

Process Makes Perfect

Why a principal should be a taskmaster at heart

Successful principals make it a priority to set priorities. Strategic thinking informs every task. Logic shapes procedures. It all spirals back to classrooms, where learning is paramount. As The Wallace Foundation notes, effective principals incorporate six processes into their regular practices: planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating, and monitoring.

Of course, no principal can plan for every curveball heading to the plate. They must set priorities and plan for routines and contingencies, project leadership behaviors, and sculpt a cohesive school climate. This section examines tactics and techniques for maximizing effectiveness through time management, while retaining the agility needed to rank issues on the spot and devise action plans. In addition, teacher evaluations get an in-depth look for their power to spark student growth.



SETTING PRIORITIES, PLANNING THOROUGHLY

Veteran principals recommend a strategic approach to setting priorities, followed by meticulous planning.

Set Priorities

Screening all potential priorities with equal objectivity means discarding those offering fewer returns and zeroing in on those that move the needle on academic performance.

- When determining areas of concentration for the coming year, choose no more than three and create only one system or initiative to manage each. Some principals select a single priority and make it sacrosanct.
- Debate the benefits and drawbacks of every proposed priority. Those with the greatest value will rise to the surface.
- On the daily to-do list, prioritize the must-do items that affect student achievement. One principal highlights them with green stars. Her assistant principals used to laugh at her for doing this, but they have now adopted the habit.
- An open-door policy doesn't mean letting anyone with a concern disrupt the calendar. Delegate problem-solving responsibilities to the experts on your team, so that only the thorniest issues come to your desk. Train staff members to direct calls toward those delegated authorities with an explanation that the principal is focusing on teaching and learning.

Plan Everything

Principals and staff members who plan for every conceivable occurrence—the routine and the possible—manage to maintain a steady stride and keep the focus on reaching academic targets.

- Leverage the summer months and preplanning to finalize systems, structures, and processes for the year. Practice procedures such as lunchtime routines and school dismissal. Create consistent schoolwide procedures that students recognize and follow from year to year.
- Calendar everything. Empower an administrative assistant to hold you and others to the schedule.
- Issue a bulletin every Monday morning that identifies the week's priorities.
- When true emergencies arise, jettison the schedule and delegate nothing. Anything involving student safety, police intervention, health emergencies, or media incidents belongs solely to the principal.
- Eliminate all unproductive activities. For instance, teachers in well-run schools are in regular communication regarding student progress. That makes frequent faculty meetings redundant.

IMPLEMENTING LIKE A PRO

Decisive leadership practices set examples for the entire school community to follow.

- Model everything. That could mean demonstrating how to deliver timely evaluation results to assistant



Key Considerations:

Managing processes effectively starts with setting priorities and following through with those priorities.

- Align professional development with school priorities.
- Evaluations are conversations—not confrontations—when you and teacher team leaders regularly review data and progress with teachers.
- Just like students, teachers have different learning styles. Make your school a campus for adult learning.
- Administrators and office staff can't do one thing a dozen ways. Create simple systems, put them in the teacher handbook, and make them stick.
- Do a few crucial tasks very well, instead of being OK at many things.
- For people or groups seeking to talk, ask, “Am I listening, am I helping you problem-solve, or am I taking action?”

principals or showing teachers how to implement classroom techniques that drive student growth.

- Create two teams: one for instructional leadership and one for school management. Spend more time on instructional leadership, but keep school management running smoothly in order to prevent facility and logistical snags that dilute the focus on learning.
- Direct the instructional leadership team to plan for the week, aligning all steps with school priorities. Start the next week's meeting with those “next steps” as the accountability map.
- Avoid top-down decision-making. Discuss ideas with assistant principals, teacher leaders, and others. Solicit input from peer principals.
- Model behaviors for students and parents to emulate, too. When one principal whose top priority is reading sees her students around town, they repeat her tagline, “Reading makes you smarter!”
- Use your calendar to self-assess performance. Determine how much time was spent on learning-focused issues and adjust if it's too little.

SUPPORTING YOUR PEOPLE

People thrive in climates that are orderly and predictable. When students, parents, teachers, and staff experience consistency, they feel comfortable taking the chances needed to grow and learn.

- Build consistency into the curriculum across grade levels, allowing students to make progress through the same lesson structures and components in each grade. This also saves teachers' time.
- Direct teachers who attend conferences to share their findings with colleagues. It's a way to capture new

information and research as it comes into the building.

- Include classroom staff such as paraprofessionals and coaches in the school vision. Listen to their concerns, especially when similar observations indicate that trends are brewing.
- For every new duty assigned to the faculty, remove an old one. Give teachers the precious and productivity-enhancing commodity of time.

ADVOCATING FOR IMPROVEMENT

Kids love superheroes, but they don't always know that the flesh-and-blood champions in their lives include their principal. In an age of tight budgets and distrust of institutions, students, families, teachers, and the school staff need a champion.

- When children are in the building, put them and the people who teach and care for them first. Save emails for later.
- Use data to reveal areas of need and target community resources toward improvement goals. That includes segments needing additional funding. Work with community partners to obtain grants, and continuously monitor those grants for their effectiveness in supporting school goals.
- Be a teacher advocate by aligning data findings with the resources teachers need to achieve improvements. That can include planning, professional development, access to experts and leading-edge research, and creating a culture of learning for adults.

COMMUNICATING STRATEGICALLY

School goals can't languish on a shelf. Communicating strategically devised goals and plans is vital to pointing all

members of the community toward the same objectives.

- Infuse primary goals into all outreach, and be sure to explain the “why.” One principal whose top priority is to develop in students a love of reading sends research blurbs to parents every week.
- Integrate learning into everything. If a local restaurant donates pizza for an event, grab a marker and write, “Don’t forget your reading log!” on the boxes.
- Infuse the vision and goals into all conversations, including those with potential volunteers. In one New York City school, parent volunteers became a distraction in kindergarten and first-grade classes. Now, the early-grades parents who want to volunteer are directed to other opportunities, with clear explanations. Most of them understand the greater goal of doing what’s best for the children.
- Build an audience for social media and electronic communications by training parents in their use. Sharing messages in multiple formats reaches audiences in their preferred media, but principals know that electronic communications save time and money.
- Quick video messages to families, teachers, and stakeholders

- offer opportunities to extend timely greetings (e.g., “Happy Thanksgiving!”) with quick-burst learning reminders (e.g., “Read a couple of books, kids!”). If a message happens to remind kids to listen to their parents, those parents will be eternally grateful.
- Build capacity to communicate in students’ home languages by tapping into community resources and the staff’s language and translation skills. This effort supports school goals of academic rigor by more fully engaging parents and supporting the drive for diversity, inclusion, and excellence for every student.
 - Direct teachers to communicate and explain student learning, putting everything from test scores to field trips in an educational framework.
 - Prepare thoroughly for parent-association meetings. Include members into goals and progress to build parents into advocates and peer messengers.

MONITORING CHANGE

Planned changes are only as good as the intensive monitoring required to ensure their application in the classroom.

- When implementing new processes, provide room for staff learning and monitor progress to prevent backsliding to the old ways.



Reflection Questions:

- What adult learning needs to take place in order for the work to succeed?
- How can I respect adult learning and push for greater results at the same time?
- What do assistant principals need in order to do their jobs well?
- Is now a good time to start an initiative? If not, why not?
- What will success look like?

NOTES

What steps can we take to better communicate in students’ home languages?

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- Align teacher classroom improvement goals with district assessment goals—for instance, setting a 5 percent improvement target if that’s the district’s goal.
- Engage individual teachers in regular “data chats,” reviewing their classroom findings and possible corrective steps.
- Review and comment on the data discussed in teacher team meetings. Take the findings to leadership team meetings to guide discussions on progress and goals.
- Give teachers the autonomy to address their classroom challenges and present administrators with their ideas for new initiatives.

MAKING TIME FOR EVALUATIONS

Effective principals build momentum into the teacher evaluation process, creating an infinite loop of feedback and growth. Adhering closely to a calendar and managing a strict feedback schedule assures that little goes unfinished.

- Schedule a predetermined number of teacher evaluations per day and

per week. One principal packs most evaluations into Mondays and Tuesdays, finishing about 75 percent and completing the rest by week’s end.

- Avoid overlooking any teachers, or spending too much time with others, by logging and tracking the time spent with each of them in formal and informal observations. Even “superteachers” crave feedback.
- Balance each round of evaluations by scheduling the teachers who need the most help with one or two who usually need little intervention.
- Save time by delegating much of the evaluation discussion to assistant principals, joining the conversation as it concludes.
- Consider divvying up teacher observations with the data coach and instructional lead teacher every two weeks. Then reassign the observations, so every teacher gets a fresh pair of eyes.
- Complete all evaluations by late winter, giving teachers time in the school year to make any needed improvements. •

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Related Topics:

In addition to the ideas addressed in this section, here are some other topics for consideration related to managing processes:

- Setting priorities in a sea of needs;
- Creating consistent lesson structures across all grades;
- The art of delegating;
- Crafting an effective but nonrestricting open-door policy;
- Making the best use of summer planning time;
- Maintaining a feedback stream with teachers; and
- Tapping into community and staff language and translation skills.

NOTES

How could our teacher evaluation schedule be made more efficient? What are some methods that would ensure that equal time is spent with each teacher?
