School size and instructional leadership of elementary school principals

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Elementary school principals face a balancing act between managerial responsibilities and instructional leadership. With increasing accountability and responsibility, many principals find themselves overwhelmed, lacking the time, resources and support to be instructional leaders. In relation to school size, little has been written regarding the elementary principal and instructional leadership. This paper examines the effects of school size on instructional leadership of principals in ten elementary schools. Three of the case study sites were small schools (350 or fewer students), while the other sites were large schools (500 or more students). Serving as the unit of analysis, each principal was interviewed to examine how school size impacts his/her instructional leadership.

This study found that school size does impact the principal's likelihood of being an instructional leader. As student enrollment climbed over 500, principals indicated it was more difficult to "connect" and develop trusting relationships with students as well as staff. More students led to increased responsibilities such as staff observations and meetings. Given the increased amount of staff, it was more difficult to monitor the curriculum and instruction delivered to students. Large school principals spent more time on student discipline and "putting out fires" such as parent/teacher complaints. Lastly, even with additional administrative support, principals relied on curriculum coordinators/grade level coordinators to ensure communication with staff and that best instructional practices were used in classrooms.

An additional factor limiting instructional leadership was the size of the district. Principals from smaller districts cited increased autonomy to lead and implement instructional initiatives. Meanwhile, principals from larger districts cited less autonomy and increased standardization when serving as one of many elementary schools in the district.

Finally, three themes emerged from this study. Principals reported to be an instructional leader it is vitally important to establish trusting and collaborative relationships with staff. Secondly, principals must hold staff accountable for student learning through formal observations, team meetings and informal walkthroughs. Lastly, principals face many barriers preventing them from serving as instructional leaders such as teacher resistance, lack of time and micro-management from supervisors and the board of education.