to central office administrators and school based technology specialists.
 Agree Disagree Not sure
3. Principals are not aware of the implications of *instructional* technology. They see technology only as a management tool.
 Agree Disagree Not sure
4. Principals are generally aware of the implications of *instructional* technology but leave implementation up to teachers on a voluntary basis.
 Agree Disagree Not sure
5. During the next several years, the principalship will become that of operations manager and will have a reduced role in instructional matters.
 Agree Disagree Not sure
6. During the next several years, the principalship will become more focused on instructional technology as candidates for the principalship will be more competent in this area.
 Agree Disagree Not sure

Yes, some principals *do* assume their legitimate leadership role relative to instructional technology. On the other hand, my experience tells me that many are satisfied to consider instructional technology as a sidebar issue in their own professional priorities. What do you think? To share your ideas and to read those of others, please go to my blog at <http://redesigninglearning.wordpress.com/> and click on *Principals*. If we can accumulate enough responses, I will prepare a follow-up article with the results.