ResearchOnline@ND

University of Notre Dame Australia
ResearchOnline@ND

Education Papers and Journal Articles

School of Education

1-1-2012

Principals: Catalysts for Promoting Student Leadership

Shane D. Lavery
University of Notre Dame Australia, slavery@nd.edu.au

Gregory S C Hine
University of Notre Dame Australia, Gregory.Hine@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/edu_article
COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Copyright Regulations 1969
WARNING

This material has been copied and communicated to you by or on behalf of the University of Notre Dame Australia pursuant to part VB of the Copyright Act 1969 (the Act).

The material in this communication may be subject to copyright under the Act. Any further copying or communication of this material by you may be the subject of copyright protection under the Act.

Do not remove this notice.

Recommended Citation
Lavery, S., & Hine, G. (2012). Principals: Catalysts for promoting student leadership. *Principal Matters*, **Winter.**

This Article is brought to you by the School of Education at ResearchOnline@ND. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education Papers and Journal Articles by an authorized administrator of ResearchOnline@ND. For more information, please contact denise.mclinden@nd.edu.au.

Principals: Catalysts for Promoting Student Leadership

Introduction

The role of the principal is pivotal in the development of student leadership within schools. As well as assuming a heavy administrative workload and undertaking numerous complex and time-absorbing responsibilities, the principal plays a significant part in facilitating student leadership development initiatives—in essence, this person becomes the steward of student leadership. This stewardship most often takes one of two forms: through direct or indirect involvement. A principal advocating stewardship through direct involvement is personally engaged in leadership activities, and works closely with student leaders. By contrast, indirect involvement requires the principal to empower colleagues with the responsibility of personally engaging with leaders, and to be involved in the philosophical and organisational components of the leadership program. Both forms have merit. This article underscores the importance of including student leadership programs within schools and examines the manner in which the principal can engage directly or indirectly in developing student leadership.

Student Leadership

Student leadership matters in schools. Adolescents have enormous potential as leaders. It is they who will be tomorrow's leaders in their families, in the workplace, in the community, in the military and in government. Schools are in a unique position to develop leadership in young people. Schools are what van Linden and Fertman call "hotbeds of leadership development" (1998, p. 224). By the way school personnel model leadership, through the opportunities that they offer students to exercise leadership, and by the manner in which they mentor and support students in leadership activities, they deeply influence the leadership behaviour and development of adolescents. Principals and teachers have an important obligation to work with the students in their care to ensure that these students become the best leaders they possibly can be.

Ideally, all school students should be given the opportunity to develop their leadership talents. While not every student can be an elected school leader, every student can be encouraged to take responsibility for his or her own learning. Schools are, moreover, most efficient in providing opportunities for students to participate in student committees, sporting teams, debating, music, community engagement and service-learning programs, all of which engender leadership development. Research indicates a range of benefits for students who have the opportunity to participate in school leadership activities (Lavery, 2006). For

instance, leadership experiences can help students prepare for the future, enhance their personal development, improve their interpersonal skills, increase their confidence and self-esteem, engender a sense of pride in themselves and in their school, and develop a desire to assist others.

The authors argue that there are five underlying principles that ensure effective student leadership, irrespective of whether or not students are in formal leadership positions. These principles require: the style of leadership should reflect the values of the school (Davies & Syme, 2008); service should form a key element of any student leadership development (Lavery, 2007); students must be prepared effectively for their leadership duties and responsibilities (Chapman & Aspin, 2001); schools must ward against trivialising student leadership (Gray, 2002) such that student participation becomes little more than manipulation, decoration or tokenism (Hart, 1992); and the role of adult mentors is an essential component of any successful student leadership program (Lavery, 2006). It is the last of these principles, the notion of mentorship, that is the focus of this article. That is, the role of the school principal in the leadership formation and development of the students within the school?

Direct Involvement

Principals can be directly involved with student leadership by working closely with elected student leaders and planning specific events that promote leadership development. By the very title and nature of their position, principals assume full responsibility for all learning and personal development opportunities—including the facilitation of student leadership activities. Covey highlighted, "after all, the principals are the ones who lead the meetings, approve the plans, and agree to the activities that will reinforce the culture" (2008, p. 102) of the school. Furthermore, student leadership holds particular importance on the weekly agenda of many principals. In one sense, as Lineburg and Gearheart (2008) noted, "involving student leadership allows even the busiest administrator to have a true pulse on the school" (p. 4). Freeborn (2000) shared that "school captains (or whatever title the school uses, e.g. Student Representative Council (SRC) President, or Prefect Leader) are integral to a principal's realisation of a vision for the school. However the vision is articulated, it must be connected to improvement of student learning outcomes" (p. 18). In addition to this, and for student leadership to be sustained, Freeborn recommended that principals and student leaders work

together in the planning and exercise of leadership activities: training events, leadership projects, small group meetings, staff-student meetings, and leader elections.

Lineburg and Gearheart (2008) have underscored the importance of principals working with student leaders as a way of improving the school climate. In one American school, the principal and selected staff worked with student leaders throughout the year in a variety of activities and events. The principal shared that all staff responsible for student leadership "must find time amidst all the various activities to meet regularly with student leaders" (Lineburg & Gearheart, p. 3). There was an open-door policy for the student leaders to meet with staff members, and an expectation for staff—including the principal himself—to meet with senior leaders twice a month. Meetings focussed on the planning of upcoming events, provided an opportunity for staff and students to express concerns, and empowered students to influence peers in positive ways. Lineburg and Gearheart maintained, "most importantly, involving senior leaders in the decision-making process adds prestige to the leadership positions in the school, making class elections legitimate instead of just a popularity contest" (p. 4).

Indirect Involvement

Current literature suggests that principals have also become indirectly involved in student leadership within their schools (Bunn et al., 2010; Freeborn, 2000; Myers, 2005). Freeborn acknowledged that in most cases, whilst principals are not 'regular' teachers in the high school context, "one of the most important teaching and learning programs that principals can align themselves with is the school's student leadership program" (p. 18). In essence, the manner in which school leaders represent the school is the outward indicator of a principal's teaching and learning expertise—and this begins at the planning and organisation stages. Such planning can see principals utilise staff to facilitate leadership days for feeder schools, sports leaders' development days, training events for senior leaders, and other leadership programs (Myers). Following research and planning for student leadership initiatives to take place, principals may also create new roles for staff (Bunn et al.).

Another approach used by principals is collaboratively to engage a number of staff members in the planning, organisation and facilitation of student leadership programs (Leo, 2006). One example involved a principal inviting the senior staff to consider ways in which the entire concept of student leadership could be rebuilt. A collaborative approach was emphasised—comprising eight of the school's senior staff, including the Director of Student

Welfare, the Assistant Principal, and the Student Counsellor —in exploring the school's philosophy of leadership. In turn, this philosophy of leadership helped to develop a broad-based leadership mission statement. Staff then assumed certain roles in the leadership program, including the facilitation of leadership training sessions, and appointment of student leaders. Leo noted that in the new model, there was more senior student leadership evidenced around the campus, and in a wide range of ways. With this increase in the size of the leadership cohort, all student leaders worked within an area in which they had previously expressed an interest. The principal allocated additional staff to work with students in these areas, as a result, the school experienced "better relationships between staff and students at the leadership level" (Leo, p. 27).

Principals can also assume a considerable share of responsibility regarding the philosophical and organisational facets of a student leadership program. In this way, principals can contribute to the creation of student leadership opportunities—and thus remain indirectly involved in such initiatives—before empowering suitable, qualified staff to undertake key roles in the leadership program. Bunn et al. (2000) noted that the approach towards leadership taken by one school followed sabbatical research that the principal had undertaken at an American university. As part of the planning process the principal also took into account the "views of industry and community groups, parents, staff and students who were consulted" (p. 8). A student leadership program underpinned by servant leadership was developed for the school. The Director of Pastoral Care coordinated the explicit teaching on leadership and emotional intelligence that occurs within the Pastoral Care and Social Education program offered each week. The principal also created a new staff position of Director of Student Leadership Development. The Director was involved with the "overall planning and staging of the leadership development of students" (p. 9). Specific tasks included training students within formal leadership positions, meeting in committees to plan and coordinate events, and provide feedback and appraisal of student work.

Discussion

It is the authors' opinion that the principal must have a role in the formation of student leadership within a school: it is not an option; rather, it is a question of degree. That is, to what extent does the principal engage herself or himself in the development of student leadership in the school? There is no single answer. At one end of a possible spectrum lies indirect involvement where the principal encourages and supports staff in the conduct of the various student leadership programs within the school. This model sees the principal

exercising an active interest in student leadership development, but having limited contact with the students. The principal's role is one of both mentor and colleague to those staff responsible for promoting student leadership in the school.

Direct involvement moves the principal into having contact, usually with elected student leaders, on a regular basis. It extends the principal's role of mentor to incorporate working with students as well as staff. One possible model sees the principal meeting with the College Captain and Deputy Captain (single gender school) or Head Boy and Head Girl (coeducational school) on a regular basis. Oftentimes the focus of the meeting is on planning. Further movement along the spectrum might entail the principal attending senior student leadership meetings, conducting a forum for student leaders from middle and junior classes, or taking a role in the school's student leadership days or camps, especially those that involve the formation of senior students.

Whatever the degree of involvement, whether direct or indirect, it is important that the principal takes the lead in promoting the philosophical understanding of student leadership at his or her school. The principal needs to ensure that the school's philosophy of student leadership reflects the values of the school. Ideally, the philosophy will embrace an inclusive policy that acknowledges and supports both students elected formally to leadership positions, as well as those students who do not have 'a badge'. In such a way the principal can play a critical role in fostering a culture of leadership within the school. Moreover, it is recommended that the principal prioritise any student leadership commitments as a sign of his or her stewardship of student leadership.

Conclusion

Principals are catalysts for developing student leadership within schools. Their position allows them to work collaboratively with staff and students to foster a culture of leadership within their schools. Through involvement in student leadership development, principals are able to 'keep their finger on the pulse', and to perceive first-hand how such initiatives and programs are working. Staff and students are able to see the principal show a keen interest in student leadership, which, in turn, implies that student leadership is an important endeavour. Involvement in student leadership activities and programs encourages principals to move outside their administrative role, and to enjoy the very reason they became educators in the first place—to assist in the development of student potential. Moreover, principals have the opportunity to exercise a mentorship role with other staff members and to

provide these staff members with leadership and administrative opportunities. Most importantly, involvement in a school's student leadership program allows principals the opportunity to unequivocally inspire the leaders of tomorrow.

List of References

Bunn, D.C., Browning, K, Hamilton, P., Prowd, I., Ashley-Cooper, C., Walton, W., O'Connor, S., Cummins, & M., Kenny, P. (2010). Learning to lead: Eight schools share their approach to developing leadership capacity in students. *Independence*, *35*(1), 8-23.

Chapman, J., & Aspin, D., (2001). Schools and the Learning Community: Laying the Basis for Learning Across the Lifespan. In D. S. Aspin, J. D. Chapman, M. Hatton & Y. Sawano (Eds.), *International Handbook on Lifelong Learning Part 2*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Covey, S.R. (2008). *The leader in me*. New South Wales: Simon & Schuster.

Davies, J., & Syme, A. (September/October 2008). The birth of inclusive leadership; the death of exclusive leadership. ACEL Conference.

Freeborn, S. (2000). School captains: School and community expectations. *The Practising Administrator*, *4*(3), 18-19, 44.

Gray (2002). Students can be strong education partners. Retrieved from

www.icponline.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=76&Itemid=&view=article&date=2008-06-01

Hart (1992). Children's participation from tokenism to citizenship. *Innocenti Papers 4*. Florence: UNICEF.

Lavery, S. (2007). Service learning – preparing students for leadership. *Australian Association for research in education conference*, Fremantle.

Lavery, S. (Summer 2006). Student leaders: So many reasons to bother. *Principal Matters*, 27-28.

Leo, G. (2006). From fading stars to a brilliant constellation. *Principal Matters*, *67*(3), 24-27.

Lineburg, M.Y., & Gearheart, R. (2008). Involving senior students in shared leadership. *Principal Matters*, *76*(3), 2-4.

Myers, T. (2005). Developing a culture of student leadership. *Teacher*, *155*(1), 26-29.

Van Linden, J., & Fertman, C. (1998). *Youth Leadership.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.