

Research Brief

Tips and Strategies for New Principals

Question: What are some things that a new principal should do to assure success in their first year or two?

In A Nutshell

Most new principals suffer from tremendous stress as they enter an entirely different role with a vast array of new challenges and demands. Despite the idiosyncrasies of each school, certain issues arise in almost every case. New principals have to focus on building relationships, attending to their own professional development to refine leadership skills, communicate effectively with a variety of constituents, and be an authentic person.

Summary of Findings:

It's your first day as principal. You've been preparing for this day your entire career. You've been at school since 4:00 AM, making sure that absolutely everything is OK and that there are no hidden surprises ready to snag your attention and turn the start of your first day into a ragged rout. You feel pretty good about this; after all, you've been an assistant principal, and you've seen, first hand, most of the challenges that your principal has faced. But there's one difference: now you're the one that other people will turn to when they don't know what to do. As one California principal put it, "Now, you're the one out in front of the building when the TV cameras show up."

Your own mentor principal is out of town at a professional conference, and you sure don't want to start your first day on the job by calling your supervisor for help. Most of all, you want to appear confident, poised and self-controlled today – with no "deer-in-the-headlights" moments of sheer terror or befuddled confusion. Your meetings with the faculty during pre-planning went well, and you feel good about the professionalism and competence of your staff. You have a new Assistant Principal who looks more nervous than you feel.

But today it's show time – with real kids. Pretty soon, people start to drift into the building; some stop by to say hello and wish you well. Then there's a flood of kids in the building, and things go pretty well. Schools run mostly on routine and inertia, and everyone seems to know what to do, except, perhaps, for the occasional confused Freshman, baffled sub, or flustered parent. By the end of the day, it seems like you've counseled a hundred people, solved a thousand problems, and answered a million questions. As Mel Riddile says, being a principal is like "drinking from a fire hose." But it felt pretty good, and you might get to like this job after all. [Compiled by Howard

Johnston based on round-table conversations with 28 high school principals, January-March, 2010].

The composite story above certainly doesn't describe, in detail, all of the problems, issues, and challenges that new principals face, but it does capture the intensely personal nature of the "new principal" experience – the challenge of going from being an "expert" teacher or assistant principal to being a novice principal. Despite the idiosyncratic nature of schools and the principalship, however, there are certain elements that appear to be part of every new principals' experience.

Challenges for New Principals

Larry Lashway (2003) describes the challenges faced by new principals this way:

By all accounts, new administrators experience intense, unrelenting stress as they try to adjust their textbook understanding of leadership to the real world of practice. They have to master technical skills, learn to deal with a variety of constituents, and wrestle with doubts about personal adequacy, all in a fast-paced environment that leaves little time for reflection and thoughtfulness. They are frequently haunted by the fear that a moment of inattention will blossom into a crisis. In the words of one beginning assistant principal, "You can't turn your back on something, 'cause that might be the thing.'

First-year stress comes not just from task overload, but from the need for quick assimilation into a new culture. Every school is a unique organization, with its own history, environment, and cast of characters. New principals not only have to learn "how things are done," but "how things are done here." They must go from "stranger" to "insider," quickly discerning the unwritten rules and identifying the real movers and shakers.'

Many new administrators also find it disconcerting to deal with teachers as supervisors rather than peers. Operating for the first time from a schoolwide perspective, some are shocked to see the parochialism of some teachers' behavior.

Finally, many beginners report a strong sense of isolation. Unlike new teachers, who can usually find an empathetic colleague just down the hall, principals literally have no peers in their building. The isolation can be magnified when they receive little feedback from supervisors.

Although induction and mentoring programs have helped mediate some of these problems, these programs are often uneven, inconsistent, and largely dependent upon the commitment of individual mentors and the relationship established between the mentor and the novice principal.

Ten Skills for Effective School Leaders

Since 1906, the National Association of Secondary School Principals has been helping principals cope with the demands of leadership in ever-changing school environments. In a recent publication, *Breaking Ranks: Ten Skills for Effective School Leaders*, NASSP lays out the key skills for principals that can be derived from research and practical experience. These establish an ambitious agenda for new principals to achieve in their own professional development, but they help sharpen the focus of that professional development as well.

Educational Leadership

- Setting instructional direction – establishing and sustaining a clear focus on teaching and learning as the central mission of the school.
- Teamwork – building and sustaining a team of administrators and teachers committed to the core mission of the school.
- Sensitivity – alertness to subtle signals about how people are functioning in the school and giving empathic, appropriate responses to client needs.

Resolving Complex Problems

- Judgement – Thoughtful, judicious consideration of issues and problems; sound, evidence-based decision making.
- Results orientation – Focus on student learning outcomes; encouragement of responsible innovation to boost student learning.
- Organizational ability – Organize and manage resources to achieve maximum performance: time, money, people, environment.

Communication

- Oral communication – Communicates effectively with all constituents and clients; communication is clear, precise and civil.
- Written communication – Provides clear, concise and correct written communication; utilizes appropriate technologies for communication.

Developing Self and Others

- Developing others – Provides opportunities and resources for faculty and staff to develop new skills and employ them effectively in the school program.
- Understanding your own strengths and weaknesses – Candidly assesses personal performance, identifies needed improvements, and finds resources for own professional development.

Strategies and Tips

There are dozens of lists of tips for new principals, and most of them give good advice about very practical matters. Many of these listings are provided at the conclusion of this brief. A quick perusal of these listings show that there are several categories of advice that help to define areas that new principals should focus on for personal and professional development. These include:

Personal Integrity. Most veteran principals agree that one of the most important traits of effective new principals is a strong sense of personal integrity. That means not only that they are fair and honest in both words and deeds, but that they are “authentic” – they don’t try to be something they are not and don’t wear the principal role as a disguise that tries to conceal “the real person.” Specific actions associated with this kind of integrity are:

- Being clear with yourself and others about your values and beliefs about education, teaching and leadership.
- Keeping your word
- Acting in ways that are consistent with your beliefs and values
- Acting honestly, ethically and compassionately in your dealings with others.

Relationships. Anything that gets done in a school depends on the quality of the relationships that exist among the adults and between the adults and the kids in the building. Effective principals do all they can to foster and cultivate strong relationships with both the staff and students. Specifically, they:

- Treat people with respect, kindness and tolerance.
- Get to know their staff and their students well.
- Go where the action is – in hallways, classrooms, cafeterias, the school neighborhood; they’re visible and accessible in the school environment.
- Listen carefully and openly for advice, feedback, criticisms and accolades.

Leadership Skills. This is a huge category that includes everything from instructional supervision and time management to creating a productive school culture and making sure the buses run on time. In essence, it means being good at what you do. Good principals:

- Understand they don’t know how to do everything, and they seek help when they need it.
- Have a clear, focused personal professional development plan to learn the skills they need to improve their performance.
- Model personal professional learning for their staff and their students.
- Consult broadly before making major decisions; make smaller decisions with consideration for those involved.

Community and Parent Relations. Good principals understand that they have a prime responsibility to communicate with and sustain good relationships with parents, but they also know that parents may comprise a very small segment of their total community. Therefore, they create community networks that allow them to communicate with key constituents and influential policy makers who can shape public support for the school. Effective principals:

- Build strong networks that reach into diverse segments of the community, capitalizing on civic, religious, community service, or other youth-serving organizations to build support for excellent, innovative schools.
- Meet with both supporters and critics of the school to keep lines of communication open and the possibility of collaboration alive.

Making it Happen

Ultimately, effective leadership consists of discrete actions, careful monitoring of the effects of those actions, and a willingness to modify personal behavior to create the most desirable outcomes. The resources below provide dozens of actions that will help a new principal realize the goals for effective leadership outlined above.

Online Resources:

References

National Association of Secondary School Principals (2010). *Ten Skills for Effective School Leaders*. Reston, VA: Author.

Lashway, L. (2003). *Inducting School Leaders*. Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on School Management. ERIC Document Number ED479074. Retrieved from the Internet, May 1, 2011: <http://www.vtaide.com/png/ERIC/Inducting-Leaders.htm>

Resources

Three Great Blogs

Mel Riddile's Blog – The Principal Difference, NASSP

http://nasspblogs.org/principaldifference/2009/10/what_makes_the_principal_diffe.html

In Mel's words: "As a high school principal, I always felt as though I was drinking out of a fire hose instead of a straw. It was always difficult to find the time to keep abreast of current issues that were important to me as a principal. I had the best of intentions, but I often found myself not reading that article or that book that a friend recommended. I needed someone to synthesize what was happening and translate it for me so that I could put the information into practice. I needed short bursts of information that I could absorb in a few minutes. If I wanted more information, I could take the next step. Blogs are a great way to stay on top of school issues, but I couldn't find one that applied directly to me as a principal. I needed a bridge between research, current events, and my school. That's what this blog is all about—taking what is out there and translating it for principals so that they can use it right away."

Ron Williamson's Blog

<http://effectiveprincipals.blogspot.com/>

Ron is a former principal and the co-author of *The Principalship from A to Z, Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way* and *Scheduling to Improve Student Learning*. This blog is a practical, realistic and concise resource for everyday school leadership.

Michael Smith's Principals' Page

<http://www.principalspage.com/>

An engaging and often entertaining look at the principalship from Illinois principal, Mike Smith. It includes resources and a blog. See especially the blog posting for new principals:

“New Principals: Free Advice is Worth Exactly What You Pay for It”

<http://www.principalspage.com/theblog/archives/new-principals-free-advice-is-worth-exactly-what-you-pay-for-it>

More Resources

Tips for First Year Principals: Eight Ways to Make Your Mark

<http://www.nassp.org/Content.aspx?topic=60479>

A joint project between Carolyn Birks and Judith Richardson, this article from NASSP reveals 8 key lessons learned from a principal who began her principalship with a collaborative model that involved teachers, parents and the community.

Communication Tips for the New Principal

<http://nspra.org/node/3077>

These are great ideas from a first-rate organization – The National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA). In addition to this article, their website is a great source of help for principals in managing effective public relations.

Illinois New Principal Mentoring Program (INPM)

http://www.ilprincipalmentoring.org/new_principals/index.html

Although designed for Illinois' principals, this site has great resources and Podcasts on a variety of leadership topics and issues. Scroll down the page for access to Resources.

Must-Read Books

***The New Principals' Field Book* by Pam Robbins and Harvey Alby**

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/26545561/The-New-Principal%E2%80%99s-Fieldbook-Strategies-for-Success>

This is the Bible for new principals. Practical, well-organized and focused on instructional leadership, this very user-friendly book should be on every principals' bookshelf – or laptop.

***The Principalship from A to Z* by Ron Williamson and Barbara Blackburn.**

<http://www.eyoneducation.com/bookstore/productdetails.cfm?sku=7105-8&title=the-principalship-from-a-to-z>

This book provides practical tools and activities that can be used immediately to improve your practice. This guide offers specific strategies that will help you become a more effective principal. There are 26 chapters in this book, one for each letter of the alphabet.

Even More Resources

All of these sites provide solid, practical advice for new principals. Take some time to browse through them; they're loaded with great tips from experienced school leaders as well as some who are just starting out and learning as they go.

Top things a First Year Principal Should Do

<http://teaching.about.com/od/admin/a/Top-Things-A-First-Year-Principal-Should-Do.htm>

New Principals' Corner

<http://sites.google.com/site/principalcrackerbarrel/new-principals-corner>

Survival Skills for New Principals

<http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/courses/eol464/fa2001/464web/PrincipalSurvivalSkills.pdf>

10 Things for New Principals to Think About

<http://theredpencil.wordpress.com/2007/07/11/10-things-for-new-principals-to-think-about/>

Advice to a New Principal

http://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2008/06/12/37tln_norton.h19.html

20 Valuable Tips for New Principals

<http://www.naesp.org/resources/2/Principal/2007/J-Fp52.pdf>

Tips for New Principals

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education-update/oct05/vol47/num10/Tips-for-New-Principals.aspx>

Principals on the Move: Tips for Making a Smooth Move

http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin489_c.shtml

Education World's Administrators' Website

http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/

Check out the problem solving archive and blog



Veteran Principals Offer Advice to New Colleagues

http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin233.shtml

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