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The Principal Connection / What New (Young) Principals Need to Know

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The youth of the participants in our annual seminar for aspiring principals caught me by surprise. Most had been college students when the World Trade Center was attacked in 2001, and few understood schooling outside the aegis of No Child Left Behind. All were first-career teachers with just a few years of classroom experience.

Some of the aspiring principals I met in that seminar have found jobs; this September, they will step into the shoes of retiring baby boomer principals. The challenges facing these young educators are unparalleled. Facing accountability for student achievement, implementing complex special education policies, providing for diverse student populations, and dealing with parents who have misgivings about public education are only a few of these challenges. Yet many of these highly motivated young people have not acquired the skills that come primarily from experience.

In anticipation of working with these new principals, I asked veteran principals, experienced teachers, and a few principals who had just finished their first year what essentials these young men and women should know as they enter their new role. Their responses, summarized below, were strikingly similar and might serve as a guide for those beginning their journeys.

Build Relationships

Every respondent, without exception, recommended building relationships as the foundation for a successful principalship. They expressed this message in many forms:

- Get to know everyone—from teachers, students, and parents, to bus drivers—on a first-name basis and personally, if possible.
- Let teachers, parents, and others know who *you* are. Don't hide behind your title or desk. Several respondents advised first-year principals to share with colleagues who they are, what they believe in, and what they consider their "nonnegotiables."
- Get out of the office. Walk around the building often at different times of day. Visit classrooms and be present in the lunchroom, playground, and staff rooms.
- Recognize the multiple relationships that exist in the school and realize that much gets accomplished through these networks. Communication and power do not operate vertically in schools; schools are, in essence, horizontal communities.
- Don't let a computer screen block communication with coworkers. Respondents seemed to mean this both figuratively and literally. One principal said, "E-mails should not substitute for face-to-face conversation, especially when teachers are right down the hall." Another recommended, "Banish laptops from staff meetings."

Listen!

Both experienced principals and teachers called for listening.

- Pay close attention to the words of teachers, just as you do to central-office missives. Ask lots of questions. Teachers know school realities: If you hear them, they'll help you understand those realities.
- Listen to parents, hearing not only what they say, but also the emotional content of the message. Keep teachers in the loop regarding parent communication.
- Note what students say. They, too, offer unique insights.
- Remember that teachers—and parents—have their own wisdom. Don't default to a problem-solving response when someone brings up an issue. Expertise often lies within the person presenting the problem. Tease out that wisdom.
- Know the difference between understanding differing points of view and agreeing with them. Although you cannot agree with each person, make every effort to understand and respect everyone's point of view.
- Pay close attention to the words of your secretary. The school culture often resides with her or him.
- Listen to your own inner voice of common sense.

Think Before You Leap

Respondents urged new principals to *think* (emphasis theirs) before making a decision or acting.

- Study all kinds of data, both formal and informal. Check that your decisions are informed by data rather than by hearsay or personal bias.
- One respondent advised that "Let me think about that. I'll get back to you by tomorrow afternoon" is a legitimate response.

Find a Mentor or Critical Friend

Many respondents emphasized this need.

- Find someone you trust with whom you can talk.
- Join a group of principals with varying levels of experience to remind yourself that you are not alone. Although you might believe that your experiences are unique, you will find that others have commonly experienced even the things that feel most personal to you. This helps you know you're not crazy.
- Choose an experienced principal as a mentor, someone who will listen, advise, and—when needed—catch you before you jump off a cliff.

What's Most Important

Other suggestions trickled in, most of them about relating to people. I find it interesting that these lists of advice from practitioners did not resemble the long lists of standards and performance objectives studied in principal preparation programs—standards on which many principals are formally evaluated. Perhaps first-year principals need to concentrate on the most substantive qualities of leadership, those that focus on relationships. Those of us who create myriad lists and rubrics must realize that many essential traits of being a good principal rest in the heart and mind and cannot be measured by separate, quantifiable behaviors.

The necessity of building relationship networks that many respondents stressed stands in stark contrast to organizational charts that diagram a vertical flow of power from the principal down to subordinates. Perhaps successful principals realize that power, control, and information do not flow from the top down, but move through the more horizontal and complex connections that exist in any human community.

I don't pretend that this is a comprehensive list of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions a new principal needs. Others have written about the beginning principalship more eloquently elsewhere. However, this practical wisdom from colleagues already in the trenches gives neophytes a good place to start.

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