

Viewpoint

Redefine Your School Business Official's Role

It serves little useful purpose to argue the legitimacy or the validity of the most recent criticisms leveled at the nation's schools. The insistent demand that schools be more productive is of sufficient potency to warrant the profession's attention. It is time to stop reacting in defense of our present programs. Our energies need to be redirected proactively as we seek to search out and implement viable alternatives. It is not the purpose of this statement to be specific as to the alternatives or specific remedies. Rather, I make the singular point that it is timely and appropriate to be sure that all the total talents, personal insights and creativity within each school district are brought to bear on the issue of significant educational improvement. Specifically, the role structure and role expectations of the school business official warrant consideration.

Generalizations are flimsy, often discredited in light of careful analysis. Accepting that risk, let me offer the observation that many districts' school business officials need to move beyond the stereotyped role of provider, facilitator and coordinator to become an activist and a co-participant in the instructional decision-making process. The first blush response to this revised role expectation might well be that "I'm not either trained or certified for that role." I contend that this concern matters little, if any at all. We need to nurture within districts both the need and the opportunity for the business official to come to understand the rationale and considerations that are part of instructional priority-setting and subsequent decision-making. A person of demonstrated competence and commitment is more than capable of developing general understandings of instruction and the related support considerations. It is in this environment that the school business official can acquire a "hands on" sensitivity that will enable him or her to interpret with greater meaning the myriad of requests, shifting demands and re-focused priorities which demand response.

In this revitalized role a business official is privy to and part of the dialogue leading to key educational decisions. No district can afford to allow a key management official to either observe or participate impassively. Resources of each district are too thin to perpetuate this type of position. Too often we could probably point to school business decisions based on nothing more legitimate than random judgment.

It is not uncommon for business officials frequently to leave staff meetings when talk shifts to instructional matters with the disclaimer that the discussions really do not pertain to them. Schools cannot move to levels of greater productivity with only part of the administrative and instructional team involved. While the business officials are not necessarily disinterested they are, for all practical purposes, functionally uninvolved when they eschew instructional issues. School business officials who have maintained a credo of "Just tell me what you need and let me handle it" are now out of step with their districts' needs. The business official in every district should be expected to become a knowledgeable co-partner in educational policy-making and implementation decisions.

John Goodlad in the Phi Delta Kappa publication, **The School We Need**, made the general point that schools cannot improve by trying harder within their current framework and restrictions. It does not stretch the point too much to suggest that the traditional role of the school business official be reconsidered and restructured. New roles, new outreaches and new directions are called for if we are to gear up for greater productivity in the public schools. While this suggests but a small step, its intention can be powerful. Examine your district and the roles your central office staff plays. Be sure your business official has every opportunity to be a full contributor to the district's educational mission. It is an important stride forward in your commitment to making your school more effective.

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