



So Little Time

APs must prioritize their many tasks to provide effective instructional support

By Ian P. Murphy

Like educational professionals at all levels, APs have a lot on their plates. Not only are they tasked with supporting the principal in running their buildings, but they also take on specific subsets of school responsibilities by grade level, subject matter, and administrative specialty.

Add the hundreds of variables they deal with in the form of students, families, teachers, and staff—not to mention the challenges of performing the job at a distance during the pandemic—and the AP's role can get very complicated, very quickly.

"The majority of APs find the work to be a challenge—particularly those new to the position," says Kevin Thompson, principal of G. James Gholson Middle School, a Title I school located in Prince George's County, Maryland, one of six large districts active in The Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline initiative. "Even veteran APs tend to struggle with everyday tasks," he said.

Participants in NAESP's National Mentor Certification Program "almost always" put task and time management at the top of the list when asked what their principals and APs struggle with, says Alice Shull, a former principal who now works as a professional coach and mentor. "Many of us say that we come to school with a plan for the day," she says. "But we know that as soon as the buses roll in, the students become our agenda."



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—Kevin Thompson, principal,
G. James Gholson Middle School,
Landover, Maryland

Stick to a Schedule

APs' move toward hands-on instructional leadership has made it necessary for them to be able to pivot quickly from administrative tasks to focus on the teaching going on in their buildings. “It is a shift that’s happening across the nation,” Thompson says. “An assistant principal is not just a manager. They often check those boxes, but they also have to focus on instruction.”

To stay on top of instructional leadership, Thompson creates a master calendar that APs use to schedule class visits, teacher feedback, and other tasks. “Developing a system is the best way to coordinate your time,” he says.

Thompson’s secretary synthesizes schedules to ensure that everyone is on the same page of that calendar, he says, and provides reminders. But APs need to track their to-dos, too. “We make lists,” he says. “The items on those lists may be disrupted by things that happen throughout the day, but it is one of the best guides you can have.”

Follow-through is a challenge. APs must provide teachers with instructional feedback and then circle back to ensure that their recommendations are implemented. “They can get caught up in other things,” he says. “We have a set cycle in which we provide feedback to our teachers, then we have a calendar that echoes the first calendar to ensure those strategies are implemented.”

Dealing With Disruptions

With so many human variables under the APs' watch, disruptions are the norm. Administrators must develop a sense of what needs an immediate response and what can wait. Not every parent email

requires you to drop everything, in other words.

“Students are our priority, so any issue involving a student can take [APs] away from their usual tasks,” Thompson says. “Or it may be something I hand them, or parents can be very demanding. Being able to look at those different factors and prioritize is the key.”

When it comes to handling email, try “batching” or confining it to distinct periods of the day, says Gregory S. Mitchell, AP at Club Boulevard Humanities Magnet Elementary School in Durham, North Carolina, and a 2019 NAESP National Outstanding Assistant Principal. If you have an urgent, complicated, or contentious communication, he adds, go analog instead: “A 10-minute phone call can sometimes save hours of drafting, editing, reading, and replying to emails.”

APs should examine their practice to get schedules under control: What worked and what didn't work when it came to time management? “At times, they seem to be so driven to get one thing accomplished that they don't think about the other things that their tasks have an effect upon,” Thompson says. “I want them to reflect at times.”

Knowing when to step back is important for administrators driven to succeed. “That's something we all struggle with, and we all have to

Top Tips for Time Management

1. **Make lists.** Thompson asks his APs to make written lists of daily tasks or set up desktop reminders to aid in prioritizing tasks.
2. **Have a routine.** Put the feedback loop with teachers on a predictable, reliable cycle that includes set times for follow-up.
3. **Take time to focus.** When an unforeseen event or task puts you behind schedule, understand what you can do to get back on track.
4. **Accept support.** Be open and honest if you're having difficulty handling the workload. Your principal, fellow APs, instructional specialists, and teachers might be able to help.
5. **Relax and reflect.** Consider what worked and what didn't when it comes to accomplishing your many assigned—and unassigned—tasks, and adjust your strategy accordingly.



learn,” Thompson says. “Make sure your mental health is taken care of, and tend to yourself and your family after work hours. I ask our APs to leave the building or close the laptop.”

Remote Learning’s Silver Lining

PGCPS kept learning virtual through December to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, and while that has proved difficult for students and families, it has had an upside for administrators. “It takes away the disruptions that come throughout the school day,” Thompson says.

“We get to chat and focus thoroughly on instruction. Virtual meetings and classroom visits indelibly reveal the areas in which APs need to grow as instructional leaders and managers. It has shown me their strengths and weaknesses.”

If an AP starts to feel overwhelmed, Thompson encourages an open dialogue to find ways to take care of the logjam. He inherited a “toxic environment” when he assumed the principalship, he says, and he strives to build a culture of collaboration, transparency, and support.

“We take a tiered approach,” Thompson says. “I want my APs to learn from me and take that learning to the employees they supervise. I observe them and provide feedback, then they model that same type of feedback to the teachers and use it for improvement.”

“A principal might put on their mentor/coach hat,” Shull says. “He or she might provide some tools such as a to-do chart and ask open-ended questions that encourage the assistant principal to reflect on the items. [If an] AP has high expectations and is driven to achieve, the principal might consider giving the AP ‘permission’ to delay some tasks.”

An AP can also reach out for help. “Sometimes, this requires having a difficult conversation with your principal,” Shull says. “Perhaps script your concerns and questions. Deciding together how to share the tasks, better managing time and disruptions, will allow the AP to feel more in control of time and more empowered regarding decisions.”

“It goes back to prioritizing: Which is the most important task that needs to be dealt with first, and which can we sweep off the list?” Thompson adds. “How can you facilitate—and maybe delegate—this to somebody else you supervise in order for it to get done?” ●

Ian P. Murphy is senior editor of *Principal magazine*.



In Case You Missed It: Video on Literacy Instruction

Readers of the December 2020 *APs Rising* e-newsletter saw an exclusive video featuring five insights to help APs guide literacy instruction:

1. Narrow the focus
2. Observe classes, virtually and in person
3. Create a text-centered approach
4. Encourage teachers to help each other
5. Take care of yourself

Snap the QR code above to view it yourself!

About The Wallace Foundation

This article is funded by The Wallace Foundation, which works to support and share effective ideas and practices to foster improvements in learning and enrichment for children and the vitality of the arts for everyone. Its objectives are to improve the quality of schools, primarily by developing and placing effective principals in high-need schools, promoting social and emotional learning in elementary school and out-of-school-time settings, expanding opportunities for high-quality summer learning, reimagining and expanding access to arts learning, and building audiences for the arts. The foundation seeks to generate knowledge and insights from these efforts to enhance policy and practice nationwide. For more information and research on these and related topics, please visit The Wallace Foundation’s knowledge center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

