



REFLECTING,

Reconnecting and Moving Forward

By Pat Fontana

Stress, burnout, and mental health issues have been – and will continue to be – very real challenges for school leaders. A renewed emphasis on making connections, building relationships, and developing the social and emotional aspects of learning will be critical for school leaders, for their own motivation as well as that of their staff and students, as we move forward.

The sudden and drastic changes in education over the past year have been challenging enough for seasoned educators and administrators. Some experienced educators feel that the changes brought on by the pandemic are just too much for them and so have decided this is a good time to retire. Burnout is a very real possibility, between remote classes, stressed out students, and the fear of virus transmission.

For school leaders who took on their new roles just prior to or even during the pandemic, these shifts in focus and delivery have been an especially serious source of apprehension. New school leaders have faced the challenges of learning their jobs and taking on new responsibilities in the midst of a myriad of changes in the education field.

Dr. Larry Dake is one of those who have taken on a new job in school leadership in the midst of the pandemic. In addition to his work as the newly appointed Binghamton City School District assistant superintendent, Dake has published a timely book, offering solid advice for educators and leaders in education, whether they are new to the field or have been in their positions for years.

“Take time to be intentionally reflective.”

“Keep personal connections alive.”

“Give yourself some mental space.”

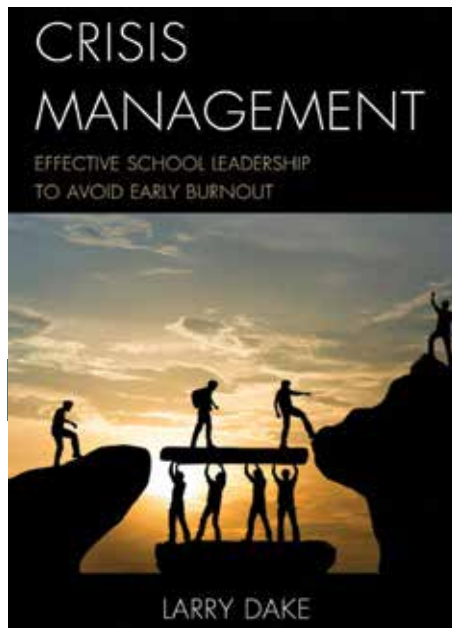
These and other key pieces of leadership advice are the basis of Dake’s recently published book, *Crisis Management: Effective School Leadership to Avoid Early Burnout*, written to help school leaders navigate through crises while continuing to be excited and passionate about what they do. In describing his book, Dake says it contains advice on “all those things I’ve struggled with, things that nobody talked about or talked about enough.”

Now finishing up his eleventh year as a school administrator, Dake took on his current position in Binghamton in July 2020, returning to the district where he started his career as a student teacher. His leadership career began in August 2010, with the role of Vestal’s coordinator of instruction. He then moved on to become the George F. Johnson Elementary School principal and then assistant superintendent for personnel and secondary education in Union-Endicott. Dake also teaches, as an adjunct professor in the Binghamton University Educational Lead-

ership program, returning to the program in which he participated several years before.

Dake says that every position has had a consistent theme. In each, he says, there have been “things that have been

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changing,” whether that was the end of a recession or the beginning of a pandemic. The key for him has always been to “figure out how to work with people and move forward.”

That, in fact, has been, and continues to be, a template for him: How do you work with people, learn quickly, then try to build relationships? He adds, “I feel like I’ve had a lot of first years. The key is not to have a second first year in the same position.”

MAJOR STRESS RELIEVERS

One of the big takeaways from his book, Dake says, is “talking about stress and anxiety and avoiding burnout.” As part of his research, he interviewed principals and other administrators who told him stories about having a trusting relationship with their staff as being a major stress reliever for them.

Acknowledging that every administrator is going to make a mistake, and that there are always situations that could be handled better, a great stress relief for him is “going home at night knowing the staff trusts you and you’re doing things for the right rea-

sons.” In his own case, he adds, “They know I’ll be consistent.”

Mental space, “not always being in reactive mode,” is also key to reducing stress as a school leader, particularly during the challenging and uncertain days of the pandemic. Dake advises that “it’s impossible to be all things to all people at the same time.” He points out that one of the early mistakes a new leader can make is to try to be responsive to everyone’s needs, to try to solve all the problems.

While it’s natural to want to help people, if that’s the only mode a leader is in, he says, “That’s where I’ve seen people burn out early in their career.” It’s important to create some space, to get some breathing room for being able to enjoy family or outside hobbies, and to get out of the office at a reasonable time to be able to do all those things.

How to do that? Take notifications off your phone. Set up basic email expectations with staff. Over the weekend, or when taking some vacation time, check email but do not respond to it. Although Dake says he will answer the phone because that could be an emergency, it’s important to “set expectations that email will not get a response until Monday.”

REFLECTIONS AND CRITICAL CONNECTIONS

Time is a critical aspect of a school leader’s ability to deal with stress. Although time may seem to be a precious commodity, it is still important to set aside some time to be self-reflective. Dake points out that at this time the “ups and downs are lower lows and higher ups than we would normally experience.” Being self-reflective, taking time at the end of the week or the end of the month to think about meetings, conversations, and other events, can be a very valuable learning tool, especially for new leaders.

It is also helpful to acknowledge

small wins, particularly since it can be very difficult to see huge gains in any one area in a short period of time. Thinking about strategies that are easy to implement but that can have large results can also be helpful. A small win can be as simple as a phone call, a home visit, or anything that helps the leader make a personal connection.

Dake emphasizes that keeping personal connections alive is in itself a win. Those connections might be with staff, parents, or the students themselves. School leaders are finding that they have to make an extra effort during the pandemic to reach out and engage with students who are not in the building all the time.

A DIFFERENT LEARNING CURVE

One leader who has found that she had to be more creative and came up with new ways to make those connections is Erin Rueckert, ninth- through twelfth-grade counselor at Granville High School. Rueckert started her job in December 2019, just before the holiday break, then had about two and a half months of relative normalcy. She was meeting with students and getting to know them just as everything shut down and then shifted to remote learning. She says it has been “a very interesting year,” even though it was tough, particularly when the situation for her and her students, primarily seniors, was so uncertain.

The usual learning curve for a new school counselor completely shifted at that point. The focus now, says Rueckert, is on mental health and on social and emotional needs. She works with teachers and families to figure out what the student needs are, to make action plans, and to keep the students engaged in school so they can feel connected. She adds, “If they’re not in a place where they can focus and learn, they’re not going to do well academically.”

Celebrating small victories is also an important aspect of Rueckert’s work as she tries to maintain optimism for herself as well as for her students. Motivation is a challenge for everyone in the uncertainty of the pandemic and one of Rueckert’s challenges now is

how to encourage that motivation.

Jennifer Lee-Alden began her work as assistant principal for the class of 2023 at Shenendehowa High School in mid-August 2020. Although she had previously served as a summer school principal, she found that much of her learning curve in her new position has also been focused on student engagement efforts.

She says that during normal times, the assistant principal is “the person that has to do the student discipline.” However, she has found that she has had to refocus her efforts on outreach, including home visits, phone calls, and emails. She has been developing a process of reaching out to students to keep them engaged. This is all a huge challenge for everyone. She adds that she is also working with parents, who are looking for help themselves. Although they may be dealing with issues of their own, they really want their kids to be successful.

Lee-Alden also points to the social and emotional impacts as being prevalent this year. She sees the mental health of students and their families as being in crisis. For her, communication can make the difference, but it can also be seen as a stigma. As she is reaching out to find kids and families who are struggling, she finds that they don’t want anyone to know they are struggling so she has to find a way to put it all in a more positive light.

KEEPING THE FLAME ALIVE

One of the reasons Dake says he wrote his book was because the lessons he learned as part of the leadership program are “not necessarily the things that make or break you in the first year.” Although the courses taught important lessons about issues such as budgets and legal issues, the more important aspects of leadership, especially today, are managing time



well and building relationships. These are the areas that will help new leaders reduce their stress and help them keep the flame alive.

“When things get back to as normal as they can be,” Dake emphasizes, “those efforts will pay off.” It can be difficult for a first-year administrator who does not get immediate positive feedback but who should know that their efforts will pay off in the long run. He encourages new leaders to find a mentor, someone they can bounce ideas off of and someone with whom they can “process stuff within a safe space.”

Lee-Alden says there have been high points for her even among the challenges of the past year. She stresses that her administrative team is truly a team with “a very positive vibe.” They are all welcoming and the principal is really a leader for the team. They all work together to “do what it takes to help the kids succeed.”

Rueckert says for her the high point is “seeing the support of our community and how our community has supported what the school district’s decisions have been.” She adds that she is encouraged by “how willing families and teachers are to work together to support the kids.” She anticipates a time of personal growth going into the new school year, as she is “looking to learn and improve on practices that can better support students.”

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

No one is quite certain what the classroom will look like in September. Dake says, though, that “as we look forward to September there is a little bit of a feeling that we can pick up our head and start thinking about the future.” He adds that “now is the time to really engage with the school community, to start talking about

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Equally important is talking about what we are doing now that we may need to continue doing. He emphasizes that “having those conversations helps build consensus.” Especially important are the connections that were made with families through video conferences. There are a number of ways in which this relationship building could benefit students, staff, families, and administrators in the future.

Dake says that “if we take a step back and think about what was lost in this year, it really is that in-person piece when everyone is together. When we can emphasize those opportunities with those communities, we’ll have

made a real difference in putting this back together.”

Dake just submitted a proposal for his next book, which will be “focused on the theme that there are little pieces in our leadership that may not be visible to us, but they can become problematic.” Leaders, new and experienced, can fall into habits and if those aren’t addressed, they can grow into major rifts in their leadership.

As to the fall, Dake says it’s critical to “go back to focusing on relationships with students, with staff, with the communities.” Everyone

will be craving a sense of normalcy, including school leaders. It will be important to be present, to be accessible, to show an investment. Rebuilding and reinvigorating, keeping the flame alive, will involve prioritizing “those moments where you have students, staff, and community in the same space. Those are going to be unique opportunities that we’ve lost in the last 18 months.” Going forward, they can be “tremendous opportunities to rebuild that community and to make it even better.”

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

RESOURCES

Crisis Management: Effective School Leadership to Avoid Early Burnout

Published in 2021, Dr. Larry Dake’s book, available on Amazon, is touted as a helpful guide that will “assist aspiring and practicing school leaders with strategies to navigate transitions, balance relationships, and manage their time more effectively.”

Chapters include titles such as:

“The Grass May Look Different, But It’s Not Always Greener... One Administrator’s Story”

“Is It Lonely at the Top? Navigating Leadership Isolation and Loneliness”

“The Goose That Lays the Golden Egg: School Leadership and Time Management”

Dake also includes “must read books for prospective and practicing school leaders” as well as a helpful survey instrument for school leaders.

