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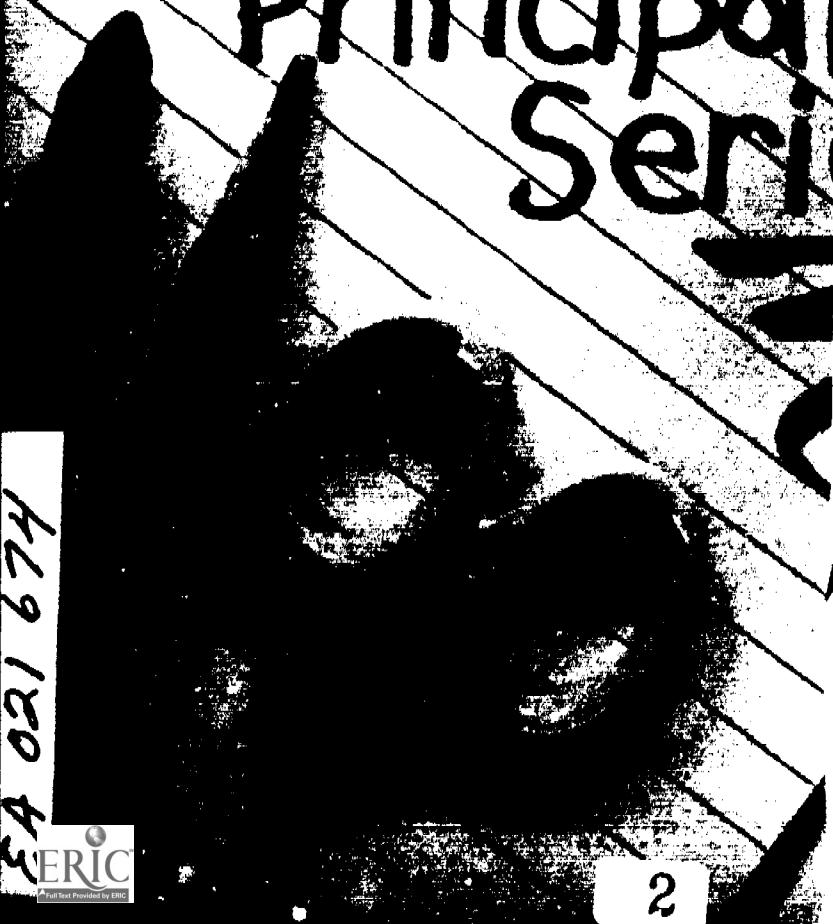
ABSTRACT

The second of six volumes in the "Elementary Principal Series," this booklet presents a framework to help beginning principals learn about their schools and the communities they serve. Principals should begin by reviewing key school documents, meeting with office staff, touring the physical plant, and getting to know the teaching staff through informal interviews and class visits. Principals must make a special effort to know new and itinerant teachers, aides and volunteers, substitutes, and other staff. Knowing students is central to understanding a school's social system. Principals must also become familiar with evaluation and monitoring systems governing staff, curriculum and instruction, the school testing program, special programs, class assignments, discipline, faculty meetings, parent conferences, supply distribution procedures, major school activities, money-handling methods, and policies conerning emergencies and special drills. Learning about the total school system involves understanding the district's formal organizational structure, district goals and objectives, and performance evaluation criteria; attending central office and board meetings; handling visiting VIPs; and managing personnel, the teacher union contract, and teacher evaluation and dismissal. Other administrative responsibilities are outlined, along with ways to learn about, and communicate with, the commmunity. Finally, a well-organized work plan and timetable for learning about school and community are presented. (MLH)

#2 The New Principal: Learning About Your School and Community

by William E. Webster

Elementary Principal Series



Elementary Principal Series No. 2

The New Principal: Learning About Your School and Community

by
William E. Webster
Professor of School Administration
California State University, Bakersfield

Cover design by Victoria Voelker

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Becoming a principal in a new setting presents a series of challenges. In this booklet I present a framework to assist beginning elementary principals in learning about their school and the community it serves. Specifically, I address the issues confronting first-time principals in a school with which they are not familiar, especially those issues arising at the beginning of the school year.

As the new principal goes about learning about the school, business goes on – children misbehave, parents complain, substitutes must be obtained, and the unexpected will always arise. One principal told me that her first day on the job she learned that three experienced teachers had decided not to continue teaching. Each had different reasons for resigning, but none of them had informed the district personnel office of the decision. This principal ended up spending a large part of her first week obtaining substitutes and interviewing candidates to replace the three teachers who resigned. She made it through the first week, but not in the way she had planned to undertake her new responsibilities.

New principals should accept the fact that people do not change easily; they expect things to run pretty much as they did before the new principal arrived on the scene. They might have complained about what the previous principal did or did not do, but if established routines and procedures are changed, there is likely to be resentment. When certain school activities have been conducted in the same way for years, they become ritualized and are defended with the argument, "That's the way we've always done it." Senior faculty, in particular, are probably comfortable with the way things have been done in the past and will not hesitate to make their views known to a new principal. Therefore, it behooves the new principal to spend some

time learning about the organizational culture of the school and about the way things have been done in the past.

The suggestions and recommendations offered in this booklet are based on my own experiences as a principal as well as on comments and observations from many teachers and administrators in my classes and in informal contacts. I especially acknowledge the advice I received from Ginger Sherril, Polly McBride, and Linda Mapes, principals in the Bakersfield City Elementary School District, and from Charlotte Blum, a principal in the Taft Elementary School District in Taft, California. The practical comments from these successful administrators were invaluable in the preparation of this booklet.

Learning About Your School

Every school is unique; each has its own way of carrying out the business of educating children. Learning about your school – its culture – means becoming familiar with both the unwritten and the written rules. This learning is a continuing process, but it starts from the moment the new principal arrives at the building site.

School Documents

Getting to know your school should start with reviewing key school documents. These include district policy statements, negotiated teacher contracts, teacher personnel files, pupil record files, standardized test scores, and teacher and student handbooks if they exist. If some of these documents are not available in the school, request them and file them in some central location. Other forms of documentation are parent newsletters, agendas and minutes from key meetings, and a master calendar of school events. The master calendar from the previous year can be a very useful document for a new principal.

Office Staff

As you go about gathering pertinent documents, you will learn how very important the secretary and other office staff are in the operation of the school. The comment, "Our secretary, Ms. Jones, really runs the school," is no hyperbole. Some of the things you will learn from the office staff are:

- Where the student records are kept, in the office or classrooms.
- What the procedures are for recording disciplinary problems.
- How correspondence is handled.

- Whether the secretary takes dictation or expects you to write drafts in longhand.
- Whether there is a computer and who uses it.
- Where the files are containing bulletins to the staff, PTA notices, memos from the central office, etc.
- What the procedures are for handling money that comes into school for any purpose.

Equally important is knowing how the office team works with and feels about the teaching staff and their attitudes toward the children and parents.

The Physical Plant

Another early activity in learning about your school is a careful walk through the plant, through "each nook and cranny," as one principal told me. You probably should do the first walk-through alone, noting the condition of the teachers' lounge, workroom, each classroom, cafeteria or multi-use room, lavatories, auditorium, and gymnasium.

The second walk-through can be with the custodian, using the notes you took on the first walk-through. The focus should be on identifying major safety hazards and maintenance needs. This is the time to ask questions about what the custodian sees as maintenance problems, about working relationships with the staff, and about past practices in monitoring and evaluating the custodian's work. It also is a time to find out what the custodian's perception is of students' attitudes toward maintaining a clean and safe school.

Teaching Staff

There are many ways to learn about the teaching staff, including reviewing personnel records, formal interviews, and classroom visitations. Each of these ways is discussed below. You also can learn about the staff in informal situations, such as casual conversations and observations on the playground.

Reviewing personnel folders is a quick way to learn about the staff. From these folders a new principal can find out such basic information as a teacher's degrees and credentials, years of experience, and areas of expertise. From letters of commendation and previous evaluation reports in the folder, the new principal can learn something about the competence of the teacher. Some new principals prefer to make their own evaluative judgments and not be influenced by evalu-

ations of their predecessors. Others feel that reading evaluation reports provides information that will be useful in both their personal and professional relationship with teachers.

Interviewing is another way of establishing a personal relationship with teachers. It can be done informally before school starts as teachers drop in to get their classrooms ready for the school year. One new principal reported that she simply called teachers during the summer and got acquainted with them over the phone. This get-acquainted interview does not have to be very long. You can begin by indicating that you have read their personnel folder and know where they went to college and how long they have been teaching. This approach sets the tone for a friendly getting-to-know-you interchange.

The purpose of this initial interview is to get to know the teacher as a human being. Avoid asking what they see as the school's biggest problems, because it sets a negative tone that could dominate most of the interview time. Keep the questions general, focusing on what teachers see as the biggest challenges facing them, their views on handling discipline, the kinds of support they expect from the principal, their participation on school committees, their insights about the community, and perhaps something about their families. It is probably best to ask the teachers the same questions because they will compare notes.

Visiting classrooms early in the school year also is an effective way to learn about teachers. At the outset announce that these early visits are not the mandated sequence of observations for purposes of teacher evaluation. Rather, explain that they are intended to give you an overview of the school's instructional program. Such visits will give you some feeling for the prevailing teaching methods used, the variety of instructional materials available, how classes are grouped for instruction, and how aides or volunteers are employed in the classroom. You can also learn about any schoolwide cooperative efforts for improving instruction.

After a month or so, give a report to the staff about what you have observed. Accentuate the positive. You might begin by saying, "I've visited every classroom in the school and seen many excellent things going on." You are usually safe in making such a statement since it is a rare school where there are not some excellent things going on. At this stage it is probably best not to single out individual teachers for commendation. If you have visited 25 classrooms and praise only two or three teachers for doing a good job, the others may wonder what was wrong with them.

New Teachers

The principal must make an extra effort to learn about new teachers on the staff because there will be limited information in their personnel folders. The first thing to find out is what kind of induction program, if any, these new teachers have had. School systems vary widely in the quality of induction programs for new staff. By interviewing new teachers as well as experienced staff, you can learn what orientation or induction experiences have been provided. If little has been done, then one of your first tasks will be to design and implement an induction program, involving some of your more experienced staff.

Aides and Volunteers

Many schools with Chapter I and other categorical funds employ a large number of aides. You will need to know how they are recruited, trained, assigned, and evaluated. The same is true for volunteers. Volunteers can be a great asset in the instructional program, but they do need training. If no training program is in place, you will have to implement one.

Itinerant Teachers

Speech therapists and teachers of music, physical education, art, and remedial reading often serve more than one school site. Coordinating their schedules with the regular teachers' schedules is a complex task, requiring both time and tact. These itinerant teachers provide a vital component of the school program. Get acquainted with them as soon as possible. Consult with them, as well as with your regular staff, about what scheduling problems might be anticipated Without a home base, itinerant teachers may not feel they are part of the regular faculty team. Make a special effort to include them in social functions and other important school activities.

Substitutes

In some districts the principal is responsible for obtaining substitutes; in others the central office handles this responsibility. Regardless of who calls the substitute teachers, the principal should have a plan for orienting them to the school and for helping them to make the best of what is often a less than optimal teaching situation. Basic information would include daily schedules, room locations, fire drills,

playground duty, and special events of the day. Also important is a firm policy on having regular teachers leave prepared lesson plans when they know they will be absent.

Official Teacher Evaluation

Nothing affects faculty morale more than the way in which evaluations are conducted. Therefore, it is especially important for the new principal to be thoroughly familiar with the formal staff evaluation procedures of the school system. Although standard evaluation procedures may be mandated by the central office, there is likely to be considerable variation in how these procedures are carried out in individual schools. One new principal learned that his predecessor never visited any of his senior faculty's classes. He simply called them into his office and had them sign a previously prepared evaluation report. Another new principal learned that her predecessor had rated every teacher on the staff as "outstanding" in every category! By knowing what has gone on before, the new principal can avoid serious morale problems when dealing with the sensitive area of teacher evaluation.

You can get some sense of existing evaluation procedures by examining staff personnel folders and through the initial get-acquainted teacher interviews. In addition to these sources, you should become thoroughly familiar with district policies and the union contract provisions regarding teacher evaluation. With this information in hand, you can devote a faculty meeting early in the school year to a discussion of your philosophy of evaluation. By being forthright about your own views and by listening to the views of your faculty, you can agree on procedures that will dispel potential morale problems.

Students

Every school has a complex set of social systems involving the interaction of teachers, students, and support staff. To understand these social systems is to know how a school conducts its business. It may be knowing how kindergartners get on the right bus the first day of school or how throwing snowballs is controlled with the arrival of the first snowfall. Central to learning about the social systems in a school is knowing your students.

There are many ways to learn about the students in your school. In addition to classroom visits, time spent in the cafeteria and on the playground provide rich opportunities for observing student in-

teraction and for seeing how the staff deal with students in a less structured environment. Another way to learn about the students is to examine students' cumulative records. By reviewing a sampling of cumulative records, you can learn about the kinds of standardized tests administered, the predominant occupations of parents, and from teachers' anecdotal records something about their views about particular students.

Custodians and Cafeteria Workers

Custodians and cafeteria workers often do not feel they are part of the school team. Your initial walk-through of the school with the custodian is one way to indicate your interest in and respect for the important job that he or she does. Following up with weekly inspection tours with the custodian will keep you in touch with building maintenance needs. One principal told me that after starting weekly inspections with the custodian, he began to notice gradual improvement in the appearance of the entire school plant as well as the playground.

Similar personalized attention to cafeteria workers can make these important people feel they are part of the school team. From them you can learn specifics about the operation of the cafeteria, including how menus are determined, how food preparation is handled – either on site or from a central school system kitchen – how free lunches are determined, and how supervision of children is handled in the cafeteria.

Evaluation of custodians and cafeteria workers may be the principal's responsibility, or it may be done by central office personnel. Regardless of where the responsibility rests, these vital school employees must know that their work is appreciated. The principal is the key person to communicate that message.

Monitoring Curriculum and Instruction

Even though district curriculum guides exist, teachers tend to teach in ways with which they are most comfortable, particularly experienced teachers. Part of the new principal's orientation is learning how curriculum content has been monitored in the past. Were lesson plans required and were they reviewed by the previous principal? One new principal told me he asked that tests results be submitted to him on completion of each reading and arithmetic unit. Since this had never been done before, he very nearly had a revolt on his hands.

Another part of orientation is finding out what kinds of building-level curriculum committees exist and what their mandates are. For example, there might be committees working on math or reading goals, committees working on scope and sequence in science, or grade-level committees working on writing across the curriculum. It is also important to find out who chairs each committee, how they were selected, and what is their term of office.

School Testing Program

Another facet in monitoring the curriculum is a thorough knowledge of the school's testing program and test results. These data are essential for evaluating the program of instruction. Basic information a new principal needs to know are when tests are given; how they are reported to the teachers, parents, and the community; how test scores compare with other schools in the district; and, most important, how the tests are used to modify instruction and the curriculum.

Special Programs

With the proliferation of state and federal categorical programs, almost every school has some kind of program for students with special needs. These special programs may be the direct responsibility of a project director from the central office along with some kind of parent advisory group. However, the principal has an important role in implementing these programs in the individual building. It might be helping a teacher develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for a special education student. Or in a school with a large ethnic population, it might be coordinating a staff inservice on a bilingual education program. It is essential for new principals to know their role with respect to these special programs.

Class Assignments

Principals report that they spend many hours the first few weeks of school dealing with parents who are unhappy with their children's class assignments. Some insist on having their children moved from a newly appointed teacher to an experienced teacher, whom they know or another of their children has had. The new principal needs to know how class assignments were made and what the policy has been for moving children from one teacher to another. Such information can be a great time-saver when dealing with a dissatisfied parent.

Discipline

Maintaining discipline is fundamental to the operation of an effective school. It should be a priority item for the new principal. The initial teacher interviews are a source of some information about formal discipline policy. A review of the files on discipline will provide data on the kinds of offenses that warrant sending youngsters to the office and on how parents are involved in discipline policy. Also, it is important to know if the staff has had training in Assertive Discipline or other behavior modification techniques. Several new principals have told me that one way teachers test them is to send youngsters to the office for every conceivable reason in order to see how the principal will handle things.

Faculty Meetings

In many schools faculty meetings are the only time the entire staff gets together. The new principal needs to know how often faculty meetings are scheduled and how the agenda is prepared. There may be some traditions associated with faculty meetings, such as teachers of one grade level being responsible for refreshments. The principal's awareness of these traditions will contribute to a smooth transition.

Parent Conferences and Reporting Pupil Progress

School districts vary in the way they report student progress to parents. Parent conferences are used in many elementary schools. Some districts use a shortened school day to schedule parent conferences; others schedule them in the evening to accommodate working parents. The new principal must be aware of these schedules and the procedures for organizing these conferences. The new principal also should devote some time in helping new teachers to prepare for parent conferences.

Supplies

The new principal must be familiar with the procedures for distributing expendable supplies such as paper and pencils. This may be the responsibility of the secretary or other office staff, but ultimately the principal is accountable if there is a breakdown in the distribution system and teachers are complaining about the lack of supplies needed to do their job. It is good to know beforehand if supplies are distributed on a periodic basis, or if there is an open supply room and, of course, who is responsible for keeping it organized.

How textbooks arrive in a teacher's classroom also is important to know. In conversations with teachers, they report that parents often complain either that textbooks arrive late or their children do not have a text for each subject. A new principal must ensure that children have their textbooks when school starts. In a large district, determining exactly how textbooks get from the district warehouse to the school is a part of this process. The principal also should make sure there is a system for rotating supplementary texts that are shared among students. If there is a school book room, check the inventory with the manager to make sure that children have books when they should.

Major School Activities

Every school has a series of major activites, many of which involve the community. They include Back-to-School Night, Open House, fund-raising projects, and such holidays as Christmas, Jewish holidays, and Martin Luther King's birthday. A new principal needs to find out what these activities are, when they are scheduled, and what is the principal's role in coordinating these activities. For example, with a fund-raising activity the principal needs to know who assumes the major responsibility. Are teachers expected to participate? What is the role of the PTA? How are funds accounted for? For holiday celebrations the principal needs to know district policies on handling the religious aspects of Christmas and Jewish holidays.

Handling Money

Most schools participate in a variety of activities involving cash transactions. These include bake sales and other fund-raising events, book club programs, school pictures, and ticket sales for school events, to mention a few. The new principal needs to know who is responsible for handling and accounting for funds for each event. Some districts have detailed policies for accounting for extracurricular funds; some have none at all. By being familiar with past practices, the new principal is in a better position to know if new procedures need to be implemented.

School Visitors

Many schools have a policy requiring all visitors to sign in at the office and policies for who is authorized to take students from school. It is not uncommon today for court orders to be issued prohibiting

an estranged parent or other relative from taking a student from school. Where such court orders exist, the office staff should be informed and given a list of the students who have restrictions as to which parent or guardian may pick them up.

Emergencies and Special Drills

The new principal must quickly become familiar with both district and school policies for handling emergencies. These include medical emergencies when parents cannot be reached, closing of school because of inclement weather, and fire and earthquake drills. The principal should have close at hand the phone numbers for the ambulance service and paramedics. School closings for inclement weather are usually a districtwide decision made by the central office and announced on local radio stations. Some schools use a telephone tree for contacting staff about school closings. Sometimes it is only necessary to delay the opening of school by an hour or so. In most states fire and earthquake drills are mandated, but each school handles them differently. In some districts fire department personnel are asked to be present. Being familiar with all emergency procedures is a priority for the new principal.

Some Further Suggestions

The weeks before school officially opens provide an ideal time for getting acquainted with your school. During this more relaxed period, it is possible to talk with teachers who may drop in, with youngsters and their parents who have just moved into the community and come to register. One new principal reported that during this time he was able to call or meet with almost every teacher on the staff. This is also an uninterrupted time when you can become familiar with school policies and procedures.

One new principal told me that she was able to learn a lot about her school and community by developing a close professional relationship with two senior administrators in her district. In effect, these individuals became her mentors and apprised her of both the formal and informal aspects of working as an administrator in the district.

Another good practice for gathering information is breaking bread together. A monthly coffee-and-doughnut session with the cafeteria workers and custodians was one new principal's way of doing it. Another scheduled periodic lunches with the office staff and occasion-

ally with the PTA board. These times together were not simply social occasions; they were a continuing way to learn more about the school.

By undertaking an orientation program covering the topics discussed in this chapter, you will have a fairly clear picture of the management and leadership style of your predecessor. You then will be able to identify those areas in which your style parallels or diverges from that of your predecessor. During this period the staff also will be learning about you. What you both learn about each other should establish the trust and mutual respect needed for effective working relationships.

Learning About Your School System

Your primary focus during the first few weeks is understandably on what happens in your own school. But each individual school operates within the organizational context of a school system. Therefore, time spent learning about the total school system will help to make you a more effective administrator in your own building.

Early on you should become acquainted with the central office staff and learn what kinds of support they can offer. Your job is to help them to understand school-site problems and to enlist them as a team to help you deal with them. Further, if your building staff perceives you as an effective advocate on their behalf with the school system's hierarchy, it can improve your working relationships at school.

Learning the School District Organization

The organizational structure of central office staff usually includes three areas of responsibility: curriculum and instruction, personnel, and business (including maintenance, operations, and budgeting). In addition to learning about the formal organizational structure, it is important to know the individuals responsible for these areas and how they actually function. For example, the director of personnel may have the official responsibility for hiring, but the curriculum people also may have an important say in who is hired. Also, line and staff distinctions may be blurred. A staff person who has many years experience in the system and has gained the respect of the community may exercise authority that is tantamount to a line position.

Superintendents in smaller school districts may want principals to bring problems directly to them. They have an open-door policy and encourage staff to drop in whenever they have a problem. In larger

school systems, reaching the superintendent is likely to require going through a chain of command. The new principal can learn from senior administrators what the best approaches are for communicating with the superintendent.

District Goals and Objectives

Most school districts today operate from a set of board-mandated goals and objectives. In addition, it is often required that each school have related goals and objectives and, in some cases, that teachers have them also. Even though district goals and objectives have been adopted, how seriously they are taken and how they affect administrative behavior will vary from district to district. It is incumbent on the new principal to become familiar with the district goals and to determine how much time should be devoted to achieving them.

Performance Evaluation

Performance evaluation of principals can range from casual to very formal procedures. An early meeting with the person responsible for performance reviews of administrators will give you some idea of the evaluation criteria used, which can help in determining your work priorities for the first year. If, for example, performance appraisal is directly related to achieving district goals and objectives, then this will determine how you go about organizing your work load.

Attendance at Central Office Meetings

Attending meetings is an unavoidable part of being a principal. The new principal should make sure that regularly scheduled central office meetings are on the master calendar. If an emergency prevents you from attending, make sure that you notify those in charge of the meeting and follow up to find out what transpired, especially with regard to new policies and programs affecting your school.

As the "new kid of the block," the new principal should do a lot of observing and listening at the early meetings to learn about the group dynamics. In one school district with which I am familiar, the first meeting of the year consisted of little more than a monologue from the superintendent, with no interruptions tolerated and no questions expected. In another district, the first meeting was a lively forum for raising issues and problem solving, with interaction almost demanded.

Attendance at Board Meetings

Attendance at board meetings by principals is usually at the request of the superintendent when the agenda deals with matters requiring input from building administrators. Mandated attendance is less common in larger districts. In smaller districts without a large central office staff, the superintendent may regard principals as the administrative team and expect them to attend board meetings. Of course, voluntary attendance can be a valuable experience for any new principal. It allows you to know members of the board and to learn firsthand about community concerns.

Visiting VIPs

School systems differ on the protocol for dealing with visiting VIPs. If the superintendent or other central office staff arrives unannounced, the school secretary should know where to find you quickly. For scheduled visits, you should plan to be in your office or in the outer office to greet the VIP. You should instruct the secretary that you are not to be interrupted, barring an emergency, during the time you are conducting your business. If a scheduled visit involves a tour of the school, faculty and students should be alerted by an announcement in the daily bulletin or over the public address system. If a board member or a prominent person in the community visits your school unannounced and it is clear that the central office is not aware of such a visit, then the central office should be informed as soon as possible.

Personnel Responsibilities

Early in the game the principal should find out what role he or she plays in recruiting, selecting, and assigning faculty. In larger districts these roles are usually the responsibility of personnel staff in the central office, with only minor involvement of the principal. However, in many districts principals play a key role in selecting staff for their own buildings, or they are part of a districtwide personnel team that interviews and selects both new teachers and new administrators for the system. Recruitment of quality faculty is a vital personnel function. If you are expected to participate in this function, you should know the procedures used in your district.

Managing the Teacher Union Contract

The new principal must become thoroughly familiar with the negotiated provisions in the teacher union contract dealing with policies and procedures for teacher evaluation, transfers, seniority, reduction-in-force, sick leave, and leaves of absence, to name but a few. The superintendent expects principals to be informed about these policies and procedures and to see that they are enforced.

Even though written policies exist, it is not uncommon for practice to be at variance with policy. For example, in one school district where the contract called for teachers to stay at school for at least 20 minutes after the students left, it was a common practice on Fridays for teachers to leave as soon as the children were out the door. When the new principal tried to enforce the 20-minute policy on Fridays, she met considerable resistance from the staff. In another district, which had rigid rules concerning teachers leaving school for personal business, the principal took a teacher's class for the afternoon so she could attend to some personal business. When the superintendent learned of this policy violation, he reprimanded the principal and the teacher was docked for a half-day's pay. By talking with other administrators and veteran teachers, the new principal can learn which policies are strictly enforced and which are bent to some extent.

Teacher Evaluation and Dismissal

General information about teacher evaluation was discussed in the previous chapter. More specific information about evaluation is most likely covered in the teacher contract. It behooves you to spend some time with key people in the district to learn how the district expects you to carry out teacher evaluations. There is also the possibility that one or more teachers in your building have been given a poor evaluation in the past, and the district might be moving toward dismissal proceedings. Knowing specifically the district policies and procedures relating to dismissal will prepare you in the event that this difficult action moves to due-process hearings or even into the courts.

Administrative Responsibilities

Budgeting. The principal's responsibilities for budget matters vary from district to district. In some districts the principal administers the budget for school supplies and materials. Such budget allocations

usually are based on the number of teachers or on enrollment. In some cases faculty also have some say in the purchase of supplies and materials. Budget allocations for big-ticket items such as televisions, VCRs, and computers usually are made by central office personnel.

The new principal can learn how building-level budgets are administered and about the level of faculty participation in budget decisions by talking with teachers and secretaries as well as with key central office personnel. Requests for big-ticket purchases often have to be made well in advance. The principal should find out the deadlines for making such requests and whether it is realistic to assume that such requests will be filled.

Major Reports. Most school districts require that principals prepare periodic reports dealing with attendance accounting or inventories of supplies and equipment. Such reports must be submitted to different personnel at the central office by certain deadlines. The school secretary usually is informed about what information is required for such reports and their submission deadlines. Prompt attention to such administrative details can help to establish positive relations with central office staff.

Textbooks. Lack of sufficient textbooks is a source of frustration to teachers, students, and especially parents, who become upset if their children do not have required textbooks at the beginning of the school year. The new principal should check the textbook inventory before school begins. Where shortages exist, find out where and how soon they can be obtained.

Student Purchase of Materials. Some states, such as California, have restrictions as to what students may purchase in the way of educational materials, especially at the elementary level. Other states have much more flexible policies. The new principal should know the district policy regarding student purchase of educational material.

Maintenance and Repair. Most districts have written procedures for carrying out major maintenance and repairs in a school building. The new principal must learn what kinds of maintenance and repairs can be done by the building custodian and what kinds require a work order to be submitted to the district maintenance department. The school custodian usually can provide the principal with guidelines for making these decisions.

Use of Building. The new principal must find out what the policy is for use of the building after school and on weekends for both school-

sponsored activities and for outside groups. Does the principal make these decisions or does the district have written policies about use of the building outside regular school hours? A problem can arise, for example, over the use of school facilities for summer school. A new principal reported to me that when her building was used for summer school the first year she was on the job, she returned in August to find that most of the school's expendable supplies, which she had carefully stored away to use in the fall, had disappeared over the summer. This caused major problems with her staff and, of course, with the person who had served as summer school principal in her building.

Field Trips. Most districts have policies on field trips covering such items as parental permission slips or approved locations for field trips. Part of new-teacher orientation is to make sure they understand the policies regarding field trips. It is disheartening for the eager new teacher to make all the provisions for a field trip and obtain parental permission slips only to find out that the selected site is not on the list of approved locations for field trips.

School Liability. In today's litigious society it is incumbent on the new principal to be thoroughly familiar with the school's liability coverage. A careful inspection of the school plant and playground to identify and remove safety hazards and stressing safety to the faculty and students are preventive measures for avoiding liability suits.

Student Affairs

Suspension and Expulsion. As a result of court decisions and legislation, school districts in most states have detailed policies regarding student suspensions and expulsions. Such policies involving due process, observance of timelines, and notification of parents must be followed to the letter. The new principal must be thoroughly familiar with these policies and see to it that they are scrupulously enforced.

Working with Other Agencies. Other community agencies, such as the welfare department and the courts, often must deal with the schools in cases involving children and their families. The new principal must know what is district policy regarding giving information about students to these agencies. Should parents be notified? Can a police officer interrogate a student at school about an incident that did not take place on school grounds? Should the police be called when a theft or vandalism occurs at school? How is a suspected case of child abuse to be reported? Knowing district policy in these areas before an incident occurs is sound practice for the new principal.

Articulation with Other Schools. The new principal must know what articulation programs exist for students going to other schools and how they are to be implemented. Basically this involves knowing to which schools your students will be going when they complete elementary school, being familiar with any orientation programs for these students, such as a visitation day, and coordinating with the principal of the receiving school.

Districtwide Activities. Many worthwhile activities for students operate at the district level. These include honors band, orchestra, and glee club; Sports Day; Academic Quiz Bowls; and science fairs, to name a few. The new principal should make sure that these events are placed on the school calendar and that students are informed about the opportunities to participate.

Learning About Your Community

Research has shown that a close working relation between the school and its community is a major component of an effective school. Therefore, learning about the school's community is an essential part of the new principal's orientation. This should include learning about the community itself and learning how the school has been working with parents and the community at large.

The Geography of the Community

A first step in learning about the community is finding out its boundaries, including the attendance area of your own school. Attendance areas will vary, of course, with the community. An inner-city school may be only a few blocks square, whereas a rural school may take in several square miles with most of the students being bused. A drive or walk through the community will reveal housing patterns and the location of industrial sites, railroad crossings, and shopping centers. Driving through the community at the time youngsters come to school will give you a chance to observe traffic flow and possible unsafe traffic conditions.

Statistical Data

Other sources for learning about the community are various statistical data from the United States Census Tract Reports, which usually are available in the local public library. Local chambers of commerce and planning commissions also are good sources of statistical information on communities. New York, California, and other states provide Basic Education Data Systems, which offer additional statistical data on schools. From these you can learn about socioeconomic status,

housing patterns, occupational groupings, and ethnic population distributions, to mention only a few.

Changing Communities

It is no secret that many American communities are changing. They may have undergone change in the recent past or are now in the process of changing. Through personal observation and conversations with local people, you can identify the major community changes. By driving through the community you can notice the construction of new office buildings, industrial parks, and shopping centers; you can see where buildings appear to be abandoned or are in the process of being torn down and where subdivisions have replaced agricultural land. Through conversations with community members you can learn about changing demographic patterns. And you are likely to hear wistful comments from senior faculty who remember "the way it used to be."

Key Community Events

In many communities the school is expected to participate in major community events, ranging from a parade to poster or essay contests sponsored by a local service club. Through conversations with faculty and parents and by reviewing school documents, you can learn what kinds of activities have gone on in the past and what the school's involvement has been. These same sources also can provide you with background about controversial events in the community, such as a rancorous school board election or parental opposition to the introduction of a sex education program.

Key Community People and Organizations

By reviewing minutes from PTA meetings and from school advisory committee meetings, by skimming school newsletters, and by talking with teachers, custodians, and secretaries, you will be able to construct a list of parents and other key community members who are active and involved in school and community affairs. These are the people you may want to call on for assistance at a later time. Similarly, you will want to learn about community organizations and their leaders who have supported the school with a variety of programs, such as tutoring, mentoring, school-business partnerships, and health and safety programs, to mention a few.

as of Parental Involvement

In addition to parental involvment in PTA/PTO organizations, various federal programs and some state programs mandate parental involvement in a variety of advisory committees. The nature of such involvement is unique to each school. In some cases parent advisory committees are active participants in the decision-making processes. In other cases they are mostly window dressing and function only to rubber stamp the decisions of administrators. You can learn about the nature of past involvement by reading agendas and minutes and by talking with the key players on such committees. Initially the new principal must be cautious about making changes in the nature of parental involvement if they depart too radically from what parents have been used to in the past. However, as you come to know the parents and earn their confidence, changes can be introduced gradually.

Communicating with the Community

Communicating to parents and to the community at large about the school's programs and activities is essential. Some schools publish and disseminate a special bulletin at the beginning and end of the school year. Other schools have monthly or bi-monthly newsletters. In smaller communities a section of the local newspaper is devoted to school news. The school lunch menu is always a popular feature. The new principal needs to use all methods of communication to tell the school's story. Early on the principal should establish contact with the local newspaper editor or education reporter to learn how the paper has worked with the school in the past and how school news can be better presented in the future.

The Community as a Resource

Effective schools make full use of the physical and human resources of the community. Such resources include sites for field trips such as the supermarket, post office, and fire station. Human resources include volunteers to work in the school library and community members with special interests and skills, which they are willing to share with students. The new principal will need to become aware of the range of resources that have been used in the past and the persons to contact to arrange for use of the resources.

Sources Unlimited

Sources of information about the school and its community are limitless. Your own faculty is a prime source of information. But in today's commuting society where teachers often do not live in the school neighborhood, talk with the teacher aides, who more often live in the neighborhood and are likely to have firsthand knowledge of the local community. Also, law enforcement people, municipal agencies, and business organizations can give additional insights into the community. Through talking and listening to many people and with some study, the new principal can begin to understand the community, how the school has related to it in the past, and how these relations can be improved in the future.

A Work Plan for the New Principal

The new principal needs a well-organized plan for learning about the school, the district, and the community. Given the frenetic nature of the beginning of the school year and the many distractions that come up, the neophyte principal needs a work plan that reserves blocks of time to learn about the school and community. This final chapter outlines such a work plan.

This author strongly recommends that the work plan be written out. Having a plan in writing serves as a personal checklist and ensures that some attention is given to each of the three areas of orientation: the school, the district, and the community. By checking the plan from time to time, you will be able to determine if there are any areas that have been neglected or possibly omitted. Of course, having the plan in writing does not mean that it can't be changed. Handling emergencies or crises is part of running a school; they have to be dealt with without delay. But having the plan before you in writing will help you get back on track as soon as the emergency is resolved.

In addition, the written plan communicates to your immediate supervisor that you have an organized, self-orientation strategy, which should contribute to your success on the job. It also gives that person a chance to make some suggestions, which could improve the plan. Also, as your performance is reviewed during the year, particularly in the first three months, a written plan can serve as one basis for the review. It will give the reviewer the benefit of your insights into the management of the school system and might suggest ways that districtwide policies can be altered or clarified to help other new administrators.

Writing Your Work Plan

The work plan can be organized into three parts: the overall goal, specific objectives, and activities with time allocations. The overall goal might be something like the following: "I will [illegible] sufficient data about the school, district, and community to enable me to provide the leadership necessary for an effective program of instruction."

The specific objectives might fall under three headings: "Learning about the school," Learning about the district," and "Learning about the community." A specific objective under the first heading might be: "I will become well enough acquainted with each member of the professional staff to have an effective working relationship with each of them."

The activities selected to accomplish each objective should be written down along with a date and the estimated time to complete the activity. The list of activities might look like the following:

- Week of August 15th. Reading student cumulative records. Six hours.
- Weeks of August 15th and 22nd. Interviewing each member of the professional staff, allowing one-half hour per interview. 12 hours total, assuming a staff of 24 teachers.
- Week of August 15th. Walking the school plant. Two hours.
- Week of August 22nd. Walking the school plant with the custodian. Four hours (perhaps divided into two blocks of two hours each).
- Week of August 29th. Driving through the community. One morning.
- Week of August 15th. Interviews with key central office staff. One hour per interview.

Such a work plan, of course, must fit into the overall responsibilities of the job, such as attending meetings, taking care of paperwork, etc. The key is organizing your time. The large monthly wall calendar serves as a convenient way of recording your work plan along with other major school activities. This highly visible record is a constant reminder of what you expect to accomplish. At the beginning of each week you can review the work plan. Then on Friday afternoon you can give yourself a progress report and make any adjustments needed for the next week's activities.

The monthly wall calendar also is useful for coordinating all of your activities. For example, if you know that there is a principals'

meeting in the central office every Tuesday at 10:00 a.m., you can arrange to arrive early to meet with one of the central office staff you want to interview.

An additional tool to help you keep track of key activities is a personal computer. Using word-processing or database programs, you can record and quickly retrieve key elements of your work plan, the status of evaluations, and upcoming meetings and events.

Learning About Your School: A Continuing Job

A major theme in this booklet is that it is essential to learn how things were done in the past -- the traditions and rituals, major and minor, of each school. Another theme is that there is often a wide gap between written policies and the way they are implemented. There are many ways of learning about these things through both formal and informal channels. But learn them you must if you are to be successful on your job.

The methods you use to learn about your school, district, and community as a beginning principal will serve you well in future years. Learning is not a one-year task; it is a series of tasks that will continue as long as you are concerned with improving instruction and the quality of life in the school.

Each month, each year, a school changes. New subdivisions are constructed; businesses and industries move in and out; children graduate and new children move in; demographic patterns change; staffs change. So, too, will the central office staff change. A new personnel director or business manager could mean different procedures and regulations to follow. New state laws and newly elected school board members could mean new policies and programs to implement. And certainly a change of superintendent could totally alter the school environment.

Because the school, district, and community will continue to change, you must have a continuing plan to monitor these changes and adapt to them. This booklet points the way. It is now up to you to take the first step.