

A Job Like No Other

A few years back, the U.S. Navy lured recruits with the slogan, “It’s not just a job. It’s an adventure.” Principals can certainly relate to those words. Today’s schools, like today’s military or today’s business world, operate in a demanding and fast-changing environment with drastically different expectations than were the case two decades ago. It almost makes you dizzy to think about what changes might lay ahead.

The principal’s job is like no other. It involves major responsibilities to children, teachers, parents, and the wider community. It requires balancing expertise in management, instruction, public relations, data analysis, and more. In short, it is a role probably best filled by the special kind of educator who can find energy and encouragement in total commitment and unending challenge.

We are fortunate that public education continues to draw the kind of people who are willing to share their talent, knowledge, and enthusiasm with children. We are also lucky that many of these people develop the leadership skills that prompt them to accept the challenge of the principalship.

The Job Keeps Growing

In our 2001 guide, *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*, we sketched the broad themes of the modern principal’s job description. I hope that our guidelines encourage principals to do even more than what their formal job descriptions call for. We envision the principal as the linchpin connecting school and community.

We have already seen principals who have expanded their responsibilities and devoted valuable time to developing relationships beyond the schoolhouse, reaching out to local business and religious leaders, politicians, and community agencies that serve children. They have shown that the principal’s job requires not just abundant energy, but sophistication in building relationships outside of their school. Today, the job doesn’t stop when the last bell rings, and it doesn’t stop at the campus property line. In truth, it may hardly stop at all.

Since publishing our guide, we have enlarged our vision, encouraging principals to take on leadership responsibilities in coordinating the early childhood education provided by



local preschool and day care facilities, and ensuring quality after-school programs. (If you need guidance in these areas, you can order the appropriate titles from our *Leading Learning Communities* series.)

Finding a Balance

Leader, manager, goal-setter, quality supervisor, data translator, community leader, and evangelist for learning—they all are included in the unwritten job descriptions of today’s principals.

So where does the work stop? Even the most dedicated principal needs to maintain a balance in life and leave adequate time for family and self. There are principals who seek to achieve this balance by blending some of their duties with their personal lives. We know of principals who bring their young children to school during after-school activities to play in the gym or do homework in the library. Spouses often come along to events where principals meet and mingle with community leaders.

In balancing life and work, principals must master the skills of prioritizing and delegating. They need to recognize which tasks demand immediate attention, which may be possible for others to handle, and which offer opportunities for the school staff to develop leadership skills. In fact, building leadership capacity is yet another part of the principal’s job. The most successful principals are endowed with a clear sense of purpose and organization. It is no coincidence that their schools produce more than their share of leaders.

An important element in keeping principals in their demanding jobs is an internal sense of success and satisfaction. Because the position is so multifaceted, knowing how and when you’ve succeeded is difficult to determine. There aren’t many days when people come along and tell you what a great job you’re doing. There are always ways to improve, and there is always more to do. If anything, the mission is likely to get tougher and more challenging. Big challenges push people and demand a lot, but today’s principals are prepared.

Today’s Navy slogan is “Accelerate your life.” We get that message, too. ■

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