Double Duty

One principal, two schools? It’s not as uncommon as you might think. Charlestown, New Hampshire, a small, rural town with a population of approximately 5,000 people, has three schools in town, two elementary and one middle school. I am currently the principal of one of the elementary schools, North Charlestown Community School (NCCS), as well as the middle school, Charlestown Middle School (CMS).

NCCS is a grade 1-5 school in the north end of our sprawling town. Although we are the epitome of small with 82 students, we are still expected to meet state and federal standards. We teach Common Core State Standards and we take the Smarter Balanced Assessment in the spring. Seven miles south of NCCS is CMS, a grade 6-8 school in the center of town with 146 registered students.

Why one principal? Small schools are a challenge to a budget, so one principal for multiple schools is the norm in our district. One of my colleagues has four schools under her wing. The schools are not on the same campus, so there have always been numerous challenges. There are, however, many benefits to leading schools at different levels. My elementary and middle-level “hats” inform each other for the benefit of both schools. Here are five benefits of leading both an elementary and a middle-level school.

Family Ties. Leading both an elementary school and a middle school allows me to get to know families on a deeper level and develop a history with them. I rejoice in the births and grieve with the losses since we are together for eight years. These relationships ease the transition to middle school for many students and adults because I am a familiar presence. Parents get to know me, and my style of leadership in the elementary school, and I have the knowledge of students and families to ease this transition.

Parent involvement changes at the middle school level since, developmentally, students are becoming more independent. We work together and experience the changes together as students grow into young adults.

Leading schools at two levels has provided me with a unique leadership experience—an experience I can only have because the staff members at both of my schools are true leaders.

Academic Continuity. Leading both an elementary school and a middle school allows for me to see the academic growth of students from grade 1 to promotion. I watch as students who do not know how to read transition to reading to learn. I can also assist with the special education process because I know each student’s academic history. Little time is lost learning about the new students.

I am also familiar with grade K-8 curricula, which allows me to have effective input into student needs. I can assure the middle school teachers that their students were in fact taught specific content in the lower grades. This eliminates some of the counterproductive “blame game” of previous teachers.

Curriculum Alignment. Leading both an elementary school and a middle school allows for me to see the instructional progression that occurs. I can assure middle school teachers that multiplication facts were indeed taught. I am able to troubleshoot areas that need more attention by knowing how students are doing at the middle school level. I can share areas of instruction that need more emphasis with the elementary school faculty.

Whole Child. Leading both an elementary school and a middle school allows me to value the whole child. Students can’t disappear into middle school because I bring my knowledge of their learning style and family history to their experience there, as well. As a result, students live up to their potential once they enter middle school, and their educational experience is a continuum. I get to watch them grow in every way—academically, socially, physically, and emotionally.

Diversity of Interactions. Finally, leading both an elementary school and a middle school allows me to split my time between two age groups so that I never get dragged down by either one. Only having elementary students would leave me out of great conversations about current movies and television shows that I have at CMS. If I were only at the middle school I would miss great interactions with elementary students, like the one I had with a first-grade student with autism who is obsessed with space. On this particular day, this student was not very happy with me and yelled down the hall, “Mrs. Stevens, NASA called and you are fired!” You don’t get that in middle school.

Leading schools at two levels has provided me with a unique leadership experience—an experience I can only have because the staff members at both of my schools are true leaders. A word of advice to anyone who is running more than one school: Empower your staff members to lead in your absence by carrying the vision and having a great sense of adventure.