
A Framework For Understanding

The Beginning Principals

Fewer than 25 years ago, concerns of beginning principals were not really considered important by educational researchers. The truth of that statement is readily apparent if you take time to glance at the literature over the past 75 years. Many books and articles focus on the role of the principal, of course. We know a lot about the duties of principals, the kinds of conceptual and practical skills that must be demonstrated, and we even have excellent descriptions of what the life of a typical principal is like. Harry Wolcott's (1973) study, *The Man in the Principal's Office: An Ethnography*, remains what many describe as the best analysis of what building administrators (men and women) do on a daily basis.

Because of a recognition of the critical need for new people to move into principalships across the United States, however, there has been an equivalent understanding that research on the world of novice administrators would not only be interesting but important as a way to inform the development of policies and practice. This chapter looks at research on beginning principals and suggests a method by which you can compare the kinds of issues that you are facing with what others faced when they first came on board.

CASE STUDY: I'M NOT A POLITICIAN

Karen Chen had been waiting for the past two years to take on her first principalship. Despite many obstacles, she persisted in her efforts to complete a program of studies leading to certification through a local university. She interviewed with several local school districts before she was given her first big chance to become the

leader of a small but well-regarded elementary school in a community near home. Like many other school administrators, she found that she was going to be a new principal just a few weeks before the next school year was to start. Still, she was on cloud nine as August wore on and she got ready for the arrival of her teachers, classified staff, and most important, her students.

Karen was especially looking forward to work with her teachers on a daily basis. For years, as a classroom teacher, she was concerned that principals seemed to be getting further away from their instructional duties. Karen saw her first job as an opening for her to get into a school and truly become an instructional leader. She intended to devote her time to working with students, teachers, staff, and parents in her school. Not only was this a personal goal, but it seemed that it was an idea that was strongly supported by her school district and superintendent. When she stated that her goal was to “take first things first” and improve student learning in her school by working with the people in her school, the interviewing team and superintendent all said that she had exactly the attitude that they wanted to see in a new principal.

Things appeared to be going very well for Karen in her first few weeks as a principal. However, about a month into the school year she received a call from Reverend Dan Adams who explained that he was the president of a local community group that had been formed to ensure that schools would be sensitive and safeguard traditional values. It was a pleasant conversation, and Karen explained to Reverend Adams that she appreciated his call, but for the moment she could not become actively involved with organizations that did not work directly with her students, parents, and teachers. After all, she was the principal of a small school in which very few parents were directly involved in Reverend Adams’s group. Karen thought to herself that the group headed by Reverend Adams had very little connection with her world and that her time was better spent keeping to her original goals.

As the year progressed, however, Karen received a number of subtle signs from the central office and a few parents in her school to suggest that Reverend Adams’s group was not pleased at being turned away from her school. Karen began to understand that what seemed to be a task unconnected to her world as a building instructional leader was having more and more of a negative effect on her daily life as a school administrator.

CASE STUDY: TO GO OR NOT TO GO

Dan Carter was very happy to become an elementary school principal in the Hightower Independent School District. For the past two years, while he completed university courses leading to administrative certification, he had looked forward to landing a job as a principal someday. The night in June when the Board of Education approved his appointment was a great time for Dan and his family. Everyone came to that board meeting, and afterward there was a nice reception for Dan and three other new elementary school principals in the district. Dan noted that all the other principals in the district attended that board meeting, so he penciled in the first and third Tuesday evening of every month as an evening when he would be away from home, sitting in on school board meetings.

In July, Dan went to both board meetings. He wasn’t terribly surprised when he saw that he was the only principal in attendance. After all, his more experienced

colleagues were probably taking some vacation time. Veterans deserved to miss the ceremonies every once in a while, and as a rookie, had the right to be “gung ho” the first few months on the job.

When August came around and all the principals in the district were due back for the next school year, Dan again went to both school board meetings. Again, he noted that he was the only building principal in attendance. He expected some recognition from the superintendent, and he hoped that he would earn some “brownie points” for showing up at board meetings. However, there was not even a hint that the superintendent saw him in the middle of the board room. Dan had now spent about 14 hours over the past two months attending school board meetings, none of which had even the slightest relevance to his role as a school principal in the district.

Enough was enough. In September, Dan did not attend the first Tuesday board meeting. He decided that staying at home with his family was worth more than the recognition he was likely to get from the central office administrators for being a good company man by attending yet another board meeting. However, when the district principals had their monthly meeting with the assistant superintendent for administrative services on the Wednesday following the first board meeting of the month, Dan was the focus of considerable discussion by some of his colleagues. “Hey, rookie. You didn’t make it to the board meeting last night,” noted Adam Smith, one of the more experienced principals in the district. “The superintendent scanned the room and noticed the principals who weren’t there. You won’t hear anything directly, but the superintendent notices who is ‘naughty or nice.’”

Dan felt bad, but he knew that this was the first board meeting of the new school year, so he assumed that he would now be expected to attend board meetings every two weeks. In the third week of September, however, he again appeared at the school board meeting but discovered that he was the only building administrator present. The superintendent again stared blankly at him.

“What the heck am I supposed to do today with the board meetings?” Dan asked Mary Martinez, an elementary school principal who had worked in the district for 10 years. “I show up and I’m the only principal there, so the boss seems to get mad. I don’t show up, and I hear the boss also gets mad. Am I being set up for a big fall here, or what?”

Mary smiled at Dan’s frustration. “I guess it is hard to walk into a place that’s had a history. You’ve got to be able to read the signs, Dan. When the superintendent wants us to show up at board meetings, such as when the board is scheduled to do anything with the curriculum, select new programs, or review test results, you’d better be there. Otherwise, the boss wants to be the show himself. Read your advance board agenda very carefully on the Friday before the next board meeting.”

The revelation about “subtle signs” hit Dan like a ton of bricks. From that point on, he figured out the system and didn’t miss an important meeting.

CASE STUDY: FIGURING OUT THE PAPERS

Maricela Chavez was in her first two weeks of her first principalship of an elementary school in the Northern City Public Schools. She had eight years in the classroom as a teacher and then four years as a central office coordinator for special education

programs in the southwest region of the city. While she was coordinator, she worked on her master's degree in school administration and received her certificate as a principal. She was fortunate to get a call to serve as the principal of the John M. Smythe Elementary School on the south side soon after she applied last spring.

When the superintendent offered her the job, he told Maricela that although she was his selection to be the new principal at John M. Smythe, she still had to be approved by the district school board at its monthly meeting in June. As expected, school board approval was merely a formality. She was introduced to the public as the new principal of the small but well-respected school. The next day, she proudly went to the central office to get her keys, policy manual, and all other assorted paraphernalia, mail, and notes left by the previous principal. She skimmed over the mound of paper in front of her and slowly began to get a bit uneasy about her new job. From her previous experience as an assistant principal, she knew that a big part of the principal's job would involve keeping detailed records and filling out forms, but she was already overwhelmed by the procedures required for working on many of the district forms, completing the state department of education report sheets, and responding to what seemed to be a never-ending stack of memos, correspondence, and other paperwork that filled her incoming mail basket. She had a lot of similar work to do as a teacher, special education coordinator, and assistant principal. But all of her past experiences seemed to be minimal compared to what she now saw from the "hot seat." She knew she was now in the major leagues!

Points to Ponder

In some ways, it might be amazing that experienced educators would find daunting the amount of paperwork now piling up on their desks, or that education is not "apolitical." Or even that there are a lot of small idiosyncratic practices or rituals that have never been seen in the pages of textbooks used in graduate school classes. Teachers do many of the tasks and experience the same challenges each day as professional educators. But teachers or even assistant principals do not carry around the "keys to every aspect of a school's operations." There is no one "down the hall" to pass tons of problems needing instant resolutions to be found. If you are the principal, it all lands on your shoulders. One of the suggestions made by experienced administrators is that all incoming principals should have a retreat of some sort, open only to rookies, and an assigned reading named "Surviving the culture shock of the first 100 days on the job." Would this be a help to you if you are just starting up? And what do you do if you are in one of the many school districts in the country that have only one or two buildings and you are the only principal hired within the last ten or fifteen years?

The three brief scenarios that led off this chapter were selected to illustrate three classic situations representing the kinds of issues faced by many beginning principals. Maricela Chavez is a beginning principal faced with the enormous demands of her new job: Papers fill her desk, her superintendent wants answers to every question "right now," and the district policy manual seems to be staring at Maricela in a

way that suggests she will be viewed as incompetent if she strays from any required practice or policy. It makes little difference that she has had prior experience as an assistant principal. Things are very different in a place that leaves her “on her own.”

Research related to the needs and concerns of beginning principals has shown that Maricela’s feelings are not uncommon. They are often referred to as the “technical” or “managerial” side of the principalship. They involve the operational details that provide clear direction and guarantee (to some degree) order in a school. Some might even say that these skills are needed to “keep the trains running on time.” Included may be such tasks as making certain that the policies of the district are followed, that state rules and regulations are observed and addressed, and that the terms of the district’s negotiated agreements with classroom teachers and noncertificated staff are observed and followed.

The technical or managerial side of the principalship also involves overseeing and maintaining accounts and the school budget, maintaining effective relations with parents and others in the community, developing a weekly schedule of important events, activities, and meetings, delegating responsibilities to others, ensuring that all terms of the district’s master contract or negotiated agreement with the teachers’ association are fulfilled, resolving disputes and perhaps above all, keeping student discipline and maintaining a safe and orderly environment. These technical and managerial issues are often referred to as the “Three B’s (“Beans, Busses, and Budgets”) of school administration. Incidentally, the “fourth B” in some school districts (particularly in Indiana and Kentucky) might be “basketball!”

It would be incorrect to leave the discussion of important technical demands of the job without noting that, for many beginning principals, a major stumbling block is not solely the inability to do certain managerial tasks associated with their jobs. In fact, they may be quite skilled at doing some of the things required in their job. Rather, many beginners have significant problems because they lack strong communication skills: They know what to do, but they cannot communicate to others *why* they must do what they do. That lack often is indicative of a lack of skill in both written and oral communication skills. The critical issue here is that even the best administrative “technician” with the best ideas and motives for managing the school can fall flat if others do not understand what is taking place.

What are some of the technical and managerial aspects of your job as a principal that concern you (or that concerned you) during the opening chapters of your current career? (For example, have you discovered that you are not terribly confident with budgeting or the use of technology as part of your daily job requirements?)

The second case study, in which Dan Carter had a hard time understanding when he should or should not attend school board meetings, is also representative

of problems often reported by novice school principals. In short, the research refers to them as “problems with socialization.” These types of concerns are often related to two different points: socialization to the norms and culture within a particular school district (as Dan’s case describes), and socialization to the profession of educational administration in general.

Dan Carter was experiencing frustration in his new job because he could not figure out how to read subtle signs in his new environment. It made sense to him to attend school board meetings, but he could not understand why he was discouraged from being present at some meetings, whereas at other meetings he seemed to be in trouble when he was absent. He could see no rational pattern. What Dan did not appreciate was some of the history that was known to the senior principals in the district.

Not knowing about the culture, traditions, and history of schools and school districts often hinders new principals in their ability to do their jobs. This gets played out in a variety of ways. Informal “dress codes,” participation in administration social events (e.g., golf outings, holiday parties), or even how to address the superintendent’s secretary (e.g., never use a first name, as opposed to always use a first name) are all examples of the little things that a newcomer needs to understand.

List other examples of some of the local traditions, activities, or past practices that you have considered as part of the culture of your new setting. (For example, perhaps you have already discovered that Fridays in your school district are traditionally “dress down” days for staff, or that teachers do not “talk business” at the table during lunch.)

The second type of socialization problem often faced by new principals is found in learning about the culture of the principalship as a career. Here, we are talking about trying to understand the big picture of how principals are supposed to act, what they are supposed to know, and at times, even what they are supposed to do when compared with their colleagues across the United States, or even across a single state. Perhaps the best way to summarize this area is, “So what does a principal look like?”

Many new principals become so focused on surviving their first years on the job that they may ignore the importance of learning what is going on in the professional world outside their own vision. They are often unaware of the critical issues that colleagues in their own state and across the nation are facing. In recent years, it has been amazing to see the number of principals who were blindsided by issues that were faced by principals in other parts of the country. Examples of this might be the ways in which community pressure groups have focused on such seemingly harmless issues as the Common Core Learning objectives or efforts to exclude children from schools if they were suspected of having transferable diseases. Such issues

have often become the center of considerable controversy. It is understandable that local principals often feel as if they must tend to local issues first. However, at the same time, national trends are under way that will eventually affect the local scene. The fact that beginning principals are not being socialized to the larger profession often makes continuing communication with the “outside world” a serious problem.

In the space below, jot down a few additional issues that you have discovered are faced by other principals across the United States and that you now face in your district during your first few years on the job. (For example, has your school or district had to address the issue of allowing prayers in school? What about school safety issues? How are other principals across the nation addressing the challenges associated with the mandates found in the No Child Left Behind legislation? How do people work with large numbers of students now entering the country from traditional Third World countries?)

The advent of widespread use of social media (i.e., LinkedIn and Twitter among others) and focused chat rooms and blogs have added many new opportunities for principals to engage in conversations with colleagues across the United States and around the world. Do you make use of these resources to develop contacts with other principals on a regular basis?

The first case we considered was that of Karen Chen, the new principal who was surprised to discover that her work as an elementary school principal would also need to include some time to link with important groups in the community, despite her personal vision. She could not maintain her personalized image of the principal being involved only with the business taking place within the walls of her school building. Although it may not have been part of her vision of the principalship, she was learning that certain political responsibilities are also a part of her “turf.”

Researchers have found this viewpoint in many beginning principals. Often, it is linked to becoming effectively socialized to a new role or having an awareness of

self. Sometimes new principals are faced with critical decisions that might conflict with their own personal values or ethics. For example, a beginning principal may face the responsibility of evaluating a teacher and know that the evaluation process may end in the nonrenewal or termination of that teacher's position. Is it really in accordance with one's values and ability to carry out a process that may deprive a colleague of his or her career as a teacher?

In a related situation, a new principal may observe teachers who are not performing effectively, but upon reviewing personnel files find nothing but "excellent" or "superior" ratings provided by the previous principal. Are the perceptions of the new principal incorrect? Have these teachers suddenly become ineffective during the last few months? Or was the previous principal too lenient or unable (or unwilling) to evaluate teachers effectively. Couple this issue with the need for a newcomer to avoid alienating experienced teachers too quickly, and another important conflict for a novice administrator quickly appears.

All these issues surround the image of what it means to be a principal. In this book, we will later consider some other ways in which a beginning principal must appreciate his or her role as a boss. It is clear, on the basis of many studies of principals, that people often suffer a kind of shock when their personal value system is suddenly threatened by the kinds of things that they are called upon to do. Can you think of any examples of how your own personal awareness of what you might do as a principal has been different from what you expected of that role?

BALANCE IS THE KEY

In the preceding pages, we described some of the problem areas identified by many researchers in the professional lives of beginning principals. A review of these broad areas—technical skills, socialization, and self-awareness or role awareness—often leads a person to try to generalize which area is most important if one is to succeed in the principalship. We must emphasize here that research on beginning principals has shown that all three are important. In some ways, that makes your job even harder. It is not possible to simply take care of business by doing nothing more than addressing technical skills for the first year or two of service, for example. This type of logic is often expressed by novices who state that they want to get established as good managers first, with the assumption that they can take care of other matters (e.g., socialization and self-awareness) at some time in the future.

Research related to the critical skills that should be demonstrated by successful beginning principals has looked at how to address the three areas of concern

we identified earlier. Different groups of educational administrators were asked to identify their perceptions of the relative importance of certain job tasks that were, in turn, classified as belonging to technical skills, socialization skills, or self-awareness skills. When principals with at least five years of experience were asked to rate the importance of certain job tasks for success and survival by beginning colleagues, they ranked the three critical skills in the following ways:

1. Socialization skills (most important)
2. Self-awareness and role awareness skills
3. Technical and managerial skills (least important)

When superintendents who had recently hired at least one new principal for their districts were asked the same question, they ranked the skills as follows:

1. Self-awareness and role awareness skills
2. Socialization skills
3. Technical and managerial skills

Finally, those who were enrolled in university programs leading to certification or licensure ranked the three areas as follows:

1. Technical skills
2. Socialization skills
3. Self-awareness skills

These findings suggest something very important to recognize about the nature of issues faced by beginning principals. First, some important differences in the rankings show up clearly. Those who have little or no experience as school principals rate technical skills as the most critical issue that needs to be addressed to be successful. However, as people became more experienced as administrators, they may downgrade the importance of technical skills and identify socialization and self-awareness (coupled with appreciating the expectations of others) as being more critical to effectiveness, or they develop skills in delegating some technical skills to others. They realize that although the technical side of the job is important, it does not necessarily mean that it must consume the complete attention of the principal all the time.

Second, whatever the differences may be when comparing one group's perceptions with another, no group indicated that any of the three skill areas is unimportant. In other words, experienced administrators may not indicate that managerial and technical skills are as important as the other areas, but they still include as important the performance of the technical aspects of the principalship. Socialization and self-awareness are more important, but no one should assume that daily managerial duties should not be carried out.

The key to effectiveness and survival is to develop a proper balance among the three critical skill areas. The principal must manage the school (i.e., technical and

managerial skills), pay attention to fitting in (i.e., socialization), and demonstrate he or she knows what the job is all about and how it affects the individual (self-awareness and role awareness).

SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Activities that you might carry out to assist you in your professional development in the three critical skill areas include the following:

Technical and Managerial Skills

- Seek an experienced principal in your district to be a job coach who can share some tricks of the trade for more effectively doing some of the technical and managerial parts of your job.
- Consider participating in a leadership assessment activity sponsored by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), your state administrators' association, or your state department of education. This kind of activity will provide insights into your personal strengths and areas needing further development in leadership and management skills. (You may also wish to complete the "Skill Development Inventory" in the Appendix.)
- Make an agreement with one or more experienced principals in your area to visit their schools and shadow them as they engage in the daily management tasks associated with their jobs.
- Consult with principals who served your school before to learn about critical issues. Pick the brains of other key actors (i.e., teachers, students, classified staff, parents, and other community members) to learn their expectations of the principal.
- If you are lucky enough to find an experienced secretary outside your door, or if you find teachers with whom you can develop rapport, ask them for their insights into the kinds of technical and managerial issues that merit special attention in your school.
- Volunteer to take a "guided tour" of your school with some of the people who know a lot about the "behind the scenes" reality of your building. These people might include custodial staff, security officers, and cafeteria staff. These tours can enable you to appreciate some of the many issues and problems that may call for technical expertise.
- Identify short workshops or seminars related to more effective performance of the technical aspects of the job that are sponsored by local, state, or national organizations.

Socialization

- Work with your job coach and ask questions about the traditions, past practices, and culture of your school and school district.

- Read carefully a random selection of past local school board agendas and minutes to determine whether patterns of practice emerge that you need to learn about.
- Go out of your way to attend lunches, breakfasts, and other social events that might enable you to gain greater insights into some of the shared concerns of your colleagues.
- Spend time getting to know the personality and characteristics of the community within your school. Get to know students, staff, and teachers as people, not simply as people who come into “your” school each day. After all, the faster it becomes “our” school, the better.
- Listen and watch what is going on in your school each day.
- Become an active participant in activities and events sponsored by professional associations of school administrators. Read such publications as the *NASSP Bulletin* and *Principal* published by NAESP.
- Work to learn about the “internal and external” realities of your school. Pay attention to and learn about existing (and possible) connections to social services agencies and how to respond to your police department’s demands regarding safety issues. Think of how you will respond to zero tolerance policies that are meant to dictate your decisions and judgment about how to deal with critical discipline issues.

Self-Awareness and Role Awareness Skills

- Identify a personal mentor within either your school district or some other school system to give you feedback about your career development. This person may or may not be the same person selected as a job coach to help you learn more about technical skills.
- Write and then periodically review your statement of personal professional values or educational philosophy.
- Work with a trusted colleague who will agree to observe your work over a period of time and ask you to describe what you believe you were doing on the job. Compare and contrast your perceptions with those of someone looking at you from the outside.
- Consider how you will address the personal stress you will face as you try to balance your time, your job responsibilities, and your commitment to your family and personal life.

BUILDING A PERSONAL PLAN

In the spaces provided on the next few pages, begin the process of developing a personal professional growth plan, or portfolio, by reflecting on the key concepts addressed in this chapter and specifying some important goals that you might have related to each major issue. For each goal or set of goals, you need to identify activities that will assist you in achieving these goals. Always note the ways in which you can assess your progress toward these goals and objectives. This may be a helpful exercise that you can use in developing a personal entry plan to guide you in the earliest stages of your career, or even after you have been in the principalship for several years.

Area 1: Technical and Managerial Skill Development

Personal objectives for the next year:

Some of the things you will do to achieve these objectives:

The ways in which someone will be able to tell whether you have achieved your objectives:

Area 2: Socialization Skill Development

Personal objectives for the year:

Some of the things you will do to achieve these objectives:

The ways in which someone will be able to tell whether you have achieved your objectives:

Area 3: Self-Awareness and Role Awareness Skill Development

Personal objectives for the next year:

Some of the things you will do to achieve these objectives:

The ways in which someone will be able to tell whether you have achieved your objectives:

Points to Ponder

As you responded to each of the items above, what value do you think a personal reflection on the relative importance of each item might be in terms of helping you to develop a more focused response to looking at your new job and the impact that the importance of your daily assigned duties as a new administrator will have on your work.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Lipham, J. M., & Hoeh, J. (1974). *The principalship: Foundations and functions*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
Wolcott, H. (1973). *The man in the principal's office: An ethnography*. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.