

# Collaborative Principles for Principals

A powerful question from a graduate student in a leadership class I was teaching made me pause and think about my 30-year career in education. She asked, “What lessons have you learned as a principal?”

Lessons learned have come from a variety of sources, including children, parents, teachers, professors, colleagues, policymakers, and even my own mistakes. Education today is as turbulent and exciting as I have ever experienced. I hope to stay involved in education for many more years, learning and sharing best practices with educators in a variety of settings. As I reflected on that graduate student’s question, I realized that the fundamental lessons I have learned revolve around collaboration.

## Leaders Need Help, Too

Early in my career, when I was the sole administrator in a K-6 school with an enrollment of more than 1,100, I learned that “I can’t do this job alone ... I need help!” Building leadership capacity has been a stronghold of our school culture ever since. We have two designated leaders at each grade level, plus specialists. One teacher leads the professional learning community focusing on data analysis, academics, and student growth. The other leader is the grade chair working with the budget, field trips, and parent involvement. Benefits of shared leadership include enhancing the principal’s human capital, strengthening the adult learning community, and cultivating the next generation of principals.

Standards and strategies that have helped guide my leadership focus come from NAESP’s *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*. It is a thought-provoking handbook for any current or aspiring administrator to use in their practice.

Additionally, leadership must be

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steeped in pedagogy, as the principal is the instructional leader of the campus. School districts need to invest time and resources in ongoing professional development for administrators. Comprehensive learning opportunities must be available for all administrators to gain knowledge about topics such as using social media, implementing Common Core State Standards, supporting teachers in professional learning communities, structuring time so adults on campus can work collaboratively on schoolwide improvement plans, legal updates, and how to stay out of the superintendent’s office.

Depth of understanding comes from working daily in a collaborative fashion. Along with all these initiatives and practices, administrators realize teachers are seeking quality, timely

feedback, which should come in the form of teacher evaluations. Informed leaders should focus evaluations on progress teachers are making toward their goals and vision, student growth and achievement, classroom environment, and professionalism.

## Power of Collaboration

Have you ever wondered whether the most passionate teachers become the best educators, or if the best educators are the most passionate? In 2009 our school district, for the first time, had to lay off 450 teachers due to decreased enrollment and lack of funding. Without a well-defined evaluation system, we lost many great teachers.

A passionate, grassroots team of teachers and administrators convened and volunteered their time over the next three years to review the research of Charlotte Danielson, Robert Marzano, James Strong, Doug Reeves, Michael Fullan, Carolyn Downing, and others to create a model that aligned with our vision of a multi-measure qualitative and quantitative evaluation system designed to improve teacher performance. The team crafted a personalized online evaluation tool focusing on preparation and planning, instruction, classroom environment, and professionalism.

Qualified evaluators completed a year-long training to increase inter-rater reliability. Research-based topics included the value of instructional rounds, classroom walkthroughs, and a variety of techniques used to gather observational classroom data for valuable feedback to teachers. All administrators read M. D. Gall and Keith A. Acheson’s book, *Clinical Supervision and Teacher Development, Sixth Edition*.

Following the first year of implementation, teachers made comments such as, “The quality of feedback I am getting is improving my teaching.” The second year of implementation will see more training for evaluators, including *Breakthrough Coach* by Malachi Pancoast, that will help them organize their time more efficiently

with better communication with their administrative assistant. This will assist administrators in getting everything done in a reasonable timeframe so they can still have a life outside of school. The core belief of our evaluation system is to help teachers build their teaching skills and coach them along an improvement continuum toward becoming highly effective.

This process illustrated the lesson that when educators come together with an aligned moral imperative, great results are undeniable. We also learned that enthusiasm and passion help push your vision and goals to newer heights. This team of passionate, forward-thinking educators was a catalyst for change within our district. The desire for change served as fuel for building leadership capacity and brought teachers and administrators together with a common goal in mind: improving teacher performance.

Just as teachers seek quality and timely feedback, so do administrators. The role of a principal can be lonely. Often, only one to two administrators work on a campus. Visits from the district directors, coordinators, and superintendents, who come in a collaborative manner, help boost the confidence and success of principals.

*Rethinking Principal Evaluation*, a framework developed by NAESP in partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals, is designed for use in development or modification of a principal evaluation. This work offers suggestions to districts and states on how they can adopt a new paradigm related to principal evaluation informed by research and practice. The publication is structured around six key domains to be used in framing principal evaluations and professional development:

1. Professional growth and learning;
2. Student growth and achievement;
3. School planning and progress;
4. School culture;
5. Professional qualities and instructional leadership; and

## 6. Stakeholder support and engagement.

Teachers and principals want to be held accountable for student achievement. However, education is not one-dimensional. Understanding the complexity of these roles, teachers and principals must be evaluated on multiple, meaningful measures related to the context of their job.

### Professional Mentoring

My experiences also have taught me about the need for purposeful, professional mentoring for our newest administrators. With so many teachers aspiring to become principals, it is disheartening to see the number of them who leave the profession or choose to go back to the classroom after a few short years in the principalship. New principals should have a quality mentor for three years, while an administrator new to a school or district should have a mentor for a minimum of one year, if they have at

least five years of proven experience in another setting.

Districts should invest more in quality principal mentoring programs led by nationally certified mentors, such as those from the NAESP Mentoring Program. I believe this would help catapult the profession, improve performance in our schools, and increase student achievement. Administrators would be empowered to develop leadership skills quickly to achieve greater success with increased job satisfaction and longevity.

Reflecting on my 30 years in education, I believe the next 30 years are shaping up to be very exciting, and will challenge the most experienced, passionate educators. Principals will need to rely on the lessons that I have learned about collaborative leadership to assist them in ensuring that every student succeeds. ■

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