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SAMs help principals be "instructional leaders they were hired to be"



Renea Yates, School Administration Manager at Quincy Junior High, standing, helps students, from left Caleb Rose, Islam Woodson and Danay Kelley fill out surveys for the up coming career day. | H-W Photo/Michael Kipley
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By Deborah Gertz Husar Herald-Whig

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QUINCY -- Lisa Otten and Renea Yates have the same answer for many of the questions about their jobs in Quincy Public Schools.

No, they're not assistant principals. No, they don't work at Sam's Club, and no, their names aren't Sam.

Both are school administration managers, better known as SAMs, and the first hired by QPS for the full-time positions.

"How I've kind of explained it is we support the principal and assistant principals while we are supporting the school staff, the teachers and the students," said Otten, the SAM at Quincy High School.

That day-to-day support -- provided in cooperation with the assistant principals in each building -- frees time for principals to focus on instructional leadership.

"Thirty-five years of research has shown that the amount of time they spend in instructional practices is less than it should be," Yates said. "The goal is that the SAM -- which isn't necessarily a person, it's more like a process or philosophy -- supports the principal or administration so more of their time is spent providing instructional support and less management. We want principals to be the instructional leaders they were hired to be."

QPS recently posted job openings for 10 additional SAMs for the new K-5 elementary schools, five targeting academic/curriculum issues and five working with student social-emotional issues and learning.

"Each SAM role is going to be different based on the needs of that building, the needs of the administration in that building and the skill set or strengths the SAM brings to the table," Yates said. "It will be common to find the SAM at one building may or may not take on something that a SAM at another building does ... but we'll reap the long-term benefits which will be improved instruction which will lead to student achievement."

Hundreds of schools in more than 20 states utilize SAMs. The philosophy launched in Louisville, Ky., in 2002 led to the National School Administration Manager Project targeting the understanding that changing principal time use is critical to transforming schools.

"It's a national effort to improve opportunities for schools to manage their time so that the focus can be on teaching, learning and improving instruction. The end goal is to make sure our students have opportunities for learning," Director of Student Services Carol Frericks said.

QPS began training for administrators and staff in the 2014-15 year, then implemented the process with a goal of gaining at least 25 days of instructional leadership time during the school year.

"We want to continue to provide leadership and support to address the social-emotional learning needs of our students. We also want to focus on the academic growth for each and every student," Frericks said. "By having a SAM to help focus on both academic and social-emotional learning, we will be able to accomplish the school improvement goals for the new buildings."

The addition of SAMs was key as QPS shifted ninth graders to QHS and sixth graders to QJHS.

"Since Lisa is available to serve as a first point of contact, our building is able to provide a more efficient response when people have questions," QHS Principal Danielle Arnold said. "This has been extremely important this year, as we have welcomed nearly 1,000 new students, their families and more than 30 new staff members to our building."

Otten said much of her work consists of meeting teacher needs when Arnold is not available.

"It might be locating a trash can. It might be hooking their technology up so it works the next hour. It might be helping them analyze test scores," she said. "Oftentimes things come up I can't answer. I'm saying to staff members I will get the answer by the end of the day and come to you."

Otten's ability to handle a variety of tasks allows Arnold to focus more on instructional priorities.

"I get to be in classrooms, work alongside teachers during professional development and increase our partnerships with the community," Arnold said.

Yates spent plenty of time recently helping teachers access student scores, enter grades and change grades in the new Skyward system. Much of her work is done behind the scenes, such as coordinating efforts by a teacher team to help a junior high student's family after a fire.

"Every day is truly different," Yates said.

Otten, previously a Reading Recovery teacher in the district, took on the SAM role after finishing her administrative degree and an internship last year at QHS. "I look at the SAM position as a springboard to a future assistant principal or principal position," she said.

Yates, formerly director of counseling at QJHS, said working as a SAM simply "formalizes" what she'd already been doing at the junior high. "This was the perfect fit," she said. "(Principal) Dan (Sparrow) and I work really well together. I can take some things off his plate and manage those which fits nicely with my skill set, and it gets him out and about more in the building."

A strong relationship is key between a principal and a SAM.

"It's having that trust and openness to have what could be tough conversations -- having to say let me take that from you, having to push them because they need to be out helping teachers," Yates said.

SAMs track and analyze data, reflecting on where principals spend their time, where they need to spend their time and marking progress based on that time allocation. SAMs set up First Responders in the building "so not everything has to go through the principal's office," Otten said. "We have a contact list that everyone in the school is aware of. They know where to send parents, where to send students, where to send community members. They also know when to contact the principal."

Both SAMs also maintain daily contact with students. Otten works with student-initiated clubs, and both play a role in counseling services available in their buildings.

"If the counseling team is unavailable and the deans are unavailable, then I'm the next point of contact," Otten said. "By no means do I provide counseling, but I can provide face-to-face contact with a student to meet the needs until a counselor is available."

Daily face-to-face meetings between the SAM and a building principal, and at least weekly meetings with the administrative team, keep the process on track.

"They call it intentional planning, purposefully planning out the principal's week. We schedule him into classrooms he needs to be in and reflect afterward on how did the day go, who needs a follow-up and what do we need to celebrate," Yates said.

Principals did the same sort of planning pre-SAM and might have had 10 tasks scheduled for a day, but were easily diverted and didn't accomplish those tasks. "We're setting up a system so that doesn't occur," Yates said. "There are these responders who can manage that so the principal isn't pulled away, so we really respect where he is and what he's doing."