



Traveling the Road to Educational Leadership

For several years, I've been traveling a path in school leadership that began in 2002, when I left the classroom to become a curriculum resource teacher. Today I stand before you as an assistant principal in the Orange County Public School District in Orlando, Florida. In this position, I participated in the mandatory Preparing New Principals Program (PNPP). It consisted of training, job shadowing, leadership dialogue meetings, and an eight-week internship. Though exhausting, I discovered that I enjoyed every bump and sleepless night that this journey has taken me through, and I am confident that this wild ride will continue through many more years of learning.

I have been lucky to be surrounded by many wonderful principals who kindly guided me around the potholes of each day and who cheered me on when I was sure I'd run out of gas. Through the PNPP experience, I got a glimpse of what it really feels like to be in the driver's seat of a school. In reflecting on this ongoing trip, I have compiled a few components of what leaders must know, have, and be able to do when traveling the road to education leadership:

"As impossible as all of this may seem, I've learned that it is possible to enjoy the road to leadership."

A Map. Leadership must start with a vision. As the driver, the principal must plan where the school will go so that every decision, every program, every dollar will lead to this place.

Passengers. One of the principal's most important roles is as a manager of people. The faculty, students, parents, and community are our passengers and we must drive carefully to keep them safe and traveling in the same direction. These are the people we serve.

Fuel. A second important role of the principal is to ensure the school has enough fuel (budget) to keep the school moving forward. Having funds to pay for teachers, resources, and maintenance is essential to student achievement, and that is no easy task! Budgets are getting tighter everywhere, and principals must be diligent about money and creative in its use.

Vehicles. The vehicles on this roadway are the methods and programs that are used to transport teachers and students to higher achievement. Principals must direct numerous vehicles at one time, including curriculum standards, textbook adoptions, supplemental programs, intervention programs, school-based tutoring programs, computer programs, and endless teaching strategies. They must make sure that each vehicle has a purpose, the appropriate passengers are on board, and everyone is driving in the same direction.

Seat Belts. A very basic and necessary aspect of the leadership role deals with safety on campus. By establishing schoolwide rules for behavior, enforcing a student code of conduct, following district policies for visitors, and building relationships among all passengers, principals can assure the community that safety is a priority at school. Everyone on the journey must wear seat belts—no exceptions!

Music. The culture of the school can be interpreted as the "tune" that plays in your head as you walk the halls of your school. Is it upbeat and cheerful, or slow and sad? Are the students dancing to the beat of learning, or are they barely moving? Does the tune bring a smile to each face, or do you see stress

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How Am I Driving?

As a final requirement of my PNPP internship, I distributed a survey to all staff in which I asked for feedback on my effectiveness as an administrator. I posed 10 open-ended questions targeting approachability, vision, communication, management, visibility, overall strengths, overall weaknesses, organization, and overall performance. The responses were enlightening!

- My strengths are visibility, communication, managing the facility, organization, relationships, discipline, dealing with parents, positive attitude, approachability, and ability to listen.
- My weaknesses are recognition, flexibility, knowledge of exceptional student education, and being too nice!
- My effectiveness as an administrator was rated between a 5 and a 10, with 1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest. Twenty-five of the 26 responses rated my effectiveness between a 7 and a 10.

I now have a new road map to follow as I move toward the bend in the road that is my learning curve as an assistant principal. I plan on continuing to do the good things I have made habit, and to change direction in the areas where I need to improve.

and stares? Principals play an active role in determining the culture of the school by influencing the “background music”—positive reinforcement for expectations, recognition for jobs well done, building relationships, and modeling a positive outlook.

Blacktop. The surface of the road traveled signifies the facility issues that principals handle, including maintenance of

buildings and grounds, and new work needed to keep the facility up-to-date and safe. Without smooth blacktop, the ride can get bumpy and slow.

Landscape. The appearance of the school is important because first impressions really do make a difference.

Professional dress, clean and tidy classrooms, furniture in decent condition, and smiling faces are all vital for a good first impression. Passing cars will slow and take notice; and people will spread the word of a nice landscape.

Traffic Lights. At some point, in the rush of each day, principals have to take time to stop and assess the progress of their movement. Green lights reflect the fast pace with which we are all so familiar. Yellow lights are the moments when we realize that something is not working. Red lights tell us that reflection is necessary and changes in direction may be needed. Are our test scores where we want them to be? Are our current programs, strategies, and interventions working? Is everyone working together toward the vision?

Parking. I've stopped the vehicle in a parking lot to stretch and reflect on the drive. I've discovered that there isn't one best map, one perfect vehicle, or a perfect mix of passengers. Pulling over and reflecting gives me a moment to put it all in perspective, glance at my map, and get back on the road to school leadership with confidence. As the driver, I have to be focused and ready for anything. I have to balance what is happening inside the car and outside, while keeping an eye on the map, blacktop, fuel gauge, and landscape. As impossible as all of this may seem, I've learned that it is possible to enjoy the road to leadership. If I make decisions in the best interest of children and learning, if I follow district guidelines and policies, and if I model professionalism and respect, then I know I will be supported. The drive ahead does not intimidate me. ☐

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