Riding the First-Year Wave

The interview went off without a hitch. You studied the school, swam through years of data, and bought that new suit. The panel loved you, and you loved them right back. But walking into that empty office the first day in July, you may temporarily doubt yourself as you feel the weight of responsibility. The decisions you make and leadership you bring to that school will impact the school’s measures of success as well as its teachers, staff, parents, and students.

Now in my second year as an elementary administrator, the wave I was drowning in this time last year has passed. Instead, I am the one trying to make waves—to put my own stamp on a great school on a rural fringe of St. Louis, Missouri. Throughout my first year, I learned more about myself and what I believe as an educator than through any professional development seminar I could have attended or book I could have ever read. Here are a few simple tips to a successful first year.

It All Starts With Students
With the endless email messages and phone calls, budget documents, and sales pitches from publishers, administrators easily can lose sight of the reason for getting into the profession. That stuff can wait. Take the time to eat lunch with students, make yourself visible in the hallway, and always have a joke at the ready. All of these things humanize that age-old perception of the figurehead behind the desk. By doing these things my first year, I built a good relationship with the student body, and students taught me not to take myself too seriously.

Get Into Classrooms
Principals who are not visiting each teacher’s classroom each day are missing out on an educational experience. You never know what you might learn by just walking into a classroom and watching a lesson in progress. If I ever have my own class again, I would be a much better educator because as principal I have been given the opportunity to see teaching at its finest. Both as an instructional coach and administrator, I have been blessed to see teachers bringing meaning to math and transport literature across generations. I refuse to hold these great treasures to myself. I often rush back to my office and share wonderful lessons with staff via email, or take pictures with my phone to capture engagement from students. I have set up structures that allow teachers to see one another in action. I encourage collaboration, but as we all know, teachers are not boastful in nature. I boast for them.

Make Your Own Traditions
During one of my first days as a principal, a teacher asked, “So have you thought about what silly thing you are going to do for Fall Festival?” My eyes must have told the story. “What silly thing?” I asked. Aah, those little things they fail to mention when you sign that contract. No matter how small or out of character these traditions may be, there is little else you can do to win over veteran teachers and community more than falling in line with your predecessors. However, I urge you to take a step further—make your own mark by starting your own tradition. I tell a joke at the end of morning announcements every day. Will it continue when my tenure ends? I’m not sure, but I do know that the kids look forward to it every day.

Find Support
The hardest lesson I learned during my first year as an administrator is that it is often a very lonely position. In many buildings, you are the only one who does the job you do. Find support for those days when you know what you are doing is right, even if you are being second guessed. If you bottle it up, the result will be a caustic environment at work and at home.

In my case, my family supports me. We all have that conversation with our spouse before taking that first administrative job, the “Are you sure you are OK with this decision? It will be long hours and constant checking of emails...” conversation. At times I know my wife, who is also in education, feels like she is a single parent. Despite these challenges, she serves as my sounding board. Many principals turn to colleagues in their school district or peers that they have met at conferences. Having that network of support is invaluable.

So yes, you nailed the interview. You will nail the first year too. Welcome to the hardest—yet most rewarding—job you could ever take. The fun has just begun!