**Effective principals cultivate strong instructional practices and develop an emphasis on**

**skillful teaching through observation and feed back**

**Introduction and Rationale:**

Stephen Fink in his study *School and District Leaders as Instructional Experts: What We Are Learning*

(2012) noted that

*“The quality of teaching is the most important variable improving their instructional practice.”*

An administrator’s first essential step toward improving teaching is her ability to see, notice, and observe; in other words, to recognize excellent teaching. Dictionary.com provides these definitions of recognize: rek-uh g-nahyz (verb)

1. to identify as something or someone previously seen or known
2. to identify from knowledge of appearance or characteristics
3. to perceive as existing or true

When school leaders recognize excellent instruction, they are not seeing it for the first time. Rather, they are identifying episodes of excellent teaching by comparing them to what they have seen, learned, and experienced before. The act of recognizing, then, involves two parts. First the observer must have acquired and organized a knowledge/experience base that can be quickly and accurately accessed.

Then, the observer must have the processing ability to interpret, in real time, what is being observed in light of the observer’s knowledge base. That’s Step 1: Acquire and organize a knowledge base about instruction; then Step 2: Use the knowledge base to filter current reality for what’s most important toward improvement.

One of the key differences between how experts and novices observe differently is that experts tend to notice meaningful patterns in the contextual field where novices tend to notice less connected

details (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). A casual observer looks up at the sky and sees clouds. A meteorologist sees patterns of cloud types that have meaning for forecasting weather.

In *How People Learn- Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Bransford et al., 2000) the authors note

Research shows that it is not simply general abilities, such as memory or intelligence, nor the use of general strategies that differentiate experts from novices. Instead, experts have acquired

extensive knowledge that affects what they notice and how they organize, represent, and interpret information in their environment. This, in turn, affects their abilities to remember, reason, and solve problems. (p. 31)

As a school leader becomes more and more capable of recognizing excellent instruction, the next, complementary step is to be able to skillfully communicate that which is observed back to teachers in a manner that encourages growth and improvement (Costa and Garmston, 1994). Providing growth- evoking feedback and coaching to teachers is central to the role of school administrators, indeed to all management positions inside or outside education. Waldroop and Butler (1996) note “the goal of [feedback and] coaching is the goal of good management: to make the most of an organization’s valuable resources.”

The awareness of how important feedback and coaching is for teachers increased significantly when researchers Joyce and Showers (1988) showed that skillful feedback and coaching can dramatically increase teachers’ application of new skills vs. staff development alone, that does not include a coaching component. The expectation that school administrators be instructional leaders in addition to their role as enterprise manager is now mainstream. Feedback and coaching skills are recognized as key components of that role. (Steiner and Kowal, 2007).

For emerging Missouri school administrators, the logic model is solid:

* 1. Instructional quality is the prime mover of student achievement.
  2. Skillful administrators can learn to recognize patterns of excellent instruction.
  3. Adult learners can learn, grow, and develop substantially.
  4. Teachers apply new skills best when skillful feedback and coaching is employed.
  5. Administrators can improve their feedback and coaching skills through practice.

In order to recognize and develop excellent instruction, school principals must have the ability to:

1. Observe classroom instruction actively and skillfully.
2. Recognize and name specific patterns of excellent instruction using a common, professional language.
3. Choose promising topics for feedback to optimize teacher growth.
4. Provide episodes of growth-evoking feedback and coaching to teachers.
5. Link individual teacher feedback to overall school instructional goals.