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Survival 101

Preparing Prospective Principals

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Principals don't have "typical" days. There is no way to foresee the myriad of unknown, unplanned, and unexpected challenges that present themselves at any given time, not to mention the day-to-day tasks that must be addressed, completed, or resolved.

A principal's job is demanding, and it requires a resourceful, goal-driven, and results-oriented person who can keep all the balls in the air while measuring every action against the best interests of students. Most importantly, the principal must maintain a sense of humor and passion for ensuring the success of all students.

It's not a job for the faint of heart, and it will continue to evolve in its complexity and difficulty in the face of increasing pressures from high-stakes testing, tight budgets, and other pressing problems.

To prepare prospective principals, school boards should fund and help organize pre-service programs that are relevant, timely, and designed to help them meet these demands. Programs should hone management skills and show that the job of being a principal is all-encompassing, ever-changing, and deserving of support, especially at a time when expectations are heightened for safe, high-performing, and multifaceted schools. It is absolutely in the best interests of your students to establish programs that will equip prospective principals with skills they will need from day one.

What follows is a list of professional development opportunities for prospective principals. Some lend themselves to short presentations; others can be presented in longer formats or continued over several meetings. Presenters can be local administrators with expertise in certain areas, experienced principals, consultants, or educators from community colleges and universities.

Emphasis in all respects should be on relevance and "real-world" practicality. Some topics could easily be supplemented with short videos or pamphlets. Prospective principals can receive credit against professional development plans or take seminars designed to assist them in their future roles.

Ethics

Temptations are endless. The district's architect wants to take you to dinner at a pricy steakhouse to thank you for your role in proposing your school's new addition. A community organization wants to pay you a stipend for making a presentation. Rather than depositing \$1,200 in receipts from the football game, you are tempted to take it home and deposit it in the morning since it is late. Your bagel vendor wants to treat you to a round of golf and lunch at an exclusive country club during the school day.

What's right? What's wrong? You can be sure that districts have policies pertaining to these and other issues, but a principal can make an honest mistake without thinking it could be improper.

Even the *perception* of impropriety can be deadly, and prospective principals need to know the rules. Ethics permeate the principalship, and gifts are not the only things to consider.

Holding parent conferences

Meetings with parents can be explosive, especially when placement issues exist or students have been suspended or recommended for expulsion. Learning how to keep these meetings focused and mutually respectful is essential, as is convincing parents that you must work together.

Prospective principals can learn how to organize parent conferences with an outline or script, prepare a student's history in advance with copies of records and reports, and rely on staff members for input on the student's status. Staff members could include the school nurse, police liaison officer, assistant principal or dean, counselor, social worker, or coach, among others. Care must be taken to give parents and students ample opportunities to be heard, even when you know what will be said. Most importantly, parents must not get the impression that the meeting was simply a formality and that their opinions and input were largely irrelevant and/or ignored.

Crisis management and the media

Unfortunately, there will be crises. By definition, a crisis is stress-filled, and factoring in the media kicks it up a notch. Principals must resist the urge to say, "No comment" to difficult questions because the perception will be that they have something to hide, nothing to say, or were not prepared to tell the public what it needs to know.

Principals can use the media to put out their school's message and communicate concern, sympathy, efforts, or steps taken to resolve an issue. Aspiring principals can practice "live" on-air interviews and critique videotaped segments of themselves and others. Rumors are difficult to contain and can lead to much misunderstanding. Pre-service principals can learn how to be proactive during a crisis and preclude further difficulties.

School Law 101

This is an area where a principal cannot learn too much and where intermittent "doses" make it easy to keep up to date without feeling that you've been to law school.

Of course, principals have access to legal advice, either directly or through the superintendent, yet being familiar with key areas is always helpful. Those areas include student discipline, special education issues, labor and discrimination laws, dismissal of certified and non-certified staff, the use (or misuse) of technology, and sexual harassment, among others. Since state and federal legislation, and resulting case law, change annually, prospective principals should have a firm and ongoing familiarity with legal issues.

Managing time and stress

Learning how to manage your time, organize priorities, establish realistic short-term and long-term goals, and maintain balance in one's personal life will help school leaders be more effective and fulfilled. Learn how to not be reactive leaders by learning simple skills of managing time and multi-tasking.

Learning time management principles can help you establish a vision to advance the quality of the education program so that it becomes a focus, not an afterthought.

Stress is a constant in the principalship. New principals must be able to rely on a repertoire of stress reducers. The goal is to manage stress and use it to your advantage before it becomes debilitating or demoralizing.

Virtually anything that diverts one's attention and invigorates can be helpful. Physical fitness, reading, going to the movies or theater, participating in sports or recreational activities, writing, and taking short trips can refresh you and give you fresh perspectives.

Budgeting and finances

Being responsible for the allocation and use of significant public funds are awesome endeavors, especially if you are not familiar with the components of a typical school budget. Look out for protocols of political correctness and landmines in the form of active tax-watch groups that scrutinize and openly criticize how public entities spend funds.

Budgeting is not just about spending money, but about balancing priorities, making long-range projections, finding ways to reduce spending, and discovering appropriate alternative and supplemental sources of money. "Needs vs. wants" is a concept that the school leader needs to understand and model to the staff.

The ability to spend money is not enough. In today's era of accountability, you must articulate *why* money is needed in certain areas and be able to document convincingly what would happen if your recommendation does not occur.

Public speaking and writing

Often overlooked and taken for granted, these two essential skills are highly visible and help to convey a principal's competence, credibility, confidence, and sincerity. Critics, including parents and some teachers, take delight at poking fun at a principal's faux pas in speaking and writing.

Training in public speaking can renew one's confidence, and writing clear, concise, and grammatically correct sentences and paragraphs will always leave a positive impression. Conventions for writing letters, memos, and reports can be reviewed rather painlessly and can help the principal represent himself and his school in a professional manner.

In addition, the nuances of interpersonal communication, organizing faculty meetings, holding school assemblies, and telephone etiquette, among other things, are what others will interpret as the principal's leadership style, accessibility, and responsiveness to the needs of his staff, student body, and community.

Testing and school improvement

Like it or not, No Child Left Behind has had a significant impact on public education, and principals must be intimately familiar with and responsive to local and state assessments of student learning.

Determining what and how well students have learned are the ultimate measures of a school's success. A school's improvement plan must reflect the understanding of both the principal and staff of the strengths and weaknesses. It also must plot out how to make needed adjustments for improving learning in core areas.

School report cards are common and another way to disclose profiles, trends, and demographics for comparison purposes. As more public pressure is placed upon teachers and principals to embrace state testing and to respond to its outcomes, the school leader must be able to review and understand voluminous testing data and use it to make adjustments.

The down and dirty

The evening news is replete with horrific stories of teachers or other school personnel facing criminal charges for improper contact or sexual relations with students. Prospective and practicing principals must know how to regularly present unambiguous information to all staff about sexual harassment and illicit contact.

This topic is not generally addressed in schools of education or local school districts, yet it remains vexing for administrators. Like anything else, principals set the tone for what is acceptable. Students need to know they will be safe and will receive the information about what to do if they have a problem or concern over a staff member.

Potential schools leaders can learn valuable skills on conducting investigations, conferring with the district's legal counsel or other administrators, and working with police and children and family service agencies.

Due process

Principals must understand due process and model it in daily interactions with all members of the school community. This concept of fair treatment permeates the school's life and has ramifications in student and staff discipline, teacher evaluation, collective bargaining agreements between the board and staff, and student activities. Principals and other school officials can get into trouble when they don't observe the due process rights of students and staff.

Principals also must ensure that the staff, particularly the administrative team, abides by due process guidelines. One form of due process is informing students and/or staff about what is prohibited so things are clear in advance. Distributing and discussing the district's computer use and Internet policy, for example, can delineate clearly what is prohibited and the consequences that can be expected for violations.

Experienced administrators attest to the importance of giving individuals an opportunity to be heard and affording them due process rights, especially when disciplining students or staff.

Hot topics

Hot topics change, but some linger in varying degrees. Prospective leaders can learn more about hot topics such as bullying, hazing, gangs, substance abuse, harassment and discrimination, school safety, homeless students, or those who are in the country illegally. What are other schools doing to address these issues? Ignoring them can exacerbate them.

Some prospective principals already are somewhat predisposed to these topics, depending on their background and experience. Others may have had little or no involvement. As educators, we must encourage principals to be models for their students. Life-long learning is one area where you cannot learn too much.

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