

# The Practical Leader

*Improving the Schools of Today*

*Inventing the Schools of Tomorrow*

## RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

### Tips and Strategies for New Principals

#### 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. (Birks & Richardson, 2008; Carozza, 2012; Lashway, 2003; Szachowicz & Wolder, 2014; Williamson & Blackburn, 2009)

#### Challenges for New Principals

When one becomes a principal for the first time there is often a sense of “culture shock” at the many responsibilities associated with the position. “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” (Lashway, 2003). Principals hold some of the most complex jobs in America. They are expected to organize and maintain a safe school, manage the budget, handle student discipline, supervise and evaluate personnel and at the same time improve instruction and assure a high quality academic experience for students. And for most principals they perform the job without an assistant, without a lot of direction, and usually without a colleague or mentor with whom to talk.

The unrelenting pace, the broad range of issues and the variety of constituents can lead to doubts about personal adequacy. New school leaders often worry that an issue left unattended will turn into something unmanageable or tragic. In the words of one new assistant principal, “You can't turn your back on something, 'cause that might be the thing.”

A principal's first year is often characterized by task overload and the need to quickly learn about their school, its unique culture and history and the teachers and families who populate the school community. First year principals must quickly learn about “how things are done around here” and quickly assimilate themselves in the community.

Even more challenging for many new school leaders is dealing with teachers as a supervisor rather than a peer. This is a particular challenge when the principal is promoted from within a school. But operating from a school-wide perspective, rather than a classroom perspective, may shock some principals. Former colleagues may shun them and they learn they are no longer part of the group but rather someone to be mistrusted and considered an outsider. This leads to a strong sense of isolation because few districts have formal mentoring or support programs for new school leaders.

Although induction and mentoring programs help 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.

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## **Ten Skills for Effective School Leaders**

Since 1906, the National Association of Secondary School Principals has helped principals cope with the demands of leadership in ever changing school environments. In *Breaking Ranks: 10 Skills for Effective School Leaders (2014)*, 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**

- Judgment – 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, and 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 (ASCD, 2005; NAESP, 2007; NASSP, 2008). Many of the lists are included in the “Online Resources” section of this brief. A quick perusal of these lists shows that there are several common categories of advice that helps new principals focus on for personal and professional development. These include:

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**An Entry Plan.** Teachers and principals know that the first day of school is important in setting the stage for the year. Similarly, new principals need a plan for how they will enter their new school. There is never a second chance for entry and it's important to be clear about the vision for your school, the relationships within your school community that you want to nurture, the messages you want to communicate, and the priorities you'll set for both you and your school. Specifically, a good entry plan includes:

- A plan for semi-structured conversations with teachers, staff and parents to learn about the school's strengths and opportunities for growth
- Time to meet families and share vision for your school
- A review of student achievement data, school improvement plans, policies and other budgets
- Meetings with district leaders to learn about district priorities and initiatives
- A design to share your vision and entry plan with teachers, staff, students and families in your school community and how it links to overall school improvement.

**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.

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**Community and Family Relations.** Good principals understand that they have a prime responsibility to communicate with and sustain good relationships with families, but they also know that families 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.

**Balance Personal and Professional Responsibilities.** Good principals model good behavior and that includes finding an appropriate balance between personal and professional responsibilities ADD. 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.
- Create a support system for themselves. They assure that they have a mentor, or close friend, with whom they can share their feelings, seek advice and counsel, and trust to maintain confidentiality.
- They recognize that they don't have an answer for everything and are confident enough to seek advice when needed.
- Build networks for their continued learning. Those networks may be virtual such as a Personal Learning Network, or face-to-face.
- Read widely and stay current on trends shaping education in their own community, state and nation.

## **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**

There are lots of articles offering suggestions for new principals. Here are ten we found to be most helpful.

**Veteran Principals Offer Advice to New Colleagues** – Education World (2014)

[http://www.educationworld.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin233.shtml](http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin233.shtml)

**Twenty Valuable Tips for New Principals** - J. Borelli NAESP (2007)

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

**Open Letter to Principals: Five Leadership Strategies for the New Year**

E. Sheninger, *Edutopia* (2011)

<http://www.edutopia.org/blog/principals-leadership-eric-sheninger>

**Tips for First Year Principals** – NASSP (2008), C. Birks and J. Richardson

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

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**Tips for New Principals** - *Education Update*, ASCD (2005)

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

**15 Tips for New Principals** - B. Carozza *Connected Principals* (2012)

<http://connectedprincipals.com/archives/6047>

**Five Things New Principals Need to Succeed**

S. Szachowicz & S. Wolder *ASCD Express* (2014)

<http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol9/923-szachowicz.aspx>

**Take Care of Your People, and They Will Take Care of You**

E. Castle *ASCD Express* (2014)

<http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol9/923-castle.aspx>

**The Beginning Principal's Tool: An Entry Plan**

J. Walker *NASSP Middle Level E-Newsletter* (2009)

<http://www.nassp.org/Content.aspx?topic=59645>

**Communication Tips for the New Principal**

D. Luther *NSPRA* (2009)

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

## Print Resources

*The New Principals' Fieldbook* by Pam Roberts and Harvey Alby (2004). Alexandria, VA: ASCD

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/103019.aspx>

This guide by two experienced educators offers practical advice for the new principal.

*The Principalship from A to Z* by Ron Williamson and Barbara Blackburn (2009). New York: Routledge Education.

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9781596671058>

This book provides practical tools and strategies that new principals can immediately become a more effective principal. There are 26 chapters, one for each letter of the alphabet.

*10 Skills for Successful School Leaders* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). (2014) Reston, VA: NASSP.

<http://www.nassp.org/school-improvement/breaking-ranks-publications/breaking-ranks-10-skills-for-success>

This guide provides details about the ten most critical skills for success as a school leader.

This *Research into Practice* brief was prepared by Practical Leadership, LLC and authored by Ronald Williamson, Professor of Educational Leadership at Eastern Michigan University and Howard Johnston, Professor Secondary Education at the University of South Florida. This brief is prepared for use by principals and school staff in Oregon GEAR UP schools.

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