

Inspiration

for the next generation of leaders

When principals share the parts of their work that touch their hearts, they can inspire those they lead to become leaders.

Principals, if you were to poll teachers on your staff to measure their inclination to pursue an administrative career, what would be the likely results? District leaders, what would be the teacher reactions, system-wide?

My own informal investigations with teacher leaders from all levels often yield unfortunate responses like, “I’d have to be nuts,” or “They couldn’t pay me enough.” Although the carrot of higher pay may theoretically dangle, even the most minimally math-savvy can easily divide the new “higher” salary by the longer work year and much longer work day/week (exponentially augmenting the divisor by the frequency and magnitude of administrative headaches), and quickly determine that only those in desperate financial straits would make the decision simply for the money.

What can we do to attract the next generation of leaders, and then support those who do step up, as they prepare for the significant challenges they will face?

Inspiration is everywhere. Principals who have engineered the turnaround of

low-performing schools can be found in districts in every part of California. Principals who have moved higher-performing schools from complacency to urgency — a feat arguably as difficult as a turnaround in many respects — are out there as well. Unfortunately, they are often virtually invisible, their stories untold, even within their own districts.

Telling the stories of success

Storytelling is key to attracting the right people to leadership positions, but is a vastly under used strategy. Most of us are so intent on our ongoing improvement efforts we rarely take time to celebrate by telling the positive, detailed stories of success.

At the site level, effective principals constantly say to their teachers — as individuals, in teams and as a whole staff when appropriate — “Look what you’ve done for this student/these students! Look at this improvement!” This research-based leader-

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ship behavior has been termed “optimizer” by Robert Marzano et al in “School Leadership That Works,” based on the meta-analysis of leadership research by Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning.

Optimizers can, as each new initiative comes down the pike, counter and disarm the discouraged cries of overwhelm that begin to bubble up among the teachers with: “But this staff can do this! Look what we’ve done before! Remember how you ...” Collective efficacy grows as teachers hear and discuss these reminders of success.

We have completed the first year of our own Aspiring Administrators’ Academy, a “survey course” of the principalship, open to teacher leaders and assistant principals from the 23 districts in our county. In the course of the activities in each session, as various participants referred to their own principals’ statements and actions, observed on a daily basis, it became clear that those with the most positive view of the principalship were those who worked for principals who were obviously optimizers.

The impact that principals have on the world-view of their teachers — through the smallest actions and passing remarks — is incalculable. As principals, are we inspiring those we lead to become leaders?

Similarly, at the district level, do leaders regularly single out specific principals and recognize their successes in front of the group? It requires the same courage to single out individual principals in the principals’ group as it does to single out individual teachers in front of the staff. This behavior is termed “affirmer,” and McREL’s leadership research specifically cites the component of individual recognition.

This represents a distinct cultural shift in many schools and districts. Although the seeming danger is the perceived creation of “favorites,” the effect of recognition with storytelling is to repeatedly and indelibly plant the message, “This can be done!” In the bestselling book “Influencer” (Patterson et al, 2008), the authors cite the introduction of real-life examples as one of the premier methods of influence.

Clearly, if we want teachers to aspire to be leaders, we must provide a reason for them to aspire, and if we want leaders to learn from

each other as professional learning communities of leaders, there must be opportunities to learn from each other’s successes by publicly recognizing them. (It is important to note that lauding whatever annual improvements the API/AYP results may yield is insufficient. The research defines “affirming” as frequent recognition of successes, and this responsibility — perhaps surprisingly,



given the label — also includes objectively recognizing and analyzing failures!)

Some of the most important rewards of the principalship are intangible. In many ways, the principalship can be the single most rewarding job in education. Although some variables will always remain outside his or her control, the principal’s sphere of direct influence is tremendous.

A sense of belonging

In “The People Who Cannot Say Goodbye,” poet Merrit Malloy wrote, “This is how we make a family from strangers/This is how we light candles.” The sense of belonging that the principal is able to create — through shared leadership; through personal modeling; through holding staff accountable for creating an emotionally safe place for students, parents and each other — is an intangible that defies measurement, even with the most thoughtful survey instruments.

Principals: Share with your most promising teacher leaders the parts of your work that touch your heart. Make them explicit, label them, talk about them — most impor-

tantly, ask those you hope to encourage to consider what will reward them most as they look back over their careers. The rewards cannot all be quantified in numbers.

Sharing the realistic demands

As we work hard to attract new leaders, it is incumbent upon us to share both the rewards and the realistic demands of leader-

ship with those who aspire. Technical preparation is essential, but mental preparation should not be overlooked. Administration is highly demanding, in dimensions that differ from teaching.

One winter break, I ran into a colleague, an experienced principal, who had taken over a low-performing school in September. I asked whether she felt her leadership efforts were starting to make a dent. She replied wearily, “I haven’t even made a door ding.”

The Santa Cruz New Teacher Project once created a graphic illustration of a typical teacher’s first year — a line graph showing a month-by-month dip into an emotional abyss, slowly rising after winter break for those with the internal resources and external supports to persevere.

Similarly, the first principalship, especially if it is at a low-performing school, requires considerable stamina and other emotional resources, particularly in the beginning. Colleagues share that it seems to take a minimum of about two years for the flywheel to begin to turn at such a school — to begin reversing a negative culture,

improving student behavior and discipline, and showing gains in student achievement — through systematic, relentless leadership of systemic changes.

To the greatest extent possible, district leaders would do well to heed the same advice SCNTP gives to principals — not to place the least experienced in the most difficult assignments. Realistically, however, we need to prepare our aspiring adminis-

trators, mentally at least, for this very real possibility, given the projected shortages of qualified leaders in the near future.

education, use of data, and more. We invited guest speakers — administrators holding positions responsible for these areas in a district or our county office — to share presentations framed around, “Land Mines and Pitfalls First-Year Principals Need to Know.” In the last segment of each session, participants debriefed the presentation, using the filter of the leadership responsibilities. We would never have thought of structuring the

During the intersessions, participants made appointments with their own district administrators responsible for the area that had just been presented, in order to learn the nuances of the topic in their local districts’ contexts. The first segment of the next session would be spent in small groups sharing their reflective journals, which were designed to help them mentally process these interviews, using the frame of the leadership responsibilities.

Since our final session, several participants have called or e-mailed to say that they have been selected for administrative positions, and to express appreciation for our program. We are currently exploring ways to expand our services in the area of administrator support in light of our districts’ needs.

A number of districts in our county operate their own programs for aspiring administrators, and some include first-year principals in their groups. Others have specific programs for their APs. A few districts hire principal coaches for either new or experienced principals, especially those assigned to Program Improvement schools. Coaches are an ideal support for new principals, because support can be customized for the individual’s and school’s needs, and the principal does not have to leave campus in order to attend group sessions. All of these possibilities present opportunities for both districts and county offices of education to help ensure success of new leaders.

Developing leaders from within

As the challenge of filling leadership positions grows across California, developing leaders from within must become a more robust component of individual district efforts. Principals have a significant role to play in identifying and encouraging their most promising teacher leaders to consider administration. Proactively identifying those with promise and providing information and reflection opportunities to mentally prepare candidates for the challenges ahead are all important facets of these efforts, aside from the technical preparation they will eventually receive in credentialing programs. More comprehensive and intentional support of new administrators will

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Whenever I have shared the graphic of the First Year of Teaching with new teachers, its effect is a great sigh of relief — I’m not alone! Everybody feels this! Sharing this same potential reality, with or without a graphic, can similarly assist aspiring and new administrators.

A snapshot of site administration

Our Aspiring Administrators’ Academy was designed to provide an overview of the principal’s role, especially its operational aspects. Many participants in our first cohort of 2007-08 were already enrolled in Tier 1 programs; others were considering. Our intent was to provide a nuts-and-bolts “true snapshot” of site administration, which can be missed during the course of completing an extensive series of Tier 1 classes.

At the first session, we distributed “School Leadership That Works,” and introduced McREL’s 21 Leadership Responsibilities. We also presented the 11 research-based factors having the highest impact on student achievement, described in Marzano’s “What Works in Schools.” Thereafter, each month’s evening session focused on a different operational topic — categorical programs, school-wide discipline, special

program this way had we not attended the ACSA-sponsored McREL Balanced Leadership training. On one of those eight days I was struck by the realization that for years, I had carried an artificial dichotomy in my head about the principalship. To me, when I was putting out fires and dealing with operational issues, I was simply acting as a site manager, not an educational leader. In my mind, educational leadership was a role I exercised only when I was addressing aspects of curriculum, instruction and assessment.

Learning about the research-based leadership responsibilities completely changed my thinking! I realized that although “the right work” for principals — the 11 research-based factors described in “What Works in Schools” — is typically not the stuff of daily firefighting, every statement and action of the principal is an opportunity to demonstrate leadership. Each of these can have a positive or negative impact on those areas that are “the right work.”

At the end of each session of our Academy, as we listened in on table conversations, we knew we had made the right decision in our program design. Participants reflected thoughtfully on the guest speaker’s remarks in the context of the 21 responsibilities. With each new session, which began with a debrief of their intersession work, our belief was reinforced.

also be essential to ensure that no students are left behind, regardless of the shape of future legislation.

As we experience our most rewarding moments of leadership, in the words of Albert Schweitzer, "Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have ignited the flame within us." Foundational to all our efforts, we should never overlook the chance to inspire those who may aspire! ■

References and resources

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the Insight instruments, on its Web site, www.gallup.com.

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Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, www.mcrel.org, offers many

resources, including training in the 21 Leadership Responsibilities described in *School Leadership That Works* by Robert Marzano, et al, in the eight-day institute, Balanced Leadership™.

Patterson, K.; Grenny, J.; Maxfield, D.; McMillan, R. and Switzer, A. (2008). *Influencer*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Riverside County Office of Education is now a certified training agency for McREL's Balanced Leadership™. Contact Diana Blackledge, assistant superintendent, Educational Leadership Services Division, at (951) 826-6101.

The Santa Cruz New Teacher Project, launched in 1988, is administered by the New Teacher Center at UC Santa Cruz. Many resources to support new teachers are offered at www.newteachercenter.org/ti_scsvntp.php.

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