

An Open Letter to a New Principal

Dear New Principal,

Congratulations! You should be proud of your promotion. Whatever you have accomplished has earned you an appointment to what is inarguably the most influential role in American education today. Now, that's enough self-adulation and affirmation. It's time to get to work.



A veteran principal offers
sage advice to rookies.

Pete Hall

You may think you're prepared for the tsunami that awaits you. Allow me to be the first to tell you that you're not. Not even close. That isn't to say you haven't been adequately trained by your university in the theories of leadership, budget management, and school administration. I'm not maligning your teaching experiences, administrative internship, or the various committees you've chaired during the past several years. Your character and

integrity aren't in question, nor are your intelligence, knowledge of curriculum, or personal grooming habits. It's just that there's no way to comprehend the onslaught of what awaits you until you find yourself sitting in the principal's chair.

Worry not, rookie principal, for things aren't as bleak as they may appear. Though experience makes the difference, and you haven't yet acquired any, your recent appoint-

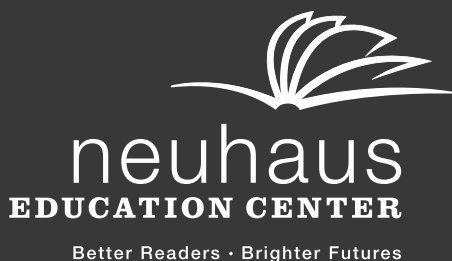
ment provides you exactly that which you lack: the opportunity to tighten your belt, slip into your flak jacket, and enter the fray.

So, what do you need to know prior to marching onto the battlefield? During my first decade in school administration, coupled with my work with the National Association of Elementary School Principals' National Principal Mentoring Certification Program, I've collected a few nuggets worth sharing. Here's what I call my 7UP (Seven Unyielding Principles):

Get a mentor. In any line of work worth its salt, one must progress through the stages of learner, observer, apprentice, and practitioner prior to arriving at master. The principalship is no different. This, quite plainly, is work you cannot do alone. Your initial experiences (which can last for at least 10 years) will require you to have a sounding board, a consultant, a guardian, a shoulder, a prompter, an advocate, a motivator—a mentor. You will encounter myriad circumstances in which you feel inadequately prepared and it is well worth the effort to consult with someone who has “been there, done that.”

If your district or local association offers a formal mentoring program, take advantage of it. If not, ask a seasoned colleague to extend some advice, share some information, and engage in some discussion. The benefits of a strong mentoring relationship are plentiful and boundless. Former NAESP president Paul Young sums it up by saying, “Anybody that's smart in this business has a mentor” (Kesner, Young, & Sheets, 2003).

Hire well. Nothing slows a dogsledder more than one husky jamming its paws into the snow. And so it is with staffing a school. Whenever we have a position open up in our school, we look at it as an opportunity to bring aboard exactly what our building needs, regardless of who vacated the job. Whatever our department, team, or staff needs, we can find the person to deliver it—if we're willing to dig deeply enough.



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Too often, principals rush into hiring decisions, claiming that an exhaustive search is just that: exhausting. They interview five people and hire the best of those five, rarely questioning deeply enough if that selection is the *right* fit for that position at that time.

When I speak to principal groups, I advise them to identify their needs, scrutinize relentlessly, conduct exhaustive background checks, and avoid vacillation (Hall, 2004). When you're totally sure that the person is the *right* person, go for it. Until then, the answer is no. I've phoned nannies, college professors, old friends from high school, youth group leaders, and even a candidate's mother for references. It's too easy to read blasé letters of recommendation and bland evaluations. To really find out about a person, we've got to dig. So dig away, and find that treasure. It'll be worth it in the long run.

Differentiate supervision. School buildings are teeming with teachers—this is a good thing. Herding them into corals and treating them all the same—this is a bad thing. As a new principal, you've undoubtedly read a plethora of articles and books on differentiated instruction. We know, through research, common sense, and experience that differentiating the learning experiences in a variety of ways helps children to learn. Is it not the same for adults? Our teaching staffs are often as diverse and unique as the children they serve, yet conventional wisdom has us providing uniform working environments, across-the-board learning opportunities, and blithely equal treatment. Well, that just won't get the troops motivated, inspired, and feeling connected to their mission.

Great managers (including principals) identify their workers' strengths and capitalize on them. We make them feel special, connect them to the work, and offer them the feedback, support, advice, and encouragement they need as individuals (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). It's easy to follow the "science" of the principalship and the lockstep

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policies of the procedures manual, but since you're in a people business, you'd better become adept at the "art" of leadership from each individual's perspective.

Cultivate a learning community. I'm sure you've heard the expression, "It takes a village to raise a child." Rick DuFour and his colleagues have made a mint turning that expression into standard operating procedure in their schools—and so have thousands of others who have received training in creating and maintaining a professional learning community. But what's more, this approach has made a difference in the lives of countless teachers and innumerable children. This past year, NAESP updated its critical guide for principals with regard to cultivating learning communities in *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*. This is perhaps the most worthwhile venture a new principal can take: Rally the troops, circle the wagons, put your heads together, and blend all your brainpower. While you may encounter pockets of excellence in individual classrooms, you won't find schools of excellence without established and strong learning communities.

Follow the three Golden Rules. It doesn't seem that long ago that I was experiencing my first year as a principal. I came into the position brash and naive, believing that I knew what to do and how to accomplish it. During that first year, I kept a journal in which I could record my thoughts, identify my mistakes, collect hints and suggestions, and vent my frustrations. At the end of the year, after conferring with my colleagues and taking a most-needed deep breath, I synthesized those reflections and experiences and isolated the three keys to unlocking the door to an effective principalship:

1. Stay true to the shared vision;
2. Be aware of goings-on; and
3. Conduct yourself professionally.

These three rules provide the litmus

test for every action you take and every decision you make in the principal's chair. To address Rule No. 1, rather than saying, "It would be nice if..." or "Maybe we could..." ask "What do we absolutely need to accomplish our shared mission?" or "Does this expenditure/allocation/field trip/professional development session truly propel us in the direction we all agreed to travel?" If so, go for it. If not, it's a no.

For Rule No. 2, effective principals get out of the office and observe (Schmoker, 2006). We listen, watch, hear, and digest. Armed with accurate information, after noting what's actually happening in the trenches, we can make better educated decisions, address issues in a more timely manner, avoid major meltdowns, provide immediate feedback, and respond to direct queries from all comers.

Rule No. 3 should be self-explanatory. At school, always maintain your dignity, speak proudly, carry yourself with authority and humility, be mindful of your influence upon others, and show respect at every turn. It only takes one slip-up to ruin your reputation, which in turn removes your leverage as a change agent.

Remain flexible as a learner. With so much incredible research on learning styles, brain compatibility, instructional precision, informative assessments, and a myriad of other aspects of education, there's a pretty steep learning curve for professional educators, regardless of experience. Change is the nature of the business—from changing curricula, changing federal guidelines, and changing staffing assignments to changing demographics, changing materials, and changing students.

Involvement in a professional organization like NAESP—and others, such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development or the International Reading Association, for example—is a vital piece of your leadership puzzle. Reading is, too. Your knowledge of the latest research, the newest trends in education, and nationwide perspectives will aid your influence as an educational leader. Get

a subscription to *Education Week*, peruse the literature in NAESP's National Principals Resource Center, and keep a stack of books by your bedside table. In addition, investigate the value of bringing in well-trained professional development agents from a trusted source such as Staff Development for Educators, which offers a theory-to-practice approach from a nationwide collection of experts.

Stay healthy. As we know from reading *What Great Principals Do Differently* (Whitaker, 2003), the principalship is a demanding, draining, and stress-filled endeavor. It's easy to get suckered into 15-hour days, toting a wheelbarrow full of paperwork to and from your car, and checking e-mails at all hours. As the most influential role in education today, it can also be the most demanding and overwhelming. If the principalship is the only thing you have in your life, then by

all means spend all your time and energy on campus, worrying about student data, teacher morale, budget figures, and the library catalog. But, if you're like the other 99.9 percent of us, treat yourself well. Drink water. Get exercise. Spend time with your family and friends. Get out of the office at a reasonable hour. Take up a hobby, a sport, or an activity that brings you pleasure—and that has nothing to do with the principalship. You'll be better balanced and better equipped to tackle the job if you do. They say you can't love anyone else until you love yourself, and the same rings true here: You can't be good to your school if you're not good to yourself.

There you go, fresh principal. My mentors, colleagues, staff members, students, research, common sense, optimism, and experiences have all contributed to this aggregate advice. Now go get 'em!

Most sincerely yours, Pete Hall 

Pete Hall is principal of Sheridan Elementary School in Spokane Washington. His e-mail address is pethall@educationhall.com.

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WEB RESOURCES

NAESP offers a variety of professional development opportunities for principals at every stage of the principalship.

www.naesp.org/professional_development.aspx

The *Administrator's Desk* at Education World offers an array of hints, articles, suggestions, and information for all school administrators.

www.educationworld.com/a_admin

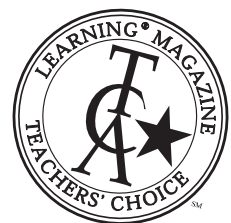
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