The Role of Supervision in Faculty Development

by Gordon B. Brown

There are really only two ways to improve a school significantly: (1) Get better teachers; (2) Improve the teachers you have” (Whitaker 2003, 7–8). That simplifies matters, doesn’t it? Do we invest the same intensity in developing teachers as we do in hiring them?

In a recent survey (Brown 2007), Christian school administrators who had an average of 7.6 years of experience reported that

- they conducted 2.3 full-class observations per teacher per year and 8.6 brief, unannounced classroom visits per week;
- 100 percent have written policies guiding supervision, development, and evaluation of faculty;
- 46 percent require mentoring for first-year teachers.

Ambitious? Maybe. But these experienced administrators give intentional supervisory focus to developing faculty even while citing lack of time as their most pressing supervisory problem (Brown 2007).

Supervision of faculty often takes second place in Christian schools. The seemingly urgent tasks receive priority attention because the results are immediate. In contrast, principals need patience while waiting for the results of supervision of faculty instruction to become obvious.

However, if we really believe that the school’s most important work happens in the classrooms, shouldn’t we invest prime-time attention in the instructional enterprise?

Evidence from Research

We need look no further than empirical research to see the connection between supervisory work by principals and improved student learning that results from the growth of teachers as effective instructors. Good supervision creates a school culture that embraces continuous improvement and student learning.

A meta-analysis of 69 studies identified nine responsibilities that principals fulfill and that simultaneously relate positively to student achievement. Those responsibilities make an impact on student learning indirectly by helping to develop teachers who lead students to achieve. When principals foster shared beliefs among teachers, affirm teachers’ accomplishments, monitor the instructional quality delivered by teachers, and involve teachers in designing and implementing curriculum, those principals are equipping faculty to enhance student learning (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005).

A study by Gaziel (1995) also supports the positive effect that principals can have on school performance. In comparing the principals of high-performing schools with those in average schools, Gaziel found that “principals in high-performing schools invested much more time in instructional management, school improvement, parent-community relationships, and personnel management” (p. 179). Yet principals typically “spend nearly all of their time on organizational maintenance and pupil control activities” (p. 180). Further giving evidence to the impact of principals, Heck (1992) discovered that the amount of time spent by principals in directly observing classroom practices was one of the three most important predictors of student achievement.

Biblical Principles Applied

The biblical pattern for the development of believers relies strongly on personal interaction, a principle that transfers to developing faculty through supervision. Church leaders are supposed to watch over the souls of the flock. The New Testament urges believers to follow more than 25 one-to-another commands so that they will grow in Christ together. In God’s methodology for Christian growth, the mature are supposed to guide, mentor, instruct, supervise, and support the less mature. The apostle Paul taught church leaders to equip saints for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12). In the same way, supervisory and collegial relationships promote the development of Christian school teachers. These biblical principles make a strong case for administrators to plan for faculty development through various supervision processes.

Building on this foundation, let’s consider four strategic approaches for supervising the development of faculty.

One: Developing Faculty as Adult Learners

Adults learn differently than children. Adults bring experience, previous learning, and independence to their learning tasks. The process for supervising teachers should take into account these patterns.
What are the principles of adult learning? Jane Vella (2002) describes 12 such principles, 7 of which strongly relate to developing teachers through supervision. Adult learning theory suggests that relevance, trust, respect, reflective thinking, accountability, immediacy of feedback, and peer support should characterize the supervision process. The following table connects adult learning principles to supervisory applications.

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<tr>
<th>Principles of Adult Learning</th>
<th>Applications to Supervision of Faculty</th>
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<td>Needs assessment requires the participation of learners in naming what they are going to learn.</td>
<td>Develop in teachers the ability to self-analyze their teaching and to identify growth needs.</td>
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<td>Safety means that the context for learning is safe and that people trust the process.</td>
<td>Foster trusting, nonjudgmental relationships between supervisors and teachers.</td>
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<td>Sound relationships exist between the teacher and the learners.</td>
<td>Conduct administrator-teacher conferences characterized by respect, safety, open communication, listening, and humility.</td>
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<td>Praxis includes action accompanied by reflection or learning accomplished by doing.</td>
<td>Develop teachers who think reflectively about their teaching and who try new methods.</td>
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<td>Respect for adults as decision makers means giving choices to adults.</td>
<td>Give teachers alternatives for new methods and hold them accountable for the results of their choices.</td>
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<td>Immediacy is important for learning.</td>
<td>Guide teachers to implement improvement ideas immediately.</td>
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<td>Teamwork (in small groups, for example) provides peer support.</td>
<td>Structure opportunities for teachers to help one another in small committees or units.</td>
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**Two: Developing Faculty Through Mentoring**

Teachers mentoring teachers is a valuable strategy that schools should require in the training of all new teachers. The principle of the more mature guiding the less mature was present in the early Church (2 Timothy 2:2; Titus 2:4, 7), and the Christian school can apply that principle by pairing new teachers with more experienced teachers in the same subject area or grade level. By training mentors and providing release time for mentoring duties, supervisors encourage a positive mentoring climate. During mentoring activities, experienced teachers observe new teachers while helping them plan, evaluate, and team-teach lessons. Together, mentors and protégés assess the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship by conferencing once a semester with an administrator.

Through mentoring, individual teachers receive immediate feedback in response to questions and problems as they arise. Ideally, mentors assist new teachers daily. When feedback and help are immediate, new teachers progress steadily.

The ultimate mentoring plan is to hire a first-year teacher as the second teacher in the classroom of an experienced teacher. After one year of daily oversight, the new teacher is ready for a class of his or her own. Believe it or not, in the southeastern United States there is a Christian school that embraces this practice!

**Three: Developing Faculty Through Regular, Informal Classroom Visits**

How frequently should supervisors observe classes? Is there an optimum number of visits for ensuring that instructional improvement will take place? Research doesn’t give us precise answers, although, as stated, Heck (1992) reported that the amount of time spent by principals in observing classes is one of the three most important predictors of student achievement.

Most schools use some form of the clinical supervision cycle that includes conferencing with the teacher before and after classroom observations. The goal is to encourage the teacher, in a relationship characterized by trust, to analyze data about the classroom events and to initiate improvement changes. Because this cycle requires 40-to-60-minute time blocks, administrators regularly lament that they lack time to carry it out effectively.

In recent years, Carolyn Downey et al. (2004) and Sally Zepeda (2005) have trumpeted the value of frequent, informal classroom visits by supervisors. The foundational reasons behind such visit patterns are:

- to enhance the sense of supervisory presence and interest in classroom instruction;
- to save administrator time and make classroom visits more doable;
- to develop teachers as independent problem solvers.

One plan (Downey et al. 2004) suggests that a supervisor visit 10 classes for 2 to 3 minutes per day and that the teachers each receive four to five visits per week. The supervisor then follows up with notes or dialogue designed to foster in each teacher reflective and analytical thinking about his or her teaching. The eventual goal is to develop teachers who examine their own instructional effectiveness, without dependence on supervisor input or affirmation.
Four: Developing Faculty Through Differentiated Supervision

Teachers are not alike. Their ability to benefit from supervision varies according to personality, learning style, and classroom experience. In small schools, administrators may be able to individualize supervision and professional development plans for each teacher. Larger schools may require a system of differentiated supervision in order to address teacher differences.

Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2001) make a solid case for using theories about adult learning and development as a basis for differentiating supervision. They propose that effective supervision
- responds to teachers’ differing stages of cognitive, conceptual, moral, and ego development;
- responds to teachers’ life cycle phases, that is, whether teachers are young, middle-aged, or older;
- fosters teacher motivation at various need levels.

Differentiated supervision plans can be simple or complex. Some schools simply have two tiers, one for tenured teachers and one for nontenured teachers. Some schools classify teachers by years of experience, and other schools by a combination of experience and quality ratings. Then the schools attach levels and types of supervisory intensity to each category. Brown (2002) offers practical suggestions for implementing differentiated supervision.

Regardless of the plan for classifying teachers and differentiating supervision, administrators should always heed teachers’ personality types (Pajak 2003), life-stage needs, and avenues of motivation when seeking to develop teachers as Christian professionals.

Planning Is Essential

A friend advised, “Get to your calendar before someone else does.” To implement supervision, administrators must plan ahead. I found it necessary to go off campus each summer for a day, equipped with a Bible, a planner, and appropriate documents. During this planning retreat, I scheduled dates and activities for all aspects of faculty development for the year, taking into consideration peer mentoring, classroom visits, differentiated supervision, and faculty as adult learners.

Summary

Supervision of instruction plays a multifaceted role in the development of teachers’ instructional excellence in Christian schools. Founded on the biblical principles of accountability and nurture, effective supervision considers adult-learning research, the strategic role of mentoring, the importance of supervisory presence in classrooms, and the differing needs and developmental levels of teachers.

When administrators invest time and resources in their schools’ instructional enterprise, those administrators enhance faculty effectiveness and student learning. Our students need—and deserve—quality instruction delivered by excellent teachers. As educational leaders, we should settle for nothing less.

References


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