

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *What Is Special About Assistant Principals?*

Sometimes, at the end of the day, I really wonder why I took this job. It seems like I only bawl out kids, pick up the jobs my principal dislikes, and tell teachers why they can't do something they're really excited about. But there have been times—like when I found a way to help teachers launch a neat project, like watching our team get to the finals in the debate competition—when I feel happy. Not many people know how much I put into making good things happen, but I know.

*—An anonymous, but typical, assistant principal*

**S**peaking about the job of the assistant principal, Bill, an outstanding veteran assistant in a large southwestern school district, wrote recently, “. . . people who know how to deal with people and know how to communicate ideas can learn the job quickly. I see a school administrator just like I see a good classroom teacher. Both have goals, understand his/her resources, take risks, stay focused, and organize and plan for the unplanned.”

What do assistant principals do? How important are they to school systems? What motivates them to take such a position, and what qualifies them to do so? These questions are seldom asked and rarely

## 2 The Assistant Principal

answered. Too often, assistant principals are seen as uninteresting—as separate from instructional leadership in their mock-military discipline role and as people at the bottom rung of the administrative career ladder.

One current assistant principal from Arizona says, “We must be magicians and be able to have many skills . . . honed particularly to our site” (Ames, 2004). Another emphasizes the need to be intuitive, and that “you have to multitask and prioritize; if you can’t, you won’t make it” (Walther, 2004). Thus the position of assistant principal is tremendously challenging, requiring quickness and creativity.

Historically, assistant principals were a phenomenon of secondary schools at the turn of the century, born of the need to manage increasingly larger enrollments in consolidated schools. Mertz and McNeely (1999) write that the position grew out of need and expediency rather than clear and thoughtful planning. To this day, the ambiguity and the random nature of school need or perception of need seem to direct the evolution of the assistant more than any clear data or research.

But the assistant principalship holds a critical position in education organizations for several reasons. First, it is a *frequent entry-level position for administrative careers*. A majority of assistant principals expect to move upward in administration. For this reason, assistant principalships often provide opportunities for observing and interacting with supervisors and learning the behaviors necessary for professional advancement. Second, assistant principals *maintain the norms and rules of the school culture*. They are usually the first ones to handle the most difficult disciplinary problems. Social issues such as poverty, racism, and family disruption help define the world in which assistant principals find themselves.

Directly related to patrolling hallways and monitoring students and their needs, assistant principals must *frequently play the role of mediator*, addressing the conflicts that emerge among teachers, students, and the community. Often it is the demands of federal, state, and local school policies that assistant principals must regulate. Mediation occurs for the sake of maintaining an environment of calm and order; without proper attention to this area, chaos can easily arise. Here lies a great disconnect between training and reality. Assistant principals are not taught how to achieve order in an institutional setting. Instead, they are taught curriculum, leadership skills, best instructional practices, and school law.

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 3

Finally, assistant principals *encounter daily the fundamental dilemmas of school systems*. They talk with teenagers trying to stay in school while pregnant, with parents angry that their child must be bused to achieve desegregation, and with teachers who resent and resist being monitored. They fill in when there are not enough qualified substitutes and the English as a Second Language teacher is ill. Their day is a microcosm representing the array of issues that arise when children bring society inside the schools' walls. As a result, they have developed into a prime group of individuals who could, if asked, generate a unique picture of the existing condition of public education.

### UNANSWERED QUESTIONS AND CONTINUING DILEMMAS

I once heard a high school assistant principal characterize his position as “the guy who goes up and down the corridors pushing kids back into classrooms.” In fact, no one really understands the complexities, lack of satisfaction, and dilemmas within the role of the assistant principal. This chapter identifies those dilemmas—the problems with no simple answers. It tackles the questions raised by our typical assistant principal, questions like these: “What exactly is my job?” “Who knows or cares about what I do?” “How can I find fulfillment in this work?” “Was I supposed to learn in grad school how to plan a pep rally, create a snow schedule, or analyze student test scores?”

Few researchers have paid attention to the assistant principalship. Those studies that have dealt with the topic reveal several intriguing facts. For example, on the surface, there are no substantial differences among the roles of the assistant principal in junior or senior high schools in urban, suburban, or rural schools. Important differences, however, emerge below the surface. Old research reveals challenges that need updates. Gaertner's (1980) study found that while 44 percent of elementary assistant principals are women, women are less likely to obtain secondary school assistant principalships. Croft and Morton (1977) revealed that women are less likely to obtain assistant principalships in a rural or small town than in an urban setting. These facts raise questions: How are the secondary and elementary positions different? Why are some assistant principalships “off limits” to most women?

In spite of the history of the assistant in American public schools, we rely too much on stereotypes and anecdotes. Many

#### 4 The Assistant Principal

questions still remain unexplored by researchers and policymakers. Little attention has been granted to the training and selection, job satisfaction, and motivation of assistant principals. Moreover, few studies have helped the assistant principal focus on the ever-changing, ever-demanding functions of the position. An important unanswered question remains: As assistant principals deal with numerous duties during the course of a single day, how do they derive meaning and purpose from their work?

Attempts to describe the work and its frustrations inform much of the meager research on the assistant principal (Black, 2002; Glanz, 1994; Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Hausman, et al., 2001). Indeed, one of the more recent books on the subject, *New Voices in the Field: The Work Lives of First-Year Assistant Principals* (Hartzell, 1995), focuses almost exclusively on interviews with new secondary assistant principals on themes such as the pace of the job, student discipline, relationships, and perspectives. The firsthand accounts provide a rich understanding, but it is difficult to find real data on how the job is wrought in most schools and districts. In fact, it has been impossible to find national data on the job or even recent data on the demographics of assistants across the country.

Focusing on the assistant principalship means looking at the administrative training, school culture, job roles, responsibilities, policies and structures of the organization, and daily challenges afforded this specific position. By noticing the interplay of these important elements, concerned teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and taxpayers can begin to understand the nature of the assistant principalship and its intrinsic value to the educational process.

By taking a look at what assistant principals do, we can begin to identify the special nature, the functions served, and the inherent dilemmas in their job. Assistant principals do many of the same tasks as principals. They spend a majority of their time dealing with issues of school management, student activities and services, community relations, personnel, and curriculum and instruction. However, they lack the position, power, and status of the principal. Often the principal delineates their specific tasks and responsibilities. Also, they negotiate with fellow assistant principals on-site. Since the evaluation of assistant principals is often informal or unstructured, their daily performance is analyzed and watched as “higher-ups” decide whether to sponsor or promote them. Knowing they are being assessed as they

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 5

work in their volatile and fast-paced world is especially stressful. Moreover, the increasingly difficult issue of recruitment and retention of good junior administrators may be tied closely to this stress. A task force in California (the Association of California Administrators) looking at shortages came to just this conclusion.

### **WHAT DO ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS DO? THE NATURE OF THE TASKS AND ROLES**

Although specific job descriptions vary, most assistant principal positions have tasks in common. Assistant principals handle conferences with parents and students, which may be formal appointments to discuss problems and create a plan to help a student improve or short impromptu responses to a crisis. A second major duty is handling behavior problems, ranging from a long-term strategy for monitoring to a quick reaction to violations. Third, assistant principals work on the master schedule, the “roster” registration, and student attendance as they plan for the smooth flow of people and events. Fourth, they counsel and guide students informally for their educational programs and vocations, basing their advice on information gleaned from constantly monitoring the activities, behavior, and performance of individuals.

Assistant principals also take on public relations tasks as a natural offshoot of working with parents and student activities. Some—not all—assistant principals take an interest in improving curriculum and teaching. With increased emphasis on monitoring and improving teachers, assistant principals are now expected to assist with a major portion of classroom observation.

An old survey documented assistant principals’ tasks (Pellicer, et al., 1988), showing student discipline, evaluation of teachers, and student attendance at the top of their list. Since a similar study that was conducted in 1965, duties for graduation, instructional methods, staff inservice, and teacher motivation and incentives had been added by 1985. A recent survey, with 1,230 Texas secondary assistant principals responding, serves as an update (Armstrong, 2004). The changes since that 1985 study emanate from school restructuring and high-stakes testing, which complicate administrative duties.

Interestingly, this study revealed that 37 percent of these assistant principals rotated their duties annually. Although 67 percent

## 6 The Assistant Principal

**Table 1.1** Duties of Secondary Principals in Texas**Duties Reported in Order, From Most Frequently Reported, to Least**

Discipline  
 Campus Building/Safety  
 Student Activities  
 Building Maintenance  
 Teacher Evaluations  
 Attend ARD, 504 Meetings  
 Textbooks  
 Duty Schedule  
 Tutorial Programs/At-risk Programs  
 New Teachers/Mentor Program  
 Assessment Data/TAKS  
 Staff Development  
 Supervise Departments  
 Community Activities  
 Attendance  
 PEIMS  
 Graduation  
 Campus Decision-making Team  
 Lockers  
 Master Schedule  
 Curriculum Development  
 Transportation  
 Keys  
 Parking

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SOURCE: Armstrong (2004, p. 66).

were satisfied with their jobs, their levels of satisfaction were lower in schools with higher student mobility. Presumably, challenges with attendance, student records, and discipline increase on campuses with high student mobility.

Generally, their tasks require assistant principals to work closely with their principals. They often coordinate with another assistant principal. Frequently, they substitute for the principal. Thus they

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 7

must work well on a team, be flexible, make quick decisions, and anticipate needs and problems (Austin & Brown, 1970).

Personal and professional disputes, value conflicts, and differing styles and philosophies can be disastrous in such tight quarters; the assistant most often adopts or adapts to the style and philosophy of the principal. Furthermore, assistants are seldom expected to assert leadership by creating new projects or initiatives. Risk-taking must be limited; assistants must confine themselves to supportive tasks, leaving visible leadership to the principal.

### **Role Ambiguity**

The assistant principal seldom has a consistent, well-defined job description, delineation of duties, or way of measuring outcomes from accomplishment of tasks. Along with fixed, assigned tasks, assistant principals pick up multiple jobs every hour. In one study, Mertz (2005) showed that principals assigned tasks in an ad hoc manner, so the assistants speculated they were assigned according to “who did he see first after learning about the task” (p. 18).

Role ambiguity means that the assistant principal’s roles and duties include many “gray areas”—ill-defined, inconsistent, and at times incoherent responsibilities, roles, and resources. For example, assistant principals’ responsibilities may not include employing substitutes but may include handling the problems that ensue when substitutes are not screened. Some assistants easily develop an understanding of administrative responsibilities and assertively take charge of certain tasks, regardless of their formal role expectations. However, *some* assistant principals may experience a lack of job satisfaction, emotional problems, a sense of futility or ineffectiveness, and a lack of confidence caused by role ambiguity, particularly when the information provided about the job and the actual daily job requirements seem very different (Austin & Brown, 1970; Fulton, 1987; Kahn, et al., 1964; Kelly, 1987; Norton & Kriekard, 1987). Although these problems are well documented, there are no recent studies to review.

### **Role Conflict and Overload**

With so many tasks to perform, assistant principals find that their roles are at cross-purposes with each other. For example, an assistant principal might be required to help teachers develop

## 8 The Assistant Principal

coordinated curricula, which is a “teacher support” function. But this function conflicts with the monitoring, supervising, and evaluating functions. The assistant may work with a teacher as a colleague in one meeting, and perhaps one hour later, the same assistant may chastise the same teacher for noncompliance with the district’s new homework policy. When they must monitor teachers’ compliance, assistants have difficulty maintaining equal collegial and professional relationships with them. Also, assistant principals often serve as intermediaries between teachers and students and as the main line of communication to the principal—the person in the middle between constituents and participants in schools.

Assistant principals experience role conflict when the immediate demands of the school interfere with doing the work they value as an expression of their professionalism. Constant monitoring of student discipline, for instance, may require so much time that assistant principals must forsake creative programming in curricular innovation, proactive discipline management, or using their special expertise. If assistant principals are expected to do everything the principal cannot get to, they will not have time to take initiative or focus on special projects.

Finally, assistant principals experience role conflict and overload when it is not possible to perform adequately in all of their assigned roles. This situation is exacerbated when roles and duties are ambiguous, never measured, and never-ending. An assistant principal who is expected to “respond to the needs of community groups” never knows which activities to focus on, how many meetings to attend, or which groups to meet with in order to perform adequately in this role.

Many assistant principals feel overloaded when they try to do well in all assigned duties *and* make contributions by devising special projects. They also may run the risk that the special project is neither noticed nor credited to them when they are evaluated or reviewed. Consequently, such extra work is a gamble at best. There seems to be no end to the ever-evolving expectations and no time taken to say “Well done!” They become discouraged and give up when their principals do not follow through, even after agreeing to support the assistant principal’s most innovative ideas (Mertz, 2005).

Role conflict and overload occur when job responsibilities demand so much time, energy, and emotion that little is left for the assistant principal’s personal life or professional development. Many assistant principals give up on advanced education and sacrifice time

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 9

with friends and family as they try to meet the constant demands of their school. As a result, they may become angry, confused, and depressed. They are suffering from the dilemmas of role conflict and overload.

### **Job Satisfaction and “Dissatisfaction”**

Assistant principals who are rewarded for their efforts (by the organization, by the profession, or by their own sense of what is important) should have a sense of job satisfaction. However, some research shows that assistant principals are dissatisfied in their positions. A study of secondary assistant principals in 1996 revealed that they were only marginally satisfied with their jobs and they were not as interested in advancing their careers as they had been in prior studies (Waskiewicz, 1999), but relationships with supervisors and the chance to make good use of one’s skills increased job satisfaction. More recently, a survey of secondary assistant principals in Texas found that they were generally satisfied with their jobs (Armstrong, 2004). Older studies provide nuanced findings. The 1970 Austin and Brown study found that many felt they were given low-satisfaction duties such as monitoring discipline and attendance. Furthermore, their multitude of job tasks rarely allowed them to “see a thing through” to its completion (Austin & Brown, 1970, p. 79). The study showed that administrators believe that most of the assistant principals’ assignments do not give them a high level of discretionary action. Their work is constrained by rules and understandings about their “place” and limits on their range of initiative.

A study in urban Houston and town and rural areas of Kansas (Croft & Morton, 1977) found that assistant principals felt higher satisfaction with duties requiring expertise and administrative ability than with those requiring clerical ability. The study also showed assistant principals as having higher satisfaction than Austin and Brown (1970) reported. Nonetheless, assistant principals deal with the dilemma of deriving satisfaction from this risky and sometimes powerless position. They have a great deal of responsibility but little discretion, and they are under constant scrutiny. As they seek satisfiers, they respond to pushes and pulls from their specific school site, their sense from previous professional experience about what is important, and the school system’s rewards and incentives.

## 10 The Assistant Principal

Much can be learned about job satisfaction by examining why people leave the assistant principalship. Austin and Brown found that assistant principals left for better salaries and higher status. A significant number left seeking greater professional challenges, including greater involvement in the school's educational program and a desire to innovate. One would conclude that they seldom find these satisfactions in the assistantship. Calabrese and Adams (1987) found that assistant principals had a greater sense of powerlessness and alienation than did principals. Those with advanced degrees, especially the doctorate, had much higher perceptions of alienation and powerlessness. Again, these problematic findings in old research provide insights for needed new research.

### **Career Incentives**

Probably the most powerful reward and incentive for most assistant principals lies in the possibility of using the position as a stepping-stone to administrative careers, particularly for line positions (as opposed to staff specialist positions). The assistant principal may perform the same tasks as principals (concerning budget, facilities, student affairs, curriculum and instruction, and public relations), which prepare them for moving up in the hierarchy.

In school administrative careers, a common career route to the superintendency is that of teacher, secondary curriculum specialist, secondary assistant principal, secondary principal, associate superintendent, then superintendent. The elementary principalship appears to be a dead-end position, while the secondary principalship provides opportunities for districtwide links (Carlson, 1972; Gaertner, 1980; Gallant, 1980; Ortiz, 1982). Thus there exists a real possibility that good performance as an assistant principal will directly lead to the next administrative line position, the beginning of the march up the career ladder. According to norms of the profession, career success in administration is measured by the attainment of higher power, status, pay, and a higher administrative position in the hierarchy.

Many view the assistant principalship as a step up the career ladder. Few practicing administrators prefer to remain in the assistant principalship; the Austin and Brown study showed that between 40 and 50 percent of all assistant principals advance to other professional posts. A minority (39 percent urban, 29 percent suburban) of the respondents expected to make the assistant principalship a

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 11

lifetime career when they entered the field, while a majority expected to be promoted within their own districts. This situation creates role dilemmas from which two questions emerge:

1. What is the level of effort exerted by assistant principals who perceive themselves as simply “passing through”?
2. What happens to assistant principals who realize they have plateaued at the assistant principal position?

It is important to examine whether the assistant principalship has intrinsic rewards or incentives for those who will not move up.

Moving into the assistant principalship is considered (by many educators and in terms of pay scales) to be a promotion, a reward, and a signal that one has potential for leadership. However, some assistant principal tasks are menial and routine, possess low visibility, lack evaluation and review, and provide no opportunity for creativity. Without opportunities to take risks or attempt risky projects, these individuals have no opportunity for special recognition and reward in those leadership areas. Clearly, being the disciplinarian will not provide the assistant principal with visibility or allow interaction with people in higher administrative positions.

However, some assistant principal tasks, assignments, or activities do offer opportunities for exposure to superiors, provide for frequent reviews, allow for expansion of knowledge and exercise of discretion, and allow involvement in special risky projects; they allow and encourage assistant principals to innovate and receive credit and feedback that enhances job satisfaction and opportunity for advancement. Typically, these tasks are on the boundary between the school and the community or other units of the school system (e.g., task forces managing state policy, the PTA, or district computer committees). Interestingly, these opportunities to distinguish oneself and obtain recognition from district administrators almost always involve interactions with adults, not children. When assistants develop interpersonal skills with community people, superiors, and other adults, they can learn skills for career mobility. Assistant principals who assume such tasks are more likely to get the attention and sponsorship of superiors and the motivation to move into higher positions. Thus there is built-in temptation for assistants to concentrate their efforts in areas that facilitate upward mobility rather than

## 12 The Assistant Principal

in areas focusing on the immediate needs of the programs and people in their own school.

Assistant principals who have little opportunity to move into higher positions (because of their tasks, low turnover in administrative positions, or district restrictions) are plateaued, facing the possibility of ending their careers in the assistant principalship. They are left to find rewards and incentives within their current position. In Chapter 3, we present new research on the satisfactions, adjustments, and delights found by “career assistant principals.”

Thus we see that the position can be shaped to be quite rewarding. Still, while they perform important tasks, assistants seldom are rewarded adequately. Often their tasks are conflicting. While schools cry out for leadership and creative efforts for reform, assistant principals’ opportunities for initiative are constrained. This presents problems but also policy opportunities. Professional associations and policymakers seeking ways to support new leadership will do well to address these dilemmas for assistant principals.

### **POLICY CONCERNS IN THE ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL ROLE**

Policymakers do not pay attention to the assistant principal. They do not sponsor studies or even collect data on this position. As a result, they miss rich opportunities to make a difference.

#### **Recruiting and Retaining Leaders**

Policymakers and administrators, especially superintendents and personnel directors, desperately work to recruit and retain entry-level teachers. However, the challenges of recruiting and retaining good school leaders, including assistant principals, begin with the challenge to recruit educators generally.

The recruitment and retention issues for assistant principals are usually ignored because people focus on teachers and principals. Although these are, truly, interrelated careers and positions, policymakers too quickly leap past the assistant position in their deliberations. In a 1998 survey of superintendents asking about their difficulties in recruiting principals, they reported that candidates were most discouraged for the following reasons:

- Compensation was insufficient compared to responsibilities
- The job is generally too stressful, and

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 13

- The job requires too much time.
- Other reasons—concerning parents, community, societal problems, accountability pressures, bad press, funding for schools, and no tenure—were far less worrisome for candidates (Educational Research Service, 1998). Although this survey focused on principals, it may shed light on assistant principal recruitment. These issues, however, may have shifted by now as a result of increased accountability pressures from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

### **Identifying Appropriate Training and Selection Systems**

Assistant principals are usually selected because of their visibility and success as teachers, department heads, counselors, or administrative interns. Likewise, the administrative candidates who conform to work requirements and advance tradition are most likely to be selected for promotion. But in the process, many talented, innovative educational leaders are rejected for entry-level administrative positions. Many others with potential for creative educational leadership may look at the assistant principal position and decide not to enter administration. The need for good training and selection guidelines is a pressing policy issue.

State policymakers, professional associations, and university professors ponder and debate the formal training and experience required for administrative positions. We are still trying to develop a set of understandings for the field of educational administration and describe the appropriate skills and functions that are necessary.

Formal course work does not transform people into good educational leaders. Furthermore, there exist very few specific, agreed-upon, definable criteria for selecting administrators. Efforts (e.g., the National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP] Assessment Centers and Interstate Leadership Licensure Consortium [ISLLC]) at training and evaluation actually weed out some with innovative approaches or may rely on assumptions that no longer apply. The reforms and the pressing challenges of the standards-based education movement in the new century require reexamination of assumptions about educational administration. Since the assistant principalship is an entry-level position and often the first formal administrative position that a person holds, previous administrative experience would be an inappropriate prerequisite. No evaluation instruments have been devised specifically for

## 14 The Assistant Principal

measuring the ability of the assistant principal. Tests would be difficult to devise because the assistant principal's tasks are so varied across schools, districts, and regions. Therefore university programs, state certification requirements, staff development, selection systems, and professional association meetings and publications are often designed with only a best-guess effort to address the requirements of the assistant principalship.

### **Encouraging Innovators**

School systems need vigorous imaginative leadership to meet the challenges presented by community change, declining resources, state and federal accountability, and national concern about the quality of education. Numerous studies have raised the question of whether educational leaders have the ability or the desire to be creative in addressing schooling problems. Indeed, the stated purpose for charter schools is to create a place for innovation and new ways of framing education by releasing such schools and their administrators from the burdensome requirements of state and federal government.

The selection system for administration typically weeds out people with divergent ideas. Often, teachers have a conservative bias (Lortie, 1975). Therefore, assistant principals and other administrators are selected from a pool of rather conservative people. To start with, the more creative, imaginative, reform-minded, and innovative people have already been filtered out. Then the selection and training process continues this filtering by discouraging those with innovative, divergent, and creative ideas.

In the process of training and selecting individuals, organizations teach a person to "make decisions by himself, as the organization would like him to decide" (March & Simon, 1958, p. 169). They are socialized to think and work within the status quo. People who raise questions and challenge the system are more likely to be viewed as misfits than as potential leaders. People who have conflicting feelings about administration, school programs, and incumbent administrators, and who challenge existing practice, will be less likely to be seen as trustworthy and loyal enough to be included in the administrative group.

People who are different (either because of different backgrounds or ideas or because they are minorities or women) take special risks when they separate from teachers and attempt to

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 15

become administrators. They risk becoming the “marginal man” (Merton, 1960), who neither fits with teachers nor is included with administrators. Diversity in the first years of the twenty-first century is defined more broadly than ever before, and all of these differences fall outside the very conservative administrative mold. Examples of exclusionary characteristics beyond gender and race might include economic, philosophic, political, and intellectual diversity as well as sexual orientation and the fact that a candidate’s spouse is from a different racial background. Therefore people who *are* selected as administrators are likely to be those who are similar to previous administrators, people whose ways of thinking and acting coincide with tradition.

Because of litigation and liability issues, the nature of administrative work these days is conservative. The tendency of school administrators to make safe decisions, avoid risk, and make short-term plans for measurable programs prohibits innovation. Thompson (1967) explains these tendencies by pointing out that administrators have incomplete knowledge of cause-and-effect relationships. Furthermore, he notes that “organizations can thwart the exercise of discretion by establishing inappropriate assessment criteria as bases for rewards and penalties” (Thompson, 1967, p. 120). People who have ambiguous positions, who are evaluated by vague or inappropriate criteria, are very dependent on others’ judgment. They risk losing power and rewards when they exercise discretion or independent judgment. So there is an administrative bias in favor of certainty, a bias in favor of quantifiable results, and a reliance on precedent rather than innovation. Intolerance for ambiguity and favoring quantifiable measures of cost-efficiency rather than wide-ranging discussions of social goals are natural reactions to administrators’ need to maintain control over the organizational environment.

Another factor that stifles innovation is the depth of knowledge a new assistant principal must have to be effective. From the point of view of a superintendent or principal, it is critical that the assistant principal support the established routines and guide teachers in the established procedures. Clearly, assistant principals spend most of the early years in their role learning procedures and the school culture. One very large forward-looking school district in the Southwest created an exciting new administrator academy, in which new administrators log hours with central office department heads, learning about process and procedures. This setup guarantees that the district’s desire

## 16 The Assistant Principal

for a smoothly run system will prevail, perhaps stifling innovation. The academy, then, becomes a training school.

Administrators, when overloaded by work demands and worried that they will be judged on efficiency rather than on creative leadership, will make safe decisions, avoiding ventures (e.g., in democratic leadership or community involvement) that tend to decrease their control and increase their risk. They will bend to political pressure when they are uncertain about the best stance to take in a conflict. They will put their energies into programs that will be understood, assessed accurately, and rewarded. They are unlikely to search for creative or long-term ways to address dilemmas in schooling. And the assistants who observe the selection processes (for entry into these and higher positions) will learn that risk-taking and divergent thinking can hurt their careers. Interestingly, much of the professional development and literature prepared for superintendents is focused on risk-taking!

Thus a pressing policy question remains: What recruitment, selection, reward, and assessment system will ensure that schools hire and train innovators, leaders of reform, builders of school-community integration, and participatory managers?

### **Encouraging Instructional Leaders**

Still another pressing question for those who train and select educational leaders concerns how we can identify, encourage, support, select, and reward administrators who care about the instructional program. These concerns stem not only from educators' general orientation and interest in the quality of curriculum and instruction but also from the body of research indicating that effective schools have, among other things, people who take leadership in curriculum and instructional programming. On the other hand, some reform efforts aim to empower teachers—the educators most closely attuned to classroom and curricular concerns—to have more decision-making power, discretion, and responsibility for instructional leadership. But can and do site-level administrators (assistants or principals) “lead” instruction?

Who owns the “instructional leadership job,” and how is it coordinated? Analyses of the daily activities of principals and assistant principals show that their time is taken up with personnel, school management, and student activities and behavior, although they claim to value instructional leadership and program development

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 17

functions (Gorton & McIntyre, 1978; Greenfield, 1985a, 1985b; Hess, 1985; Kelly, 1987). With the tightening of accountability for students' academic performance, no site-level administrator can duck instructional leadership work. Assistant principals and principals can, however, empower the teachers, facilitate the decisions, and help devise strategic improvement and continuous improvement plans. No initiative or reform will occur without grassroots support from teachers, and the administrator has a big hand in moving that forward.

Thus, under current traditions and structures, the assistant can be an instructional leader only in rare instances or in more nuanced ways. Furthermore, in leaving teaching to enter the administrative ranks, assistant principals may lose credibility in instructional matters (Greenfield, 1985b; Little, 1984; Spady, 1985).

The effective schools literature indicates that maintaining safe and orderly environments, building wide awareness, and committing to high levels of student progress are part of instructional leadership. But being an assistant principal may actually undermine educators' ability and affinity for instructional leadership if they advance to higher administrative positions. Quite possibly, the duties of assistant principals prevent them from developing as instructional leaders. Often their tasks take them away from classrooms and curriculum and place them in roles of managing rather than working with teachers. One must ask: Do teachers, assistant principals, and principals with the training, ability, and affinity for instructional leadership actually receive career rewards and promotions?

Observation of assistant principals (Marshall, 1985a; Reed & Himmler, 1985) raises doubts that their tasks and roles allow them to develop competencies in curriculum leadership and teacher supervision. The center of their daily activity is maintaining organizational stability. Policymakers must pay attention to the assistant principalship in their debates and directives aimed at locating and supporting instructional leadership.

### **Providing Equal Opportunity**

As a key position for entry into administration, the assistant principalship is an important focus for policy concerns about equal opportunity. Assuring access to administrative positions for women and minorities is a matter of equity as well as a matter of providing

## 18 The Assistant Principal

role models for students, of expanding the definition of competent leadership, and of maximizing the use of a pool of talented personnel.

Women and minorities have not attained administrative positions as often as men, even during the 1970s and 1980s when affirmative action policies were established. Women are more likely to be in staff positions (consultants or supervisors of instruction) than in the assistant principal and principal positions that are direct lines to the superintendency. The norms enforcing compulsory heterosexuality in school administration are so embedded that the profession seems quite incapable of even talking about gay and lesbian school leaders (Blount, 2003; Marshall & Ward, 2004). Presumably, some persons with disabilities would be winnowed out by explicitly stated job specifications about heavy lifting and intervening in fights.

It is useful to identify historical trends. Several studies of minority representation in administration indicate that minority administrators often lost their jobs or were demoted during school consolidations in response to desegregation mandates and/or economic constraints (Coursen, 1975, 1989). For example, in Florida's consolidation movement in the 1960s, nonminority principals often retained their positions or advanced while minority principals were demoted to assistant principalships or to special projects administration, with limited power, or were placed back in the classroom (Abney, 1978). Affirmative action policies have not compensated for these losses. Ortiz (1982) also found a general pattern of minorities being placed in administrative positions to supervise minorities and special projects, positions that were neither at the center of power and decision-making nor on the career path toward higher positions.

It appears that the assistant principalship is a good career stepping-stone for men but not for women. Gaertner (1980), in her analysis of administrative career patterns, found that women are less likely to attain the positions (particularly secondary assistant principalships and principalships) that lead directly to the highest administrative positions. Furthermore, female teachers are more likely to be in elementary schools, where assistant principals are few and far between. Prolman's (1982) study of principals found that among those who had prior administrative experience, men were far more likely to have held an assistant principalship. In her sample, only one woman had held an assistant principalship prior to her principalship. Most women had held positions in the central office as directors of

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 19

programs or as supervisors. More recently, of principals surveyed in 1994, 54 percent had been assistant principals or “program directors” prior to their principalship and 27 percent had been athletic coaches. This pattern has held steady over the years, although it is a less pronounced pattern in private schools than public (Fiore, 1997). Policymakers need to examine recruitment to the assistant principalship to see how it can be altered to promote equity in administration. We need better national statistics on the trends in hiring women and minorities as assistant principals (more on this in Chapter 4).

As the twenty-first century unfolds, policymakers are still seeing these trends and making only weak interventions. Policies generally are race-neutral and gender-neutral, at best, and the issue is framed as if it would be merely about opening up opportunity. Recent changes in licensure pay little to no attention to the historical pattern of women’s and minorities’ unequal representation in administration or the informal socialization processes that recruit and support white males.

Few districts, universities, foundations, or policies provide incentives, scholarships, or special support for women or minorities. As revealed in a survey about recruiting principals, superintendents said that minority recruitment was an issue for 35 percent of districts overall and for 67 percent of urban districts. However, superintendents said they had plentiful qualified female applicants. Thus, for policymakers unconcerned about equity, the “minority problem” is worse than the “women problem.”

To achieve equitable support and access for women *and* minorities, the informal recruitment and support processes must be changed so the professional culture of school administration is more enticing and supportive. Currently, it takes too much perseverance and defiance of norms and expectations for women and minorities to take on the extra stresses that all school leaders face. In her study of female teachers with leadership potential, Wynn (2003) found that they just could not see anything appealing about administration, especially when it required giving up attention to instructional matters and distancing themselves from children, including their own! Thus policies cannot work with mere statements about equal opportunity.

As a result, much leadership talent is systematically cast to the wind, leading to a crisis in numbers and a talent drain. Policymakers can reverse this pattern: “Instead of waiting for individuals to self-select administration, educational leaders must be identified and groomed in a systematic way that facilitates the recruitment of

## 20 The Assistant Principal

potential leaders among women and minorities” (Crow, Mecklowitz, & Weekes, 1992).

### **Empowerment and Participatory Management**

Principals have considerable autonomy not only in assigning tasks to assistant principals but also in defining the style of the working relationship between the principal and the assistant principal. Old research found that assistant principals had few tasks that allowed problem-solving and discretionary action, concluding with the belief that “a do-as-you-are-told policy in assigning duties to members of an administrative team is a very short-sighted one as measured by the well-being of the school” (Austin & Brown, 1970). They found that “principals more frequently than assistant principals believe that assistant principals are invested with a substantial measure of responsibility for important functions of the school that require the exercise of good judgment” (p. 47). These findings reflect a tendency to keep assistant principals in a subordinate position within a specific chain of command, a hierarchy with the principal controlling the work of the assistant principal. Recent research (Mertz, 2005) and anecdotal evidence indicate that this has not changed. Such a view seems inappropriate for an organization in which the workers are fellow professionals. Emphasis on hierarchical control can subvert efforts to work cooperatively toward common goals. District policymakers should be concerned about the professional development of aspiring educational leaders and should direct attention to the assistant principalship.

Participatory management strategies include incorporating lower-level management in decision-making so that their concerns and ideas will be heard. Administrators who have a part in making policy are more likely to implement the policy in their school sites (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978), and communication and cooperation are enhanced. In addition, such participation gives administrators a sense of satisfaction and belonging (Gorton, 1987; Shockley & Smith, 1981).

When principals see the assistant principal only as someone to do the undesirable tasks, they lose the opportunity to multiply administrative efficacy. Such a “mop-up” assistant principal merely supplements the work of the principal. However, principals who work as administrative teams with their assistants could *multiply*, not just supplement, their effectiveness. Such an administrative team

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 21

approach is more than the sum of its parts. School district policy-makers need to identify structures for supporting administrative teamwork at the school site.

To establish a climate for participatory management at the school level, districts and principals can, and sometimes do, create the structures and attitudes that facilitate participation. In addition, principals need to recognize their responsibility to provide their professional colleagues with opportunities for satisfying work, adequate support, advanced training, and effective resources. Principals who view the assistant principal as the person who does everything that the principal dislikes undermine the possibility for administrative teamwork. On the other hand, principals who learn a more collegial and less hierarchical style of leadership will get the best from their fellow professional educators—assistant principals, teachers, specialists, and other support staff.

Collaborative leadership is the essence of site-based management. Administrators should lead and facilitate this site-based management. This means that when facing a question such as “How will we address our declining reading scores?”, the administrator can and should present the data and facilitate brainstorming as well as the implementation plan.

Unfortunately, NCLB has erased the initiatives of site-based management in many ways. There still may be ways that this new accountability facing schools from state and federal governments can lead to opportunities for collegial leadership. For example, a rising need for good data collection and analysis now exists in schools as never before. An assistant principal might take up that task and provide information for decision-making efforts. Similarly, when data are collected and analyzed, a broad-based plan for using the data to improve instruction and achievement is needed. Facilitating a committee to implement the results seen in the data leads to collaborative work, not only by the administrative team but also in the wider school community. Strategic plans offer this same kind of chance to lead an implementation effort based on the test or achievement data. The division of tasks also can drive a more collaborative culture. When the principal, for example, is partially responsible for discipline or tracking attendance along with the assistant principals, some of the hierarchy is erased. A principal working alongside assistant principals in the trenches, so to speak, creates an environment of shared decision-making and problem-solving.

## 22 The Assistant Principal

### **The Plateaued Assistant**

A majority of assistant principals view their position as a necessary career step to higher positions. However, when upward mobility is not possible, what happens to these people? Many assistant principals must face the reality that they will end their careers in the same position. Many entered administration late in their work lives. Some are seen as particularly valuable in the position and hence will not be moved. Others are labeled as potentially troublesome if promoted; still others are viewed as “not fitting in.” And in districts with declining enrollment, there are simply no viable opportunities for advancement. Assistant principals frequently face such realities with a sense of failure and frustrated aspiration. Yet these realities continue to confront educators as they sense their careers reaching a plateau and the possibility of upward movement becomes more and more remote.

The frustration of the plateaued assistant principal is exacerbated by the assumption that success means upward mobility. The hierarchy, status, and reward system in education supports that assumption.

The frustration is intensified when the assistant principal is required to spend long hours doing unpleasant tasks that have no clear, measurable outcomes. Under these conditions, the assistant principal has little power or opportunity to redefine tasks or plan for better management. Both the long hours and the sometimes-limited mobility are serious frustrations, but they fade in significance in states where teachers are relatively well paid because of a long history of strong union activity. In the Northeast, where this is often the case, assistant principals could actually make less than the teachers they are supervising or give up substantial stipends that teachers receive for coaching and other extra duties. The new assistant principal could actually lose salary when he or she accepts this entry-level administrative post.

Recent research and policy concerns about the administrator shortage *should* highlight the plateaued, dissatisfied assistant principal. It would make sense to pay special attention to those who are feeling unappreciated or underpaid, needing a wider vision, and/or underperforming. Rather than lose those underachievers, special supports could transform them into high-capacity leaders.

Can the assistant principalship be defined in such a way that it is seen as a valued and desirable position? Are there policies and

## What Is Special About Assistant Principals? 23

structures that would enable people who feel no pressure, obligation, or desire to move into a higher position to find fulfillment and continuous challenge as “career assistant principals”? This is a concern for educators and policymakers.

### **RECENT REALIZATIONS AND DEVELOPMENTS AFFECTING THE ASSISTANT**

Schools have always had to find ways to work with changing demographics. Patterns of immigration, migration, and homelessness have always presented challenges to school leaders. But leaders realize the need to do more than simply provide access. They are not always prepared to embrace not only cultural diversity but also single-parent families, families in poverty, and families in which all the adults work full-time with no extended family to watch over kids. Similarly, it is not enough for school leaders to simply increase the use of crisis intervention teams to deal with problem kids or special education laws and regulations. Furthermore, the risks of hasty decision-making are accentuated in this increasingly litigious society and with the likelihood of more children falling through the cracks.

Now, NCLB requires more and more academic interventions, before and after school as well as during the day. But the assistant principal is challenged to meet this mandate when parents cannot transport the kids there or when a parent does not have enough influence to compel the child to attend. What should the assistant do, when not solving these matters means the school is out of compliance?

Assistant principals must be very careful, given the increasing disillusionment of parents and kids with the expectation that doing well in school will earn the student a good job. Some students and their parents simply do not buy the old messages about “good school performance getting you to the good life.”

Finally, assistant principals find themselves acting in *loco parentis*. They have to cope with an immediate crisis when they must act, daily, in spite of the increasing ambiguity and tension over the role of schools in mediating kids’ identities and values regarding issues such as sexuality, religion, drugs, students’ sense of self, and their self-presentation. The assistant principal may feel silly deciding that the kid with the scanty tank top or low-rider jeans must go home. The assistant principal might know that providing a condom

## 24 The Assistant Principal

would be the very best way to help the boy in front of him, but it would be illegal.

Much can and should be done to pay attention to assistant principals who, like Mr. Black below, struggle daily in helping schools function.

### **Bruce Black's Assistant Principal's Diary**

Now that he has retired after eight years as a high school assistant principal, during which he wore out the soles of two pairs of shoes every year, Black (2002) shared parts of his diary from his first year on the job:

September, first day: I walk the halls' bathrooms, three lunch duties. The noise during eighth grade lunch is like a playoff game in a domed stadium. I am not sure how many miles I put in but I was in bed by 8 p.m.

End of September: . . . the principal is dealing with the kid who came to Homecoming dressed as a condom while I am dealing with the parents who want compensation for their child's broken glasses.

October 1: Student with a serious eating disorder . . .

October 7: Janitors see me about a student who defecated on the floor—secretaries laugh about me and the Mad Crapper.

October 11: Must remove a student—a big guy from the special ed room. I'm only 5'7" but I'm fast.

November 29: The hockey player I suspended for chewing tobacco says he'll sue me.

December 3: Today I was physically assaulted by a kid who thought I was to blame that he's been truant and thus suspended.

December 4: There's a stolen snowmobile in my office.

February 3: A student I saw during the day attempts suicide that night. She is okay now . . . I am lucky; I work with a great group of counselors.

February 9: A bomb goes off in the cafeteria—student made it, following instructions on the Internet.

March 7: My daughter phones and tells me about a phone message that says “I want to kill you and your family.”

Mr. Black recalls managing the unpredictability of his job with a sense of humor. He actually enjoyed the challenges of the position, but after eight years, he said, “juggling too many things at once eventually wears you down” (p. 38). His twenty-nine years as a middle school principal seemed relaxing in comparison with his assistant principal years (Black, 2002).

## SUMMARY

A close analysis of the daily work of assistant principals provides a picture of their important functions at the school site. However, the analysis also reveals unanswered questions and opportunities for improvement through policy. By focusing on the assistant, policymakers could affect instructional leadership, innovation, and equity for women and minorities as well as recreate the position to be more than just a career stepping-stone. In paying special attention to assistant principals’ training and recruitment, policymakers could affect the supply and quality of future educational leadership. Most assistants would welcome such attention.

One is left wondering if the assistant principalship isn’t, as currently construed, a rather poor orientation to creative leadership, even though it is the usual stepping-stone and training ground for higher leadership positions. Chapters 2 and 3 provide deeper descriptions of current practice. Then, in the last chapters of this book, we note promising trends, programs, and policies and propose new ways of structuring and conceptualizing leadership.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. As a practitioner, why do you believe policymakers, the media, and universities do not pay more attention to the quandaries and challenges of assistant principals?
2. You may have noticed exceptions (including in your own experience) to the statements made in this chapter (e.g., you may know people who are secure and happy as assistant

## 26 The Assistant Principal

principals or school districts where many women and minorities hold the position). How can you explain these exceptions?

3. Conduct a library search on your own, or as a group, to identify the kinds of issues raised about assistant principals.
4. Make a list of questions and conduct phone or e-mail interviews with several districts' personnel directors and/or with several professors of educational administration to identify the kinds of issues they raise about assistant principals. This might be of use in contract negotiations for assistant principals.
5. Ask several successful principals and superintendents to discuss their fondest and worst memories about their years as assistant principals.
6. In your district, how often do assistant principals meet to discuss their roles and district initiatives, and with whom do they meet?
7. What opportunities exist or can be imagined, for you as an assistant principal, to become involved in a high-profile project for your school or district as you balance the other duties of your job?
8. What could be done to limit the time you and other assistant principals spend on discipline?
9. What curriculum or data projects could you assist with or facilitate at your site?
10. As an assistant principal, what issues do you feel were missed in this chapter to fully articulate the challenges you have experienced?