

A Beginning Rural Principal's Toolkit: A Guide for Success

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The purpose of this article is to explore both the challenges and skills needed to effectively assume a leadership position and thus to create an entry plan or 'toolkit' for a new rural school leader. The entry plan acts as a guide beginning principals may use to navigate the unavoidable confusion that comes with leadership. It also assists aspiring new leaders to think through, and vicariously experience, the challenges they may face in a leadership role. It focuses on three specific areas most relevant to rural principals: Dealing with professional isolation and loneliness, getting to know and thriving in a rural community, and basic management skills for the lone administrator. It provides a series of tools that beginning principals may find useful as they embark on a leadership journey in a rural setting and also identifies the specific skills various stakeholder groups perceive as most important for rural school leaders.

Key Words: Beginning principals; rural principals; entry plan.

Effective expeditions generally begin with a plan and a map acknowledging the potential challenges as well as the skills needed to progress through the journey. While few travelers plan to fail at the outset, history gives many examples of explorers derailed by their lack of planning or skills. In August of 1913, the *Karluk*, an American built ship, set sail under the direction of Captain Vilhjalmur Stefansson, for a sea/ice expedition to reach the North Pole. The ill-fated expedition was plagued from the outset with poor leadership, meager planning, and a serious lack of the needed skills that would have allowed the party to succeed. The *Karluk* was soon entrapped in ice and was pulled off course. The ship was eventually crushed by the sea ice leaving the men stranded on the pack ice. Of the 25 original voyagers only 14 survived the expedition (Perkins, 2000). While much less dramatic in nature, the journey from educator to educational leader requires the same understanding of the potential challenges as well as the skills needed to progress through the journey.

Much research has focused on entry plans for beginning principals, and a lesser amount on rural education, but there is a dearth of literature around the intersection of these two domains, that is, the specific needs of beginning principals in rural areas of the US. This lack of information is surprising, given the fact that US rural schools (29, 264) outnumber those located in cities (24,447), suburban areas (22,500) and towns (12,003) (Chen, 2011).

The challenges new rural administrators face often include lack of decision-making experience,

feelings of professional loneliness and isolation, little administrative support, as well as standardized compliance with state and national requirements that do not account for school or staff size (Starr, 2008). Without a plan and an understanding of potential challenges, new rural administrators, like historical explorers can find themselves derailed and lost.

The purpose of this article is to explore both the challenges and skills needed to effectively assume a leadership position and thus to create an entry plan or 'toolkit' for a new rural school leader. The entry plan acts as a guide beginning principals can use to navigate the unavoidable confusion that comes with leadership. It also assists aspiring new leaders to think through, and vicariously experience, the challenges they may face in a leadership role (Jentz, 2009). It is also important to note that this entry plan is not meant to serve as a detailed itinerary of the leadership journey. Rather, it provides multiple sign posts or road markers against which new principals can check their progress to make sure growth is in the right direction.

Because the information regarding new rural school leaders is limited this article weaves the theme of rural schools and the new principalship together. It examines the challenges of being a new rural school leader and suggests a toolkit for new rural school leaders to help flesh out a research-based entry plan for a successful beginning as a rural principal. Its major focus is on reviewing various studies on school leadership practices to demonstrate the challenges new rural principals face. Research conducted on

administrators in the field can give great insight into effective learning in the school community (Silins, 2001) and also serves as a window into the work of effective school leaders (Martin & Robertson, 2003).

Challenges for New Rural School Leaders

Today nearly 31% of American Public Schools are considered rural, with almost a quarter of all American school children attending these schools (US Department of Education, 2011). Rural school boundaries are often very large, with small populations that are frequently in decline (Duncan & Stock, 2010). In these settings, principals play a significant role in shaping the school culture and organizing the day-to-day running of the school. In addition, they play a pivotal role in the community (Mohr as cited in Clarke & Wildly, 2004). State and national mandates also create additional stresses that are unique to rural school leaders. These mandates often increase the workload, create financial inequity, and expand the responsibility of already stretched school leaders without increasing the resources necessary for the mandates to be accomplished (Canales, Carmen, & John, 2008). Unlike large schools with sizeable administrative staffs and numerous resources, small school leaders often face these challenges alone, but are required to meet the same accountability standards as their larger counterparts.

Hood and Clarke (2002) describe six conditions often found within rural schools that can present challenges to new administrators: (a) *geographic isolation* that often focuses the school as the center of the community; (b) *cultural isolation* that prevents diffusion of effort; (c) “financial stringency” caused by a small tax base; (d) *inadequate mass* where people are required to wear multiple hats that limit specialization; (e) *personal loneliness* where high personal visibility is complicated by the quick-moving social ‘grapevine’; (f) *historical stability* where schools represent the history of [the] community.

When a new leader assumes the principal role, the combination of being both inexperienced and in a rural setting can be overwhelming. In a study of ten new rural high school principals, Morford (2002) found that nine of the ten new principals left their position within three years. Eight of these responded that they had never fully been socialized into the organization as the educational leader. Morford posed an important question in her study, that if “the principal’s position in the rural high school is turning over every one to two years, who becomes responsible for instructional leadership in the school?”

The challenges most frequently experienced by new school leaders were outlined in a literature review conducted by the National College for School Leadership in 2003. In this study of leadership challenges in Great Britain, Europe, and the United States, Hobson et al. (2003) identified seven common challenges faced by new school leaders. These are:

- Feelings of professional isolation and loneliness
- Dealing with the legacy, practice, and style of the previous [school leader]
- Dealing with multiple tasks, managing time and priorities
- Managing the school budget
- Dealing with (e.g. supporting, warning, dismissing) ineffective staff
- Implementing new government initiatives, notably new curricula or school improvement projects
- Problems with school buildings and site management.

While Hobson et al.’s (2003) study focused on the challenges of both rural and urban school leaders, commonsense indicates that some of these issues are magnified in rural settings. For principals who are the lone school leader within their building, feelings of professional isolation and loneliness will be greater. Rural settings also increase the role multiplicity of the school leader as he/she tries to wear the many different hats normally worn by multiple administrators in larger urban schools. Rural principals often find themselves responsible for almost every aspect of “accountability, planning, monitoring, reporting, school performance” (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006, p. 78), as well as student discipline, working with the community, and being the public face of the organization. In a study of new rural principals in Australia (Thomas & Hornsey, 1991), many expressed they felt overloaded by excessive meetings, never ending paperwork, and the responsibility to interview new applicants, all of which was compounded by a lack of clerical assistance. Many principals in the same study also perceived their small community had unrealistic expectations for them and the school. As two new rural principals articulated (Starr & White, 2008):

I’m running the whole day. . . . I find it very hard to close the door when someone wants to see me – because who else would they see? . . . It’s getting worse the longer I’m on the job.

It’s very tiring. . . . You just never stop. . . . It’s just never-ending, I’m always busy. (p.4)

When the stress and the unknown of being a new leader meet the realities of rural schools, the consequences can be thorny. This is clearly demonstrated by the extremely high turnover rate in Morford's (2002) study of new rural high school principals. In an effort to ease the transition, this entry level plan focuses specifically on providing tools to ease three challenges faced by new school leaders that have the potential to be intensified in a rural school. These are:

- Dealing with professional isolation and loneliness
- Getting to know and thriving in a rural community
- Basic management skills for the lone administrator.

Dealing with Professional Isolation and Loneliness

Tool #1 - Find a Mentor

Leadership can often be a lonely and isolated role that is compounded in rural settings. Often there is a "sink or swim" mentality to beginning principalship, which can leave new leaders overwhelmed, and school turnover rates high (Morford, 2002; Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007). One tool that can ease this transition for new rural leaders is coaching and mentoring from experienced school leaders. The benefits of mentoring and coaching to the mentee include: guidance and support during the transition to leadership, increased self-confidence, encouragement to take risks and achieve goals, as well as having a sounding board for the new leader to discuss issues and questions (Spiro, Mattis, & Mitgang, 2007).

A recent study of rural school principals in Wyoming supports the value of coaching and mentoring for new leaders (Duncan, & Stock, 2010). In a survey of school leaders regarding the value of coaching and mentoring, 97% of the respondents agreed that mentoring was important for beginning principals. The study also found that while principals value introductory mentoring, the majority (68%) of mentoring happens informally. Only 13% of Wyoming districts have a formal introductory mentoring program for new principals.

If formal mentoring approaches are the exception rather than the rule, then new leaders have a responsibility to seek out a mentor or coach. One of the most common places to look for a mentor is within the district. Duncan and Stock (2010) found that 68% of new principals found a mentor within their own district. This lack of outside mentorship can possibly be attributed to both the distance

between rural school districts and the lack of a network of principal colleagues.

Duncan and Stock (2010) also found that among beginning rural principals, the four most helpful areas for mentoring and coaching support were in: making data-driven decisions, dealing with difficult parents and students, legal issues, and financial/budgetary issues. Other areas where mentoring helped, were: serving as the instructional leader, working with the community, and creating collegiality among the staff. Support can play a crucial role as the new rural leader navigates the potential hazards of running a school. On a personal level, mentors can play an important role by serving as a trusted colleague to help the new leader navigate the rural school setting where "principals and their families are an integral part of the community where every move is visible and every action noted (Duncan & Stock, 2010). Smith (2007) summarized how mentors can be invaluable assets as they serve new principals as an advisor, critical friend, guide, listener, role model, sounding board, strategist, supporter, tactician, and teacher. The new principal can gain important insight into his/her new role by working with a mentor who asks questions, challenges productivity, encourages risk-taking, helps identify goals, listens actively, offers encouragement, provides feedback, and shares critical knowledge (Smith, 2007, p.278).

Tool #2 - Develop Personal Resilience with Healthy Coping Mechanisms

Another area, administrators can develop to alleviate professional isolation and loneliness of leadership is personal resilience. Resilience is a person's capacity to cope with stress and adversity, which allows them to bounce back or develop the strength to endure adversity (Masten, 2009). New rural principals encounter "dilemmas, tensions, and even contradictions in their everyday work. . . . [that] entail considerable emotional labour" (Clarke & Wildy, 2008, p. 730). A study of newly appointed principals (Daresh & Male, 2000) found that beginning principals underestimate the high level of stress and the personal resilience that are needed to fulfill their role. Without personal resilience, new rural principals "face the challenge of their new appointment at a cost to their confidence, self-efficacy, and ability to manage multiple and competing pressures" (Clarke & Wildy, 2008, p. 731). As one new rural principal stated:

You can get buried. There are a lot of demands on the [principal] in a small community, and I knew I had to strike a balance. Friends who had been principals had warned me that it was one of the hardest roles you can do. The school is

expected to be the hub of the community, and often you have to do extra things like call bingo or sell raffle tickets, but that promotes the school and it's good PR, so you have to do it. . . . You have to be very careful how much to take on outside the school. It could bury you if you let it. (Clarke, Stevens, & Wildy, 2006, p.85)

Contextual examples of new rural principals in action can give us insight into the importance of personal resilience. In Daresh and Male's (2000) study, new principals expressed the importance of finding strategies to deal with stress. Montgomery and Rupp (2005) found that the relationship between stress and coping mechanisms are extremely important in preventing burnout. Unhealthy coping mechanisms such as poor diet, negative attitudes, or drug abuse, can lead to poor personal and professional outcome (Farmer, 2010). In a recent study of educators, Whipple, Kinney, and Kattenbraker (2008) found that educators who choose healthy coping mechanisms, such as exercise, have higher levels of self-efficacy. They also found this higher level of self-efficacy positively affected their actions, their stress levels, and self-esteem. By developing healthy coping mechanisms, new school leaders can better equip themselves with the tools necessary to deal with the challenge, isolation, stress, and the loneliness of leadership.

Tool #3 - Develop Personal Resilience with Purpose

Another method to deal with the stress and loneliness of being a new rural principal is through the creation of a personal mission statement. By linking positive thoughts and actions to their personal missions, administrators increase their chances of overcoming adversity (Farmer, 2010). As Kouzes & Posner (2007) state:

Values help us determine what to do and what not to do. They're deep-seated, pervasive standards that influence every aspect of our lives: our moral judgments, our responses to others, our commitments to personal and organizational goals. Values set the parameters for the hundreds of decisions we make every day. (p. 212)

In their study of successful corporations, Collins and Porras (1994) found that "The very act of stating a core ideology... influences behavior toward consistency with that ideology" (p. 71). Therefore it becomes important that school leaders set aside time for self-reflection in which they explore their values and ensure there is congruity between their values and their practices as school leaders. A mission statement should be an expression of one's core

values and purpose. This purpose-driven mission can be a motivator for educational leaders (Rozycki, 2004). Leaders can use their mission statement as a rubric to judge how to prioritize and to best use their limited time.

Because rural school principals are often the lone administrator in their building, a personal mission statement that delineates their priorities and can serve as a guide as they sift through the many competing demands of the day. If left to chance, "Uncertain priorities lead to situations in which actions are not determined by values or principles" (Smith, 1994). Without priorities rural administrators have the potential to be everywhere – but nowhere.

Getting to Know the Context and Thriving in a Rural Community

All new principals go through a period of socialization, and it can sometimes be a rough transition. Clarke and Stevens (2009) described the experience of a new principal in a rural area that had undergone much transition in school leadership.

Before I arrived, there had been a succession of acting principals and people were pretty sick of it. My predecessor had done a lot of good work in the community, but was unable to keep the position. During the pupil free day before I started teaching here, a parent approached me and bluntly said, 'We don't want you; we liked the other bloke and tried very hard to keep him here. (p. 288)

In such a situation, getting to know the community and building trust is a key component to success. However, the process is a slow one and depends on the leader's actions. Getting parents and community on board requires showing them that progress is possible and communicating clearly the steps that to be taken. As another new rural principal pointed out: "People in a small community tend to be a little more conservative . . . It takes time for people to work out who you are and what you stand for and to decide whether or not they can trust you" (Clarke & Stevens, 2009, p. 287). This process of socialization into the organization and community is a skill all new principals need to develop. Principals who do not actively choose to get to know the community and to fit their work within the rural context may find their efforts short-lived.

In cases of high leadership turnover, change becomes difficult to enact as the attitude among staff and community members may be that 'this too will pass'. High visibility and effective communication are needed to begin building relationships with and among stakeholders.

Tool #4 - Establish Key Relationships

Socialization is the process of learning about the culture of a community and organization, “including cultural norms and conceptions of appropriate and expected behavior” (Duncan & Stock, 2010, p. 298). Beginning school principals have a responsibility to view their role within the context of the school community as a whole. Principals can jump-start the socialization process by establishing key relationships within the school community. Such a process as part of their entry plan allows new administrators to learn about the new school assignment, the organization, and about their role as leader (Jentz & Murphy, 2005). Establishing relationships can take the form of both formal and

informal meetings that may occur either before or soon after the school year starts. This part of the entry plan can help the new rural leader gain knowledge, trust, and credibility within a tight-knit rural setting. This process requires new principals to work with other stakeholders in open communication regarding the health of the organization and to gain insights as to possible and appropriate changes that may be implemented (Jentz & Murphy, 2005). It can also demonstrate a willingness to establish both a top-down and bottom-up leadership approach with the school community (Jentz & Murphy, p.6).

Table 1 is a compilation of key stakeholders and the important information/conversations that need to be established as part of the principal’s entry plan.

Table 1
Key Stakeholders and Important Conversations

Key Stakeholders	Key Question-based Conversations
Superintendent	Exploring the District’s vision and initiatives Identifying the Superintendent’s expectations for the new principal Ascertaining the key responsibilities for the new principal as directed by the Superintendent Finding out about special considerations for the school including prior performance, teacher concerns, or prior pertinent history that will impact the new principal’s performance strategy
PTO Committee	Building a strong professional collegial relationship Supporting and building relationships in the rural school community Showing mutual support and recognition
Site-based Leadership Team	Learning about working history with previous administrators Distributing leadership at the school Finding out the prior pertinent history that will impact the performance of the new principal. Assessing the current mission, vision, and strategy of the school. Evaluating as a group what changes will need to be considered Beginning a strong professional collegial relationship Sharing the new leader’s vision of school leadership as well as the expectations and responsibilities for the leadership team
Individual Teachers and Staff Members	Showing appreciation for their efforts Beginning a strong professional collegial relationship Listening to their feedback regarding what the school is doing well Listening to their feedback regarding what the school could improve Listening to concerns the teacher may have regarding the leadership transition Sharing the new leader’s vision of school leadership as well as the expectations and responsibilities for the teacher
Parents	Expressing a desire to get to know their child and his/her family Listening to their feedback regarding what the school is doing well and area for improvement

By taking the time to visit with a variety of individuals and stakeholder groups, the principal demonstrates: (a) an understanding that the stakeholders have a vested interest in the success of the school; (b) that their ideas and concerns are valid; (c) a willingness to listen and learn; (d) a respect for the culture and community of the school; (e) a desire

to establish trust through understanding. Rural principals who build relationships with key stakeholders within the school community are more likely to avoid bad beginnings as they “hit the ground learning, rather than [simply] running” (Jentz & Murphy, 2005, p. 736). As Jentz and Murphy (2005) stated, by focusing on learning, “the new

administrator establishes authority not by prejudging what needs to be changed immediately, but by taking charge of the process – by demonstrating a clear understanding of how to start” (p. 736). Before embarking on changes or innovations, taking time to build rapport with individuals and groups who will be impacted is a necessity.

Tool #5 – Take the Time to Build Rapport

Schools tend to be at the heart of small rural communities (Clark et al., 2006). This places new principals in an important role: on one hand, they are looked to for direction and guidance, while, on the other hand they are also being scrutinized by the school community. Principals who take the time to build rapport with teachers and staff demonstrate their respect for the school culture, as well as a desire to be a part of the community. Rapport is defined as

“a sense of mutuality and understanding; harmony, accord, confidence, and respect underlying a relationship between two persons” (Mosby’s Medical Dictionary, 2009). Randy Jensen, the 2005 National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Middle Level Principal of the Year, believes that effective leadership is grounded in healthy relationships (NASSP, 2011). As principal of a rural middle school in southeastern Idaho, he has seen the impact that healthy relationships can have in creating a culture of caring and in building rapport with students, staff, and the school community. Mr. Jensen’s 20 years of experience can provide new rural principals insight into effective tools that can be used to establish healthy relationships within the school community. The following strategies are excerpted from a podcast of an interview with Mr. Jensen regarding the establishment of a culture of caring within a rural middle school (NASSP, 2011).

Table 2
Strategies for New Principals

Strategies	What do to
Knowing Students’ Names	Mr. Jensen has the school photographer print each picture as a 3’ x 5’ with their name on the back. Each morning he goes through the pile. He makes a separate pile for students he doesn’t know and then focuses on these. “[This] makes a big difference when I’m walking down the hall, instead of just saying ‘Hi,’ and then faking it, I can say their name.”
Using Advisory Teachers Effectively	Mr. Jensen plans time within his schedule to visit with each advisory teacher regarding their students. During the regular 10-15 minute interview, he asks the teachers to tell him about each of their advisory students. He expects his teachers to establish a healthy mentor relationship, so that each student within the school has someone that has a demonstrated interest in them.
Highlighting Teachers and Students	Each week Mr. Jensen interviews four students and two teachers/staff members. The highlights of the interview, as well as pictures of each individual, are then posted on a prominent billboard as featured members of the school community. At the end of the week Mr. Jensen takes the four students out to Pizza at a local restaurant. When he is at lunch he takes time to ask them questions and makes an effort to get to know them.
Building Rapport - Making Time	Mr. Jensen schedules time each week, either before or after school, or during their planning period to get out and visit with teachers individually. The purpose of this visit is not to focus on a school agenda. It is a time to focus on teachers and to build a relationship with them. Mr. Jensen states that “When you build that relationship with staff members, they will do what you ask them to do. You won’t have battles. You won’t have fights. And as teachers feel like they have a relationship with [the principal], they will want that same relationship with other teachers, and with the [students] that they have. It is about building relationships.”

While these strategies are geared for a middle school setting, the principle of establishing relationships works across grade levels. New rural principals who take time to establish rapport within the school will not only increase their understanding of students and teachers, but they will also increase their chance of thriving within the tight-knit rural community. Most importantly, principals who strive to build rapport will enhance their opportunity to positively influence and shape the individuals with whom they come in contact.

Basic Management Skills for the Lone Administrator

The principal's role, whether urban or rural, is a busy one. What makes the rural administrator's job unique is the vital day-to-day role the principal plays in the school, as well as the intimate way he or she relates to the community (Mohr, 2000; Nolan, 1998). Southworth (2004) argues that based on findings from a study of small schools in England, rural principals are more involved in bringing about change and improvement, because they have a more direct influence on the quality of teaching within their building. These challenges are compounded by smaller administrative staffing and fewer available resources at the district office. This is a direct contrast to larger school administrators who have a greater capacity to "delegate responsibilities and share managerial tasks" (Starr & White, 2008, p. 3). Rural principals often find themselves responsible for all aspects of the daily running of the school, including: budgetary issues, human resources, school discipline, conflict management between various stakeholders, as well as, serving as instructional leader, working with stakeholder groups (PTO), reporting to the superintendent . . . The list could go on. As one rural principal stated:

The thing that makes me so weary each day is the array of things that I have to do. . . . At one moment, I am disciplining some kids, while two minutes later, I am dealing with a call from the central office asking me for some sort of report on my staffing patterns. At the same time, my secretary comes in and says that there is a parent who is demanding a class transfer from one teacher's class to another. Next, I am being asked what to do about a roofing problem over one wing of the school. All this is happening before I have even looked at the stuff on my desk first thing in the morning. I love the job and the challenges, but I really didn't expect that every day would be so filled with so many things I feel I still need to learn. (Daresh & Male, 2000, p. 94)

While there is no way to completely prepare for the flood of information and tasks that will be their responsibility, new rural principals can increase their likelihood of success by making the effective management of the organization a priority. Recent studies (Grissom & Loeb, 2009; Horng, Klasik, & Loeb, 2009) point to positive gains in student test scores as well as teacher and parent assessments of school climate when principals focus on improving their organizational management skills. Simply put, by improving their ability to keep the school running smoothly, rural principals can increase students' abilities to learn (Grissom & Loeb, 2009). This is demonstrated in Grissom and Loeb's study (2009), where they found that "principals devoting significant time to becoming instructional leaders in their schools are unlikely to see improvement unless they increase their capacity for organizational management" (p. 32). The importance of developing organizational management skills is compounded in rural communities, because of the lack of resources, staff, and time – due to the principal's heavy day-to-day involvement in running the school. Because of the direct relationship between organizational management, student achievement and school climate, and compounded by rural principals' lack of resources, assistance and time, it is imperative that new rural principals set aside time and attention to developing their organizational management skills.

The following tools are designed to help new rural principals effectively develop their organizational management responsibilities.

Tool #6 – Infusing the Vision

Before new rural leaders delve into the techniques and skills of an effective manager, it is important to consider, "What exactly is the leader supposed to manage?" Is it enough to simply manage schedules, students, supplies, and the efforts of others? Proponents of transformational leadership argue that effective leaders learn to broaden and develop the interests of their employees, generate awareness for the organization's instructional mission and purpose, and empower employees to look beyond their own self-interest, for the good of the students and their fellow employees (Bass, 1990). Transformational leaders focus more on empowerment than on control strategies (Conger, 1999). Leadership is the process of empowering the school community to grow its vision of what is possible to achieve in the classroom, and then guiding all stakeholders in that vision. Effective organizational managers learn to make the school's vision central to their management efforts.

New principals are faced with challenges and opportunities in regards to school vision: (a) the school may already have a mission/vision that is outdated or less effective; (b) the school vision may exist on paper, but not in action; (c) efforts to change the school's mission may be seen in a tight knit rural community as conflicting with 'the way things are done around here.' If the rural school already has an effective vision, the new principal can develop trust within the school community by supporting the vision and incorporating it into his/her efforts. By making the small school mission/vision central to their efforts, new school administrators are more likely to ground their actions in the purposes and culture set in the school's mission.

When creating, or evaluating a school vision, new school leaders must be sensitive to the cultural values in rural communities that may seem unusual from an urban perspective (Clarke & Wildy, 2008). Support for a school vision can be built by making stakeholders aware of the outside forces influencing the school, and by enabling them to see the positive consequences that their vision-based decisions can have on the organization (Lortie, 1975). Once support has been created for the school vision, leaders can express this to the community by making it a part of the school's regular communication. This process can be enabled in rural communities, where school news and happenings, are a major focus of small-town newspapers and radio station as well as the coffee shop. Rural leaders are encouraged to use the grapevine in a positive manner as yet another way to communicate what is happening. Another vital aspect of incorporating a vision is the need to make it the basis for decision making and action within the

school. The school vision, in essence, becomes the compass that guides the principal's management of the organization. It is for this reason that infusing the vision is included as a management tool.

Tool #7 - Time & Task Management

Despite the vast amount of research conducted regarding the importance of management skills for new school leaders, there is surprisingly little detail on what those skills look like in practice. Additionally, time and task management are not usually covered in graduate courses or principal certification programs. Fortunately, a large amount of research exists within the field of organizational management that can be implemented into school leadership. One time/task management tool that can work in conjunction with a school's vision is Covey's (1989) Time Quadrant. In this time/task management model, the leader's tasks are divided into four different categories. The leader then places his/her tasks in the appropriate category (See table 2.) Covey argues that long-term effectiveness occurs in the Important/Not Urgent category, because this is the area that is most easily pushed aside by the urgent, but less important day-to-day tasks that can derail rural administrators from their goals and objectives. To facilitate this, principals can schedule blocks of time for important tasks to protect their priorities and most important responsibilities. This particular example of a task management model is offered solely to demonstrate the value of having a rubric by which new principals can judge and plan their daily activities.

Table 3
Prioritizing Tasks - Examples

<p>Important & Urgent [Drop & Go]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scheduled IEP meeting. • School Board meeting • Death of a student family member or tragedy in the community that affects students 	<p>Not Urgent, but Important [Schedule it and then stick to it!]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informal observations • Positive phone calls home to parents • Walk-throughs
<p>Urgent, but Not Important [Schedule a time and get it done]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some emails & phone messages • Paperwork • A flooding toilet • Organizing files 	<p>Not Urgent & Not important [Get rid of it or delegate it]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended office chat • Constant checking of email

Tool #8 - Effective Scheduling for Instructional Leadership

For years teachers and administrators have complained about parents who demand to have their children in certain classes. They are even given names like “helicopter parent,” and are joked about in the staff room. But is there any validity to why parents request certain teachers for their child? A recent study presents evidence that the actual classroom to which a child is assigned will have the single greatest impact on that child’s rate of growth as judged by student gain scores (Rowan, 2002). If it is true that the greatest single factor determining a child’s growth is the teacher, then rural school leaders have a mandate to ensure that each child is placed in a classroom with a teacher that will give him/her the greatest possible opportunity for growth. Because teacher effectiveness varies, it is vitally important that the principal leads the professional growth of the entire organization, so that individual teachers are better able to meet the students’ needs. This challenge is compounded in rural settings where parents have little choice who their child is assigned

to simply because there are few options. Many rural schools are much like one Idaho elementary school in Teton Valley, where there is one class per grade and parents do not have a choice regarding classroom placement. This school structure has huge implications for new rural principals who must ensure that the instruction happening in each classroom is maximized to benefit each student.

As a new principal, this responsibility can be daunting. Because of this, first year principal’s efforts should focus on a straightforward plan that keeps the instructional leader’s role effective, consistent, but simple and straightforward. The purpose of this tool is not to outline every aspect of instructional leadership; instead, this tool focuses on instructional leadership from a management perspective. Because new rural principals’ daily schedules can at times be flooded with urgent, but less important activities, they must manage their calendar and schedule, so that their vitally important, but not always urgent instructional leadership responsibilities are not neglected. To prevent this, the following instructional leadership responsibilities can be prioritized within a principal’s schedule (see Table 3).

Table 4
Instructional Leadership Tasks

Task	Implementation
Walk-Throughs	Schedule short block(s) of time for daily or frequent walk-throughs.
Informal Observations	Like walk-throughs, these are flexible block of time, that can be a part of the principal’s daily/weekly scheduling.
Formal Observations	These can be planned with the teacher at the beginning of the school year. This demonstrates to the teachers a willingness to remove surprise from evaluation, and to begin to establish the principal’s role as instructional leader.
Coaching & Mentoring Teachers	Schedule time during the week to plan and prepare to: (1) evaluate the coaching and mentoring needs within the staff; (2) assess areas for individual development - this involves working with the teacher; (3) work with the teacher on time-frame, method, and objectives; (4) Carry out the coaching and mentoring role – this can involve working with other mentor teachers and coaches.
Planning for Staff Development	Principals can schedule a small block of time each week that is dedicated to planning and researching effective staff development. In addition, this can involve working with Professional Learning Communities.

While scheduling for effective instructional leadership does not guarantee student success, it does ensure that the new principal is functioning within his or her role, and that the appropriate processes are in place. To be effective leaders, principals will need to spend a considerable amount of their own professional development time researching out each element. New principals who focus on these elements as part of their entry plan are more likely to be effective leaders of instruction, because they put in

place the processes and mark the steps necessary for effective instructional leadership in this role.

Working Towards Effective Rural School Leadership – The Continued Journey

Research has shown that before new principals can focus on being the instructional leader, they need to gain confidence, and a sense of competence, regarding their ability to perform their managerial responsibilities (Daresh, 2007). It takes time to

develop the necessary skills that are required to be an effective rural school leader. Effective leadership is a process that *begins* when a principal assumes his or her new role. The implication of this concept, for a new rural principal, is the importance to act and work in the present, while at the same time developing a vision and understanding of effective rural school leadership. To use the analogy from the beginning of this paper: An expedition leader has to focus on surviving the challenges in the here-and-now, while still keeping an eye on the horizon for the teams ultimate destination, and the success of the expedition.

Fortunately, there are some studies that can give us insight into effective rural school leadership. One

such study comes from Texas, where school principals and other stakeholders were asked to rank the most important leadership behaviors required for leadership success in rural settings (Canales, Tejada-Delgado, & Slate, 2008). This particular study can give an aspiring rural leader direction because it views effective school leadership from varying perspectives; the school board, the school leader, and the teachers. For the study, 206 teachers, 35 school board presidents, and 37 school leaders from small rural school districts were surveyed (p. 1). The results shown in Table 4, demonstrate that while there are certain behaviors that are important to each of the three groups, there are also important differences in priorities among the groups.

Table 5
The Top Leadership Behaviors Required for Leadership Success – Different Stakeholder Perspectives (Canales, Tejada-Deigado, & Slate, 2008)

School Boards	School Leaders	Teachers
1. Tolerance of Freedom	1. Tolerance of Freedom	1. Representation
2. Representation	2. Representation	2. Tolerance of Freedom
3. Consideration	3. Consideration	3. Role Assumption

For this study, the researchers used the Leadership Behavior Description Questionnaire Form XII that contains 100 items that are divided into 12 subscales which are: Representation, Demand Reconciliation, Tolerance of Uncertainty, Persuasiveness, Initiation of Structure, Tolerance of Freedom, Role Assumption, Consideration, Production Emphasis, Predictive Accuracy, Integration, and Superior Orientation (Canales, Tejada-Delgado, & Slate, 2008). Researchers found that of the twelve leadership subscales, *tolerance of freedom* and *representation*, were rated by all three groups as most important for rural leadership success (p. 7). Tolerance of freedom in the study was defined as “the leaders allowing the followers scope for initiative, decision, and action” (p. 6). These data suggest allowing followers a large degree of freedom in their role, are aspects of leadership that all three groups value (p. 6). The second behavior, *representation*, was also ranked in the top three by all three groups. *Representation* was defined as, “the leader’s ability to speak and act as the representative of the group” (p. 6). Interestingly, teachers ranked the importance of this role higher than did school boards and school leaders. This finding indicates it is not only important to all stakeholders that the principal has the capacity to speak and act on behalf of the group, but that teachers in particular look to principals as their spokesperson. Also, this finding further magnifies the responsibility of principal’s representation role, because schools are seen as the heart of the rural community. School Leaders and

school boards both rated *consideration* as a top leadership behavior, which is defined as the leader’s efforts to promote camaraderie and to develop relationships with subordinates that are based on trust, warmth, and respect (Gable & Kavich, 1981). While this criterion was not ranked in the teachers’ top three, nevertheless it was highly rated, suggesting that teachers perceive that promoting collaboration, being empathic, promoting team work, and maintaining cordial relations are important behaviors for leaders (Canales, Tejada-Delgado, & Slate, 2008).

The final leadership behavior rated highly by teachers was *role assumption*, defined as “leaders actively exercising the leadership role rather than surrendering leadership to others” (p. 6). This finding points again to teachers’ perceptions of the importance of school leaders assuming responsibility for their role, because teachers specifically look to the principal as the leader within the organization and within the community.

A second research study gives additional direction regarding the skills necessary for effective rural leadership (Winn et al., 2009). This two-part study explored Texas schools with recognized and exemplary student achievement ratings. It used principal self-assessment of areas of competence. The principal’s self-assessments utilized the following 18 skill domains outlined by the National Policy Board of Educational Administration (NPBEA) as important school leadership skills: Leadership, information collection, problem analysis, judgment, organizational oversight, implementation, delegation,

instructional management, curriculum design, student guidance & development, staff development, measure & evaluation, resource allocation, motivating others, sensitivity, oral & nonverbal expression, written expression, and legal & regulatory applications (p. 38).

Table 5 shows the highest rated principal skills, in order, along with the NPBEA leadership skill description. These findings can give new rural principals insight into what effective administrators view as important leadership skills.

Table 6
Recognized and Exemplary Rural School Principals (Winn et al., 2009, pp. 37-38)

Principal's Self Rankings	Skill Descriptions
Leadership	Providing purpose and direction, formulating goals with staff and setting priorities based on community and district priorities and student and staff needs.
Judgment	Giving priority to significant issues then reaching logical conclusions and making quality decisions.
Sensitivity	Perceiving and responding to the needs and concerns of others.
Oral and Nonverbal Expression	Making oral presentations that are clear and easy to understand
Instructional Management	Ensuring appropriate instructional methods are used to create positive learning experiences.
Problem analysis	Identifying problems, identifying possible causes, seeking additional needed information, framing possible solutions.

In the second part of this study (Winn et al., 2009) used state assessors from the Texas Department of Education to review and rate these same principals for areas of competency (see Table 6). The state reviewers' assessments utilized the same National Policy NPBEA leadership skill domains to identify competencies that effective administrators demonstrate. In order to contrast the principal's self-assessments with the state assessment, the second set of findings omit the descriptions of the skills that matched the principal's self-assessment.

Table 7
Recognized and Exemplary Rural School Principals (Winn et al., 2009, pp. 37-38)

State Assessor's Rankings	Skill Descriptions
Leadership	<i>Matched principal's self-assessment</i>
Student Guidance & Development	Enlisting the support and cooperation of diverse professionals, citizens, community agencies, parents and students to promote the growth and development of all students.
Information Collection	Classifying and organization information for use in decision making and mentoring.
Organizational Oversight	Planning and scheduling own and other's work so that resources are used appropriately and monitoring priorities so that goals and deadlines are met.
Sensitivity	<i>Matched principal's self-assessment</i>
Staff Development	Supervising individuals and groups and providing feedback on performance and initiating self-development.
Judgment	<i>Matched principal's self-assessment</i>

The two sets of findings from this study, when compared, outline the importance of leadership, sensitivity, and judgment. When assessed by the state assessors, the importance of student guidance and development, information collection, organizational oversight, and staff development was also emphasized.

Common Themes

These two separate studies (Canales et al., 2008; Winn, et al., 2009) display common themes upon

which new rural principals can focus as they work to become effective leaders.

1. Be the Leader – Teachers, district administration, parents, and the school community look to the principal to be the representative for the school and to lead the organization.
2. Give clear direction and freedom – Effective rural principals provide purpose and direction, formulate goals and priorities with staff, and then allow teachers freedom.
3. Leadership is about people – Leaders have a responsibility to develop relationships within the

school community that are based on trust, empathy, and respect.

4. Organization enables student success – Organizational Management is an important aspect of rural leadership and is closely linked to student achievement.

Conclusion

This entry plan has outlined a few of the challenges and provided a set of tools that beginning principals can use in their journey from educator to educational leader. It has also identified the skills that

various educational stakeholders deem necessary for rural school leaders. While not conclusive, this entry plan adds to the literature by viewing new rural principalship through the double-lens of: (a) the obstacles new principals face, and (b) the inherent challenges of rural schools. Other items that may be included in a new rural principal's entry plan include, dealing with problem teachers in a small community, distributive leadership in small schools and interpersonal relations/conflict management in a small community. These topics along with the general theme of new rural leadership, also serve as topics for further research and study.

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