



SCHOOL LEADERSHIP:

Past, Present, and Future

By Pat Fontana

“All eyes look to you.”

Kevin Strahley, the 2018 New York State Middle School Principal of the Year, sums up the difference between his original perception and his realistic view of school leadership in these terms. Strahley, principal at Windsor Central Middle School in the Windsor Central School District, adds that it was “a little bit of a shock to know I had an immediate impact.”

Are future school leaders prepared for that responsibility? What can they learn about the reality of administration from quality leaders of the past and the present?

LOOKING BACK

School leadership continues to be a vital part of the fabric that makes up many of those who have “retired” from administration. Jay Matuk, who retired after 17 years as a principal, most recently at Cold Spring Harbor Junior-Senior High School, continues to teach and to lead. Matuk is an associate professor in the educational leadership program at C.W. Post University and a SAANYS mentor coach in Long Beach and Brentwood schools.

When asked why he wanted to become a principal, Matuk says he likes to think of himself as a problem solver and, as a teacher, he saw a number of issues that “needed someone who would be able to work with people, address the issue, and try to solve it.” He wanted to be involved at the level where he could make some institutional changes.

Likewise, Tamara Ivan retired in June 2018, after 16 years as a principal and a total of 34 years in the education field. Today, she is back at it, working as a substitute principal, helping a nonprofit by training teachers and working with special-needs children, and consulting for a school district. In Ivan’s case, education is truly in her blood. Her father was a principal and a superintendent. Her twin sister is also in education and she has another sister who is a teacher. In her family, she says, they “talked about it, lived it.”

Ivan says she always seemed to take on leadership activities, beginning with her teaching career in a progressive district. She saw that the district had a need for young people to take on more leadership roles and realized she could do some of the administrative work. She pursued a degree that enabled her to move into an administrative role but didn’t really know where she wanted to go with it. A job as an assistant principal became a “good stepping stone.”

However, the assistant principal role involved a lot of discipline and not as much curriculum work. Ivan wanted to work more with teachers, in curriculum development and implementing new programs. So, she decided it was “time to make a move and take on more of a leadership

role.” She moved into the role of the fourth- to sixth-grade principal, where she stayed for 14 years. During that time, Ivan witnessed a lot of changes, including state education initiatives taking on a bigger role. After “retiring” as a principal, she moved into the position of director of curriculum, which enabled her to look at the “entire picture,” supporting the whole student, “not just in one building but as a whole district.”

THE POSITIVE, THE NEGATIVE,
AND THAT **GREATEST**
SINGLE MOMENT

With decades of experience in the education field, as teachers and as administrators, Matuk and Ivan have experienced many memorable moments. Some of their more positive experiences have involved feedback from students. Matuk says that “when kids would come back and thank you, for helping them, for being there,” that is a “tremendous form of feedback.” He has kept every letter and card that kids gave him when he was principal. Even in retirement, he says students still email him to thank him.

Ivan points out that each moment was “kind of special.” Some were small and some were large. Her greatest single moment as a school administrator came when she and a social worker “really saved a child’s life.” A boy who barely spoke and had almost nothing in terms of clean clothes or school supplies went on to become valedictorian of his high school and then graduated from college. As principal, Ivan worked with the social worker to reach out to the boy’s father, who was living in another state and who had no idea what the child’s life was really like. The situation involved a lot of effort, including working with the police and the parent situation, but Ivan says, “Any time you can save that child, that’s a victory.”

Victories are not without challenges. Ivan adds that “it’s hard when you’re trying to implement quality programs and you don’t really have parental support.” State educational requirements and regulations add to those challenges. She says that “so many of the other requirements take so much time, it’s

sometimes hard to fill everybody’s needs in a timely basis.”

Matuk points to the “limited avenues that schools can pursue” when it comes to serious issues such as substance abuse among students. He says that as he grows older, he realizes that “schools need to take an approach that deals with the underlying illness,” and that as a principal, he “would agonize over suspensions with kids who were struggling with addiction.” He says that one of the main reasons he went into the job of principal was “to help kids and to make the school environment better for everyone” but “problems like this are almost insurmountable.”

Doreen McSain, principal at Glenwood Elementary School in the Vestal Central School District and the 2019 New York State Elementary Principal of the Year, has been in her current position since 2009. McSain says her greatest single moment as a school administrator also involved a young boy.

“A first grader gave me the biggest run for my money I’ve ever had,” she explains. He “pushed my buttons.” Even though she says she loved the special-needs student “with my whole heart, there were times I didn’t know what to do with him.” When he was in fifth grade, her team talked to him about transitioning to regular middle school and it was a “huge job to help him to know that he had a group of people who weren’t going to give up on him.” At graduation, “this boy and his mother came up to me and the boy gave me a huge hug and said, ‘I will never forget you.’” The next year, the boy sent McSain his middle school grades “and they were all in the 80s. That’s why I’m doing this job.”

LOOKING INWARD

Before taking on her position in school leadership, McSain taught in the classroom at the elementary school level. She was “bumped to different grade levels each year” in a fairly large school district and ended up at the middle school teaching sixth grade in a team format. Though she didn’t realize it at the time, she now says that “in hindsight, the opportunity to teach



all those grade levels and work as a reading interventionist at the middle school shaped a lot of what I do and what I try to do in my current role.”

McSain’s current role is the result of a long career of taking on new roles and completing the education necessary to move to the next stage. She earned a master’s degree in literacy, achieved national board certification in early adolescent language arts, and earned her administrative certification at SUNY Cortland. She says that the yearlong process of national board certification motivated her and changed her thinking. She “became the person on the team who was not necessarily

behind the scenes, who took on quite a few leadership roles.”

Her new leadership roles included professional development for other teachers and then taking on the responsibility of a district-level administrative position, as coordinator for Reading First, a federal initiative. While managing the Reading First requirements, the challenge of meshing the

specific requirements with what professional development needed to be changed her thinking. It was then that she realized she wanted to work as a building principal, that she “wanted the opportunity to work with students and to do what I did as coordinator.”

Kevin Strahley also earned his administrative certification at SUNY Cortland and is now in his eighth year as a middle school principal and his 29th year in New York State education. He says he has “been a student of leadership for a very long time” even though “lots of people saw the leadership in me before I did.” Strahley

sees his role as service leadership, “creating the opportunities for staff to do their job as best as they can and getting out of the way so they can do it.”

He is about “building relationships, knocking down obstacles, and making sure resources of time, materials, and support are in place so the practitioners can practice to the best of their ability.” Focused on “tight and loose leadership,” Strahley says there are “certain things that we are tight about – practices, goals, priorities,” but he also sees a need for a tremendous amount of latitude for teachers to step up and do things the way they see fit. He says his leadership style “allows professionals to be professionals. Leadership is born out of that loose sense of leadership; it builds confidence and competence.”

LOOKING FORWARD

Two College of St. Rose students working toward administration degrees agree that leadership is complicated and vital to the future of ed-

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ucation. Kelly Onorato reflects that “leadership in education is a humbling, interdependent venture.” She adds that “stepping into the unknown can feel like a personal and professional risk” but that an aspiring leader “must have the willingness as a leader to embrace vulnerable moments and push through fear-based inner dialog to give him/herself the experiences necessary to learn and grow.”

Student Jodi Coppolo shares that she has “wanted to go back to school to get my administration degree for a very long time, and I am attempting it right now!” She says that she has “the drive to do more, become the leader I know schools are in need of,” adding that those in education “need great leaders to help guide us and make the essential large-scale decisions that keep a school moving forward.”

Coppolo moves forward through her studies with “a very clear vision of where I see curriculum going, I envision educators using a more interactive, problem-based learning approach. A curriculum that engages all learners and places the students in an active role and teachers as facilitators.” Echoing some of the same observations made by the current and retired principals, Coppolo acknowledges that “as a leader, it is your responsibility to take control and make tough decisions.” As those in the past and present also acknowledge, “You need to be well prepared, you will make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes. The key is to blame no one but yourself, own your failures and learn from them.”

Onorato emphasizes that there is a key difference between managing and leading, even in an educational setting. Having recently taken on a supervisory role herself, she says that she “aimed to support the people in my unit every single day, and I really felt their support in return.” However, even though her team accomplished a lot together in a relatively short amount of time, she also learned through the experience “what does not work for me in a leadership capacity.” She felt a constant conflict between “managing” and “leading,” with the sense that managing was the more valued skill set, and that put a great deal of pressure

on her to “manage others in a way that made me very uncomfortable.”

The most important quality of a leader is not simply managing, Onorato believes. She reflects that when “people are treated like professionals, they behave like professionals. When the best is expected of people, their best is what they will give you. The same holds true for students. If you believe students are capable of learning something, much more often than not, they will.”

Coppolo conveys what many future leaders may be experiencing as they learn more about the realistic world of school administration. She notes that the fact that she is trying to “synthesize what I am learning with who I am as a leader is a huge task, one that I want to do my best at.” She adds that she is “trying to grasp my understanding of my goals and purpose on this path. I know what end vision I have for myself, but it’s the road to get there I am navigating. This process so far has really made me have to look deep into myself to truly learn about me.”

WORDS OF WISDOM FOR THE FUTURE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Retired principals Matuk and Ivan as well as current principals Strahley and McSain agree that they would choose their career path again without hesitation. Each principal emphasized that even though “it isn’t for everyone,” school leadership can be “rewarding” and leave a person feeling “blessed.” They do advise that aspiring leaders ensure they are going into administration for the right reason.

McSain says her first piece of advice would be to “not ever forget where you came from.” What she does every day, she says, is “framed through the lens of a teacher and that helps me make those hard decisions.” When she thinks about what she wanted from her principal when she was a teacher, it helps her to understand “what the educators in this building need from me.”

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Matuk advised that “most of the time, you’re going to be involved in changing something or building something and few people will know the role you have in making it happen. You’ve got to be content with that.” Ivan emphasizes that it’s critical to “listen to others’ points of view. It’s not always comfortable but it’s a skill that can be developed.”

Strahley reflects on the changing role of school leadership that he has seen throughout his career. He says that now it “involves a greater emphasis on social emotional learning and mental health initiatives. Schools are looked at to provide more noninstructional aspects of student development.” He advises that aspiring leaders should “be mindful of that shift and be prepared to have an impact on all aspects of a child’s life.”

Their words of advice to the incoming commissioner of education are similar to their advice to aspiring leaders. Their key word is “listen.” “Be willing to listen to all constituents,” McSain says. Adds Ivan, “Really listen to the folks that are in the field that are working in the position day-to-day.” Matuk emphasizes that the “building principal has the biggest impact” so there should be more “opportunities for building leadership to give input.”

Strahley, with all eyes looking to him as a school leader, focuses back on the children. The future of school leadership, including aspiring administrators and the new commissioner of education, would be wise to “continue to be an advocate for children across our state in light of every limitation and obstacle that is facing them.”

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