

Where Did the Assistant Principalship Begin? Where Is It Headed?

By Jeffrey Glanz

Where does the assistant principal fit into the education scheme? A look at the origins of the assistant principalship can provide some clues.

Much of the effective schools literature has focused on the principalship as vital for successful school reform. Less attention has been given to the role and function of the assistant principal.

Attesting to this neglect, NASSP Executive Director Timothy J. Dyer explained:

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 (NASSP, 1991, p. vii).

Recently, however, the assistant principal has been seen as a valuable asset to the school organization (Marshall, 1992; Cal-

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abrese and Tucker-Ladd, 1991; Pellicer and Stevenson, 1991). Traditionally, the assistant principal was in charge of disciplinary and selected administrative matters. Today, greater attention is being focused on the expansion of the assistant principal's role and function to include curriculum and staff development as well as instructional leadership (Calabrese, 1991).

Although the assistant principalship has attracted interest of late, we know very little about the origins of the position in the school hierarchy. Understanding these origins may help us to better understand current problems. Our image of the past is also important in framing future possibilities for these supervisors.

Early Developments

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, schools were controlled by loosely-structured, decentralized ward boards. Superintendents and principals had little authority to affect educational policy and implement meaningful programs or curricula (Gilland, 1935; Reller, 1935). In the late nineteenth century, however, educational reformers sought to transform schools into a tightly organized and efficiently operated centralized system. These reform efforts brought order and organization to an otherwise chaotic, corrupt, and inefficient school environment (Glanz, 1991). It was during

this tumultuous period that educational decision making and daily control of the schools were assumed chiefly by superintendents.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, schooling grew dramatically. Between 1895 and 1920, total school enrollment increased from 14 to 21.5 million students. During the same period, the high school and above population grew from about 350,000 to 2,500,000 students. In 1895 there were slightly more than 398,000 teachers, earning an average annual salary of \$286. There were twice as many female as male teachers. By 1920, the total number of teachers had increased by more than 280,000 while their salary more than doubled. There were more than five times the number of female than male teachers (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1960).

The tally of principals and other supervisory personnel began only after 1900. Before this time, supervision was controlled chiefly by the superintendent, with little authority delegated to assistants and principals. After 1900, as urbanization intensified and the school system grew more complex, the superintendent lost contact with the day-to-day operations of the schools. As a result, supervision of schools after 1900 became the responsibility of the school principal.

The principal as school leader and chief supervisor gained in stature and

authority in the early twentieth century. Although present in the nineteenth century, principals did not wield any power, nor did they significantly affect the nature and character of schooling. The principal in the nineteenth century essentially filled the relatively noninfluential position of “head teacher.” Not until after about 1920 was the principal relieved of teaching duties.

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Until the 1920s, the principal would take over classes on occasion, and demonstrate to the teacher exactly how the job should be done. The principal's primary duties included offering assistance to less experienced teachers in areas such as instruction, curriculum, and general classroom management skills.

In the late nineteenth century the principal was expected to obey the directives of city superintendents, by whom he or she was usually appointed. Selection was based on presumed excellence in teaching and essentially was determined by the whim of the

superintendent. The principal was given little authority to do more than complete attendance and other administrative reports.

The number of principals doubled between 1920 and 1930. Because of increasing administrative duties, however, the principalship gradually shifted away from direct inspections, classroom supervision, and instructional development, and assumed a more managerial position. Consequently, other supervisory positions were established to meet the demands of a growing and increasingly more complex school system.

Special and General Supervisors

In addition to the principal, a new cadre of administrative officers assumed major responsibility for day-to-day classroom supervision. Two specific groups of supervisors were commonly found in schools in the early twentieth century.

First, a “special supervisor,” more often female and chosen by the principal with no formal training required, was relieved of some teaching responsibilities to help assist less-experienced teachers in subject matter mastery. Larger schools, for example, had special supervisors in each of the major subject areas. In the 1920s and 1930s, some schools even had special supervisors of music and art.

Second, a "general supervisor," usually male, was selected to not only deal with more general subjects such as mathematics and science, but also to assist the principal in the logistical operations of the school. The general supervisor, subsequently called assistant principal, would prepare attendance reports, collect data for evaluation purposes, and coordinate special school programs.

It is interesting to note that special supervisors were more readily accepted by the ranks of teachers than were general supervisors. Special supervisors played a very useful and helpful role by assisting teachers in such practical areas as spelling, penmanship, and art. In addition, these special supervisors did not have any independent authority and did not serve in an evaluative capacity. In contrast, the general supervisor was given authority, albeit limited, to evaluate instruction in the classroom. Therefore, teachers were not likely to be threatened by the appearance of the special supervisor in the classroom.

The general supervisor, on the other hand, was concerned more with administrative and evaluative matters and was consequently viewed as more menacing to the classroom teacher. Special supervisors also probably gained more acceptance by teachers, most of whom were female, because they too were female. All general supervisors were male and perhaps

were perceived differently as a result. Spaulding (1955), in his analysis of this time, concurred and stated that general supervisors "were quite generally looked upon, not as helpers, but as critics bent on the discovery and revelation of teachers weaknesses and failures,...they were dubbed Snooper-visitors" (p.130).

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The position of the special supervisor did not, however, endure for long. The duties and responsibilities of the position were gradually usurped by general supervisors. In general, the relative obscurity of the position after the early 1920s can be attributed to discrimination based on gender. The mostly female special supervisors were not perceived in the same light as general supervisors, principals, assistant superintendents, and superintendents, who were mostly male. Gender bias and the sexual division of labor in schools go far toward explaining the disappearance of the special supervisor as such.

Sex-role stereotypes in education as a whole were commonplace and in

agreement with bureaucratic school governance. Not only were curriculum and instruction standardized, but so also were hiring, promotion, and salary scales. With the newly emerging bureaucratic hierarchy in the early 1900s came the expansion of managerial positions, which were almost always filled by men. Strober and Tyack (1980) explained that widely-held views of patriarchal dominance were consistent with structured forms of control highly valued by urban school reformers. They explained the relationship between gender and social control as follows:

By structuring jobs to take advantage of sex role stereotypes about women's responsiveness to rules and male authority, and men's presumed ability to manage women, urban school boards were able to enhance their ability to control curricula, students, and personnel.... Rules were highly prescriptive.... With few alternative occupations and accustomed to patriarchal authority they mostly did what their male superiors ordered.... Difference of gender provided an important form of social control (p. 500).

In short, general supervisors gained wider acceptance simply because they were men.

The Principal and Assistant Principal

With the disappearance of the special supervisor in the early '30s, the gen-

eral supervisor was the principal's primary assistant. By the '40s and '50s, the literature more accurately reflected the relationship between the principal and the general supervisor by using the title "assistant principal."

Assistant principals were usually selected by principals from the ranks of teachers. They were subordinate to principals and were seen as advisers 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, p. 479).

Conclusion

Given the fact that the assistant principalship originated as an administrative function, it is not surprising that the primary responsibilities of APs have always centered on routine administrative tasks, custodial duties, and discipline. Assistant principals have not usually been charged with instructional responsibilities, in large measure due to the historical antecedents that led to the development of the position in schools. General supervisors, and later APs, were traditionally charged with non-instructional issues. Curiously, while special supervisors were, in fact, responsible for more instructional concerns, such as the improvement of

instruction, their duties were not assumed by the newly titled AP. Efforts underway today to expand the role of the assistant principal to include instructional leadership can be historically linked to the emergence of the early special supervisors. Additional historical exploration of the work of special supervisors may inform future prospects of assistant principals as instructional leaders. ~B

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