

Prescriptions for Effective Elementary Schools Don't Fit Secondary Schools

High school teachers are less likely than their elementary counterparts to share a common purpose.

WILLIAM A. FIRESTONE AND ROBERT E. HERRIOTT

Over the last few years, research has identified organizational characteristics that seem to make some schools unusually effective. But because the bulk of this research has been conducted at the elementary level, it is important to ask how applicable these findings are to secondary schools.

Research now under way at Research for Better Schools highlights the differences between elementary and secondary schools and suggests that the basic organizational structure at the secondary level may necessitate different approaches to improving effectiveness and even different definitions of effectiveness.

During our study, project staff visited a random sample of 50 schools—27 elementary and 23 secondary—in southeastern Pennsylvania. Because the area includes both urban and isolated rural areas along with all conditions in between, this broad sample is useful for learning about variation in the organization of schools at different grade levels.¹ The major source of data for the study

William A. Firestone is Director of Field Studies, Research for Better Schools, Inc., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; and Robert E. Herriott is an independent Research Sociologist, Concord, Massachusetts.

was a questionnaire filled out by teachers. On the average, usable responses were obtained from 86 percent of the teachers in each school.

The results of the study suggest that some of the features that characterize effective schools are significantly less prevalent at the secondary level than in elementary schools (Figure 1). Our major "climate" measure focuses on agreement on instructional goals. Teachers were asked to rank the importance "to you as a member of your school" of achieving seven student outcomes. Within each school, teacher rankings were compared for similarity.² There is significantly less agreement at the sec-

"In contrast to high schools, elementary schools have more of a shared sense of purpose with a greater emphasis on basic skills instruction."

ondary level than at the elementary level. A substantial portion of this inter-level disagreement is related to emphasis given to basic skills. Substantially more teachers in the elementary schools rank that goal as most important (44 percent) than do secondary teachers (30 percent).

Because of the importance of leadership in the effective schools research and the ambiguity of that concept, we examined four measures of it. Differences between levels were statistically significant on only one variable, but that one—influence over classroom management—is central to the idea of instructional leadership. In fact, teachers have more influence than principals over day-to-day classroom management decisions at both levels, but have significantly greater influence at the secondary level. On the other hand, influence over program (what courses are offered, what innovations are adopted) and staffing (who teaches what course) are shared between teachers and principals. Secondary principals have about as much influence as their elementary counterparts.

The idea of instructional leadership implies frequent communication between principals and teachers about issues related to curriculum, discipline, and the management of specific children. When asked how often they talk about these issues with their principals, teachers in this study indicate that such communication is infrequent at both elementary and secondary levels.

Another aspect of leadership is facilitating the work of teachers. This can be done in many ways. One is through symbolic activities that communicate the expectation that teachers can teach. Gross and Herriott's Education Professional Leadership scale addresses this latter aspect of leadership, and the teachers we studied responded to a subset of those items.³ Generally, principals

do engage in this sort of activity, although there are substantial differences among schools. However, differences between levels in this respect are negligible.

Why the Differences?

Taken together, these findings suggest that elementary and secondary schools are different in important respects. In contrast to high schools, elementary schools have more of a shared sense of purpose with a greater emphasis on basic skills instruction. Elementary principals also have more opportunity to be instructional leaders by influencing classroom management (although this is still definitely in the teacher's zone of control).

Differences between levels are unlikely to reflect the characteristics of principals as individuals. Instead, they seem to reflect basic aspects of the structure of the secondary school. In effect, a broad range of goals is built into the structure of a school as soon as it has separate units for teaching English, mathematics, social studies, vocational courses, and other topics. Thus, secondary teachers may agree that basic skills instruction is important, but many of them can argue reasonably that "it's not my job." Even the most charismatic principals may find it difficult to create consensus on instructional goals with such built-in diversity.

Departmentalization can also undermine the principal's influence. Austin suggests that in effective schools principals rely on expert power. "The principals in these studies were viewed by the teachers . . . as persons who are expert in a wide variety of areas concerning education. In these studies, the principal is identified as an expert instructional leader . . . and the level of instruc-

tional expertise falls in the area of reading and arithmetic."⁴

However, secondary school teachers are subject matter specialists. In our sample 66 percent of the secondary teachers were specialists compared to 8 percent at the elementary level. The principal has to have more knowledge about more subject areas to offer assistance to such specialists; when he or she does not, influence becomes limited. Thus, a teacher in one high school reports that "By virtue of law the principal is responsible for instruction in his building. . . . Unfortunately, they're not qualified. [My principal] can't help me with second year algebra."

Another factor that limits the principal's influence on teachers at the secondary level is staff size. Secondary schools tend to be larger, so a great deal of teacher contact is delegated to others, such as assistant principals and department chairs.

This suggests why inter-level differences in administrator-teacher communication and facilitative leadership are so small. One might expect big differences in communication between levels if only because secondary schools are larger. However, along with the increased number of teachers comes growth in the number of administrators, and our question asks about administrator-teacher communication. Thus, at each level, teachers communicate with some administrator at nearly the same rate, but this person may not always be the head principal.

Facilitative leadership does not require frequent communication. Instead, it revolves around symbolic behavior and patterns of resource allocation. It seems likely that a few well-publicized examples of a principal treating teachers as professionals or providing resources for useful staff development can have extensive ripple effects.

"It may be more useful to think of the professional staff of an elementary school as approximating a work group and that of a secondary school as members of a complex organization."

Issues and Implications

Although limited to only a few key variables from the effective schools research, these findings illustrate that much of what is suggested as desirable by that literature is more typical of elementary than secondary schools. The findings from our random sample of 50 schools suggest that the pattern at the secondary level conforms more to the picture of structural looseness suggested first by Bidwell and more recently by Weick and Deal and Celotti than to the desirable pattern from the effective school literature.⁵ Structural looseness is accentuated at the secondary level by departmentalization and increased size. These factors undermine agreement on education goals and block efforts of secondary administrators to influence classroom management.

Apparently, our ways of thinking about elementary and secondary schools have to be differentiated. It may be more useful to think of the professional staff of an elementary school as approximating a work group and that of a secondary school as members of a complex organization. Then, the principal in the former is more like the head coach of a sports team. In the latter he or she is somewhat closer to the chief executive officer of a corporation. Each principal has some responsibility for maintaining a climate conducive to productivity within his or her sphere of authority, but relations to instructional processes will be very different. The first does more to keep track of day-to-day work and communicates frequently with staff. The second is more concerned with issues of resource allocation and external relations than technical processes. This comparison suggests that "leaders" of different kinds of schools have very different jobs to perform. It also reminds us of the variety of leadership functions that must be performed and underlines

how little we know about the nature of leadership in all schools.

In the meantime, this study suggests two means that are open to administrators at all levels who seek to improve instruction: influencing decisions over program and symbolic leadership. In the final analysis teachers will determine how teaching takes place, but administrators can shape that process by ensuring that the right people teach "the right stuff." Beyond that, just as students often learn more when teachers believe they can learn, teachers may teach better when their administrators believe they are professional instructors. This is a central aspect of facilitative leadership.

The low goal consensus in secondary schools raises important questions about how to define an "effective school." The current definition is a very special one that focuses on a single content area (basic skills) for a limited clientele (the urban poor). Public schools have a variety of other important goals. They prepare children for the world of work and for their roles as citizens in a democracy; they are also expected to facilitate the development of children's self-concepts. In addition to the urban poor, schools are expected to serve the working class, the middle class, and the affluent. The apparent importance of goal consensus implies that creating effective schools requires more than technical fixes; it also calls for choices that may make some schools *less effective* at some of the things they have traditionally done. This is especially true of secondary schools with their broad mission. The value decision that high school staffs seem to be faced with is whether they are willing to stop doing some of the things they do now in order to do other things better.

Finally, although we have suggested ways to rethink how climate, school objectives, and leadership can contrib-

ute to achievement at the secondary level, we would emphasize that it is too early to draw conclusions for action from the school effectiveness research. Most of the studies have been conducted at the elementary level, and there are systematic organizational differences between levels that seem to preclude generalizing from one to the other. We now need studies that ask the same questions about how to promote achievement at the secondary level. These studies should benefit from the methodological lessons learned from the earlier school effectiveness research and be sensitive to the broad goals and departmentalized structure of secondary schools. □

¹For technical information on sampling and instrumentation, see W. Firestone and R. Herriott, *Final Report on a Study of Images of Schools as Organizations*, Philadelphia: Research for Better Schools, forthcoming.

²The statistical technique employed is Kendall's Coefficient of Concordance (W). A score of 1.00 is indicative of perfect agreement and that of 0.00 of randomness.

³N. Gross and R. Herriott, *Staff Leadership in Public Schools* (New York: John Wiley, 1965).

⁴G. Austin, "Exemplary Schools and the Search for Effectiveness," *Educational Leadership* 37, 1 (October 1979): 10.

⁵C. Bidwell, "The Schools as a Formal Organization," in *Handbook of Organizations*, ed. J. March (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965); T. Deal and L. Celotti, "How Much Influence Do (and Can) Educational Administrations Have on Classrooms?" *Phi Delta Kappan* (March 1980); K. Weick, "Educational Organizations as Loosely Coupled Systems," *Administrative Science Quarterly* (March 1976).

Copyright © 1982 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.