

# Redefining the Roles and Responsibilities of Assistant Principals

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Short years ago, the assistant-to-principal was closely associated with clerical chores, with emphasis on such items as checking rollbooks, stamps, and textbooks. Sometimes, he was assigned solely to be a disciplinarian. (Gilbert 1957, 423)

Public education has received voluminous criticism, particularly over the last several years (Johnson 1990; Katz 1987; Sizer 1984). As a result of this scrutiny of educational policy and practice, research has elucidated several important factors that contribute to effective schooling (see, for example, Blase and Kirby 1992). Many of these findings have focused on the principalship as vital for successful school reform (see, for example, Lipham, Rankin, and Hoeh, Jr. 1985; Lucio and McNeil 1969). Less attention, however, has been given to the role and function of the assistant principal (AP) (Gorton and Kettman 1985).

The first nationwide research study of the assistant principalship was conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP 1970). The study surveyed 1,270 assistant principals and simply developed a composite of the "average assistant principal." Data were collected regarding the characteristics of assistant principals as well as their experience, training, functions, financial status, and working conditions. The purpose of the study was not a critical analysis of the assistant principalship but rather a descriptive overview. The study's major contribution was that it highlighted the importance of the assistant principalship. As William L. Pharis, executive secretary of the NAESP, stated: "The forgotten man in the elementary school is frequently the assistant principal. We know he is there but little about him. This study, the first comprehensive view of

the assistant principal, is an attempt to ameliorate that situation" (83).

Attesting to this neglect, Timothy J. Dyer, executive director of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP 1991), explained that

there was a time, in the not-too-distant past, when the assistant principal was not accorded much attention in the literature or on the job. Very little was said about the AP's job in university training programs, and almost nothing was said about it in professional books or journals. The AP was simply regarded as someone employed—if the school's enrollment justified it—to take some of the burden off the principal. (vii)

Recent studies, however, have cited the importance of the assistant principal in the school organization (Marshall 1992; Calabrese and Tucker-Ladd 1991; Pellicer and Stevenson 1991). Whereas, traditionally, the assistant principal was a person in charge of disciplinary and attendance matters (Van Eman 1926; Boardman, Gran, and Holt 1946; Gilbert 1957), more recently the assistant principal's role and function have expanded to include curriculum, staff development, and instructional leadership (Calabrese 1991).

Although recent articles in journals such as the *NASSP Bulletin*—as well as works such as the first comprehensive overview of the assistant principalship by Marshall (1992)—indicate renewed interest in the assistant principalship, there is much left to be learned about the role and function of that position. Moreover, although the research cited above indicates an expansion of the AP's role, assistant principals, at least in New York City (and, I surmise, most elsewhere), remain burdened by routine administrative tasks, custodial duties, and discipline matters, not unlike those described by Gilbert (1957), quoted at the outset of this article. APs in New York City do not usually have leadership responsibilities, such as curriculum and staff development, teacher supervision, classroom observation, creation of new instructional pro-

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grams, research, and evaluation. This article reports on an attempt designed to describe the duties and responsibilities of APs and offers recommendations for expanding their roles.

### Method

In April 1992, I conducted a survey of 200 New York City assistant principals that was approved by the Board of Education's Conflict of Interest Committee. A stratified random sampling of APs from both elementary and middle schools was used to obtain the sample. The response rate was 82 percent (164 APs) as a result of two separate mailings. The study used a questionnaire composed of thirteen open-ended questions. Semantic differential scales measuring various aspects of the roles and responsibilities of APs were also used. The analyses described in this article were based primarily on the questionnaire. The questionnaire data were tabulated to describe certain demographic characteristics and attitudes of the APs toward their duties. Although this study is limited in terms of its scope (that is, only 10 percent of APs in the five boroughs of New York City were surveyed) and instrumentation (that is, only questionnaires were used), a number of interesting insights emerge. The findings may not be very new to practicing APs, but they certainly warrant publicity and discussion.

### Findings

The results of this study are based on 164 completed questionnaires. Table 1 indicates the number of APs participating in this study, their school levels, locales, and years of experience. A fairly representative number of APs from each of the five boroughs of New York City responded to the questionnaire. Eighty-five elementary school APs and seventy-nine middle school APs participated. Ninety-two APs were male and seventy-two were female. Fifty-five percent of the respondents had five or fewer years of experience as an AP.

The primary research questions that this study attempted to answer were

1. What are your current responsibilities as an AP?
2. In your view, what duties should APs be performing?
3. What aspects of your job give you the greatest satisfaction?

Data gleaned from the questionnaire revealed the following:

- Table 2 lists the various duties that respondents indicated they performed. Rankings, not of importance but of major responsibilities, are noted, as well as percentages of APs who performed the duties. Over 90 percent of the respondents indicated that their chief duties included handling disruptive students, dealing with parental complaints, supervising lunch duty, scheduling coverages, and completing surveys, forms, book orders, and other kinds of administrative paper work. Curiously, APs in this survey were significantly underinvolved in staff development, teacher training, and curriculum development.

- Nearly all the respondents reported dissatisfaction with the practices noted above. They indicated that their jobs were "thankless" and morale was low. Fifty-five percent of the APs did note, however, that working with selected teachers and students brought them much satisfaction. Here are some of the comments offered:

The mindless tasks I perform daily really disturb me. In college I trained to do staff and curriculum development. Here on the job I'm responsible for paper work, lunch duty, and discipline. . . . I derive little satisfaction from these duties.

Endless paper work, hall patrol, and especially guarding a gate really inspire me to do my best.

I feel under-utilized. My expertise seems to be wasted with inane matters. This job is thankless, with little satisfaction.

Working with the children and teachers gives me the greatest satisfaction. Helping a child or teacher succeed is really nice. When I can resolve a troublesome instructional problem I enjoy my job.

- Over 90 percent of the APs stated that they preferred working on the following responsibilities: teacher training, curriculum development, and staff development.

**TABLE 1**  
Distribution of Assistant Principals by Sex, Level,  
Locale, and Years of Experience (N = 164)

Locale	Sex		Level		Years of experience		
	Male	Female	Elem.	Middle	0-5	6-10	11+
Bronx	14	14	15	12	11	10	7
Brooklyn	22	12	20	18	19	12	3
Queens	23	21	22	19	17	15	12
Staten Island	7	5	9	3	6	3	3
Manhattan	26	20	19	27	21	16	9
Totals	92	72	85	79	74	56	34

**TABLE 2**  
Actual Duties of Assistant Principals:  
Rankings and Percentages

Duties	Rank	%
Student discipline	1	94
Lunch duty	2	95
School scheduling (coverages <sup>a</sup> )	3	91
Ordering textbooks	4	93
Parental conferences	5	91
Assemblies	6	91
Administrative duties	7	91
Articulation <sup>b</sup>	8	90
Evaluation of teachers	9	83
Student attendance	10	71
Emergency arrangements	11	63
Instructional media services	12	54
Counseling pupils	13	46
School clubs, etc.	14	41
Assisting PTA	15	35
Formulating goals	16	32
Staff development (inservice)	17	27
Faculty meetings	18	24
Teacher training	19	24
Instructional leadership	20	23
Public relations	21	9
Curriculum development	22	7
Innovations and research	23	5
School budgeting	24	3
Teacher selection	25	1

<sup>a</sup>Coverages refers to scheduling substitute teachers.

<sup>b</sup>Articulation refers to the administrative and logistical duties required to prepare students for graduation (e.g., preparing and sending cumulative records of graduating fifth graders to middle school).

**TABLE 3**  
Assistant Principals' Rankings of Their Duties  
for Degree of Importance

Duties	Rank	%
Teacher training	1	93
Staff development (inservice)	2	92
Curriculum development	3	91
Evaluation of teachers	4	90
Instructional leadership	5	90
Formulating goals	6	86
Innovations and research	7	83
Parental conferences	8	82
Articulation <sup>a</sup>	9	82
School scheduling (coverages <sup>b</sup> )	10	81
Emergency arrangements	11	80
Assemblies	12	80
Administrative duties (paperwork)	13	76
Instructional media services	14	68
Counseling pupils	15	61
Faculty meetings	16	55
Ordering textbooks	17	51
School clubs, etc.	18	45
Assisting PTA	19	39
Student attendance	20	34
Student discipline	21	31
Lunch duty	22	25
Public relations	23	21
School budgeting	24	11
Teacher selection	25	9

<sup>a</sup>Articulation refers to the administrative and logistical duties required to prepare students for graduation (e.g., preparing and sending cumulative records of graduating fifth graders to middle school).

<sup>b</sup>Coverages refers to scheduling substitute teachers.

These APs lamented the fact that they have little time to devote to these important duties given the exigencies of the assistant principalship (see table 3). Although the APs agreed that certain duties should remain within the purview of the principal (e.g., teacher selection, budgeting, and public relations), a majority of those surveyed indicated that APs should be involved in more "professional and fulfilling" responsibilities.

• Ninety-nine percent of the respondents stressed the importance of the assistant principalship. At the same time, they complained that they rarely engaged in professional activities such as instructional supervision, program development, and evaluation procedures. As one AP noted, "I went to graduate school to complete certification by focusing on theories and research about instructional supervision, yet most, if not all, of my time is spent on mundane and mindless administrative routines, like lunch duty."

Approximately 70 percent of the respondents maintained that student discipline and supervision of lunch duty should *not* be the main responsibility of APs.

### The Development of the Assistant Principalship

The fact of the matter is that the assistant principalship has changed very little in practice since its inception. Supervision in the nineteenth century was controlled in large measure by city superintendents. "Principal" or "head" teachers were placed in charge of schools but had very little authority. After 1900, however, as urbanization intensified and the school system grew more complex, superintendents lost contact with the day-to-day operations of the schools because of the various administrative and supervisory positions it was necessary to establish. In other words, supervision of schools after 1900 was the responsibility of someone other than the superintendent. The superintendent placed greater authority over local school governance with the building principal (Tyack 1974).

It was not until after about 1920, however, that the principal was relieved of teaching duties. The principal's primary duty was to offer assistance to less experienced teachers in areas such as instruction, curriculum, and classroom management (Elsbree 1939).

As schooling expanded, so did the educational bureaucracy, with the number of principals doubling between 1920 and 1930 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1975). Because of increasing administrative duties, however, the principalship gradually shifted away from direct inspections, classroom supervision, and instructional development and assumed a more managerial function. Consequently, other supervisory positions were established to meet the demands of a growing and increasingly more complex school system.

In addition to the building principal, a new cadre of officials emerged who assumed major responsibility for day-to-day classroom supervision. Initially called "general supervisors," these individuals, usually male, were selected not only to deal with the instructional supervision of the more "general" subjects such as mathematics and science, but also to "assist" the principal in the more administrative, logistical operations of a school. The general supervisor, subsequently called *assistant principal*, would often prepare attendance reports, collect data for evaluation purposes, and coordinate special school programs, among other administrative duties (Glanz 1991).

Assistant principals were subordinate to principals and were seen as advisors with little, if any, independent formal authority. The assistant principal was often warned "not to forget that the superintendent runs the whole system and the principal runs his school, and you are merely an expert whose duty it is to assist improving instruction" (Sloyer 1928).

Thus, we see that the assistant principalship originated as both an instructional and administrative function. Although APs engaged in some instructional duties, most of their time was spent on school management. Most of the early literature describing the functions and responsibilities of the assistant principal (in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s) suggests that APs were mostly responsible for clerical tasks, extracurricular activities, and pupil control. Assistant principals usually have not been charged with instructional responsibilities, in large measure because of the historical antecedents that led to the development of the position in schools.

We see that the current duties of APs are historically linked to practices and taken-for-granted notions of the past. Although roles assumed by APs were perhaps dictated by particular demands unique to schools in the past, schools today are very different and certainly require effective supervisory strategies to improve pupil achievement. Moreover, simply to generalize and conclude that APs have never been involved in instructional and curricular matters is inaccurate. There have been instances, albeit limited, in which APs have played a significant role in staff development, curriculum-making, and inservice education. There is, in fact, historical precedence for expanding the roles and responsibilities of APs to include these more fulfilling educational tasks.

## Implications and Recommendations

Based on the study discussed here, I would like to raise a number of relevant issues and urge educators to redefine the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals.

- The nature of public schooling is too complex today to expect one person single-handedly to reform the system. There must be instructional leaders other than the principal. Our first task, then, is to redefine the AP's role with an emphasis on more significant involvement in instructional and curricular improvement. This, of course, entails relieving the AP of lunch duty and his or her duties as chief disciplinarian. As Ann Hassenpflug (1991), in an article published in *Education Week* entitled "A Wasted Reform Resource: The Assistant Principal," stated:

If the assistant principal doesn't prowl the hallways looking for rule-breakers, who will? Certainly, the responsibility for student attendance and discipline needs to be assigned to school personnel, but just because these tasks have always been assigned to assistant principals doesn't mean that is the way it always has to be. The tasks could be divided among other types of staff members who might actually be more appropriately trained to handle the social and emotional aspects of students' behavior.

The question of who will be responsible for supervising discipline is an important one and should be addressed. Perhaps, as in many middle, junior high, and high schools, a dean of discipline specially trained to manage the social and emotional aspects of students' behavior can be instituted in elementary schools. Delegating responsibility to specially-trained personnel will not relieve the AP of all disciplinary matters. It will, however, extricate the AP so that she or he can be involved in more instructional matters.

Similarly, additional personnel can be assigned to lunch duty. A teacher-in-charge can deal with the daily operations of lunch duty and the AP can supervise the program by making spot checks, conferring with assigned personnel, and establishing regulations.

Partially relieving APs from these duties will have a threefold effect: (1) it will allow more time for staff-development planning or simply assisting teachers in the classroom; (2) morale will improve by allowing APs to engage in more creative and intellectually stimulating instructional/curricular activities; and (3) academic and social objectives will have a greater chance of being achieved because more time will be allotted for instructional improvement.

- Heretofore the assistant principalship has been viewed as a stepping stone to the principalship. There are two problems with this view. Studies demonstrate that the duties and responsibilities of APs are so different from those of principals that the assistant principalship does not provide appropriate training for becoming a principal (see, for example, Koru 1993; Kelly 1987; Gorton and Kettman 1985). Second, the assistant principalship must be viewed as a unique and

valuable career position in its own right (Pellicer and Stevenson 1991). Our second task, then, is to focus on the assistant principalship as a worthy and professional career position by providing incentives for persons to enter and remain in that role.

• More thorough research remains to be done on the assistant principalship and greater attention paid to the vital functions performed by APs. For example, Michael Ebenstein, president of the Association of Assistant Principals in New York City, correctly observed, in a telephone conversation with me, that little if any work has been conducted on the assistant principalship at the elementary school level. A research agenda might include increased study of the assistant principalship through the use of surveys, questionnaires, oral histories of retired APs, accounts of experiences of APs, and other ethnographic studies. Furthermore, efforts undertaken by local, state, and national organizations to redefine the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals need to be expanded. APs must also assert themselves on district, regional, and national levels.

I have indicated here that insufficient attention has been given to APs, that APs want more active involvement in instructional and leadership matters, and that a number of critical issues regarding the roles and responsibilities of assistant principals need to be raised. There are certainly many more issues that need consideration; let the dialogue continue.

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