



A Match Made in Education

Two principals tell us why having a friend in leadership to share ideas can help elevate your principalship

By *LaGloria Wheatfall*

Being a leader can feel like being in a pressure cooker. For principals, every decision made impacts students, teachers, and families—the entire school community. This is why having a leadership shoulder to lean on can help take your principalship to the next level. Two Prince William County, Virginia, principals, Hamish Brewer and Andy Jacks, demonstrate what it means to collaborate in order to achieve limitless goals for their schools. With unique styles and an over-the-top approach to education, Brewer and Jacks’ “bromance” illustrates how like-minded principals can work together to create positive results.

In addition to being named NAESP’s 2017 National Distinguished Principal, Brewer recently transitioned into a new principal role at Fred Lynn Middle School, leaving Occoquan Elementary, where he implemented data-driven strategies to help increase students’ reading proficiency percentages from 59 to 87. His overall passion for the students and his motivation to impact lives is what keeps Brewer going.

“In the work I do, the opportunity to save lives, the fact that I’m making a difference in the lives of kids in the community every day—it doesn’t get any more memorable than that,” says Brewer. “That’s a legacy you get to leave.”


Andy Jacks exhibits a similar passion for making a difference, which is personified through his life’s philosophy of “be you.” Not only is this philosophy showcased in bold lettering on the wall outside his office, but through his innovative “green-light” leadership approach in being the first elementary school in Virginia to implement the Virginia STAR program, in which students refurbish computers and donate them to needy families. Jacks’ life mantra is contagious around his school as he strives to inspire and do the impossible.

“We had a situation where a student who had multiple disabilities learned to walk when everybody said she wouldn’t be able to,” he says. “We got her to walk down our hallways, and she was able to walk for our fifth-grade promotion ceremony. I realized then that, if you push, you can make miracles happen.”

Both principals can attest that having a colleague and friend to bounce ideas around with helps “relentlessly” challenge their leadership in order to continue to elevate their schools, and ultimately change student lives. “There is nothing Andy and I wouldn’t do for a kid,” says Brewer. “We’ll go through a brick wall; we’ll fight for a student if we have to, because kids are non-negotiable.”

Andy Jacks

Principal/Ashland Elementary School
Prince William County Public Schools

 @_AndyJacks



The stats:

- Years in principalship: 8
- VAESP School Bell Award

Education:

- Virginia Tech University, doctoral student
- George Mason University, M.Ed.
- Grove City College, B.S.

School details:


- 850 students
- Grade span: Pre-K–5
- School's motto: "Together we soar higher"
- 2015–2016 Virginia Board of Education Excellence Award
- 2016–2017 Virginia Board of Education Distinguished Achievement Award

Programs:

- Virginia Student Training and Computer Refurbishment Program
- Student Run Media Production Studio
- Multiple Robotics Programs
- Cyber Safety Program

Hamish Brewer

Principal/Fred M. Lynn Middle School
Prince William County Public Schools

 @brewerhm



The stats:

- Years in principalship: 6
- 2017 National Distinguished Principal
- VAESP School Bell Award

Education:

- Virginia Tech University, doctoral student
- Auckland University, B.A. in education
- Virginia Commonwealth University, M.Ed.

School details:

- More than 1,000 students
- Grade span: 6–8
- School's mission: "Educating the whole child for a global world"

Programs:

- International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program
- Middle School World Languages Program

"We'll continue to do this together, because we're both on a mission to change what principalship is," says Brewer.

Here, Jacks and Brewer talk to *Principal* magazine about developing a leadership style and the benefits of honing personal and professional alliances.

What is the origin of this leadership "bromance?" And how did social media help your friendship and principalship blossom?

Brewer: We really hit it off at NAESP's 2014 annual conference in Nashville. We had been communicating throughout the conference and gravitated toward each other. When I first saw him, I was like, Who is this "big sucker"? He's a Steelers fan, and I can't like him, but we just started connecting.

Jacks: In Nashville, we were at one point inspired to do better, and got mad at ourselves for not doing more. We saw people, who now we actually know, writing books and doing other extraordinary things. We thought, they're doing some good work, why aren't we doing that? Why aren't we bringing it to that level? So from that day, we both made a pact; we recognized the same idea of greatness, and that we could just do more.

Brewer: Yes, we both wanted to be great.

Like-minded principals can work together to create positive results.

Jacks: We continued to stay connected through social media. We also decided to maximize our social media, because principals are a symbol for the school, and we wanted to tell our story. We talk on Voxer groups, we're involved in #PrincipalsInAction, and we even started our own group last year at the 2017 National Principals Conference, #DadsAsPrincipals, where a bunch of dads across the country with the same mindset came together and started a movement.

Brewer: If you don't tell your story, someone else is going to tell it.

Jacks: Too many principals just sit in their office, or they're not really celebrating their school. The idea is that you have to be out in front of that story; we are the leaders, we are the principals, and we need to be bragging about our school,

telling everyone else how great it is. Everybody wants to be inspired, everybody truly wants to feel better about what they're doing and be motivated—social media gives us that avenue.

Having a leadership shoulder to lean on can help take your principalship to the next level.

Alongside your vibrant-colored suits and notable dance moves, innovative professional development for your staff is important to you both. Can you tell us how you get your staff motivated?

Jacks: We talk a lot about inspiration, and we try to have this mindset of inspire, not require; motivate, don't mandate. We thrive on the idea that it's on principals to inspire greatness from teachers and staff, whether it's about a specific instructional activity, or whether it's just culture or classroom management. On the first day of school, Hamish and I both take our staff on a surprise field trip.

Brewer: Yes. We both took our staff to the United States Marine Corps. The United States Marine Corps is the greatest example of leadership under duress, under peacekeeping, under war, all these attributes you're building, is what you put your team in front of. What you're modeling is the expectation of the things that they see and do from you.

Jacks: This year I worked with the fire department, and had the entire staff run through what it's like to really save lives, and the training that firefighters do to get a sense of urgency, and understand the seriousness in their job. I want that mindset with our team—that's the sense of urgency we should have. We should practice these skills, because it matters, because we're going to save lives as well. I've also rented out the Potomac Nationals Pfitzner Stadium, and I wanted teachers to understand the grind of going through minor league baseball. With these guys, it's not glamorous, just like the teaching, but they love what they do, and they work hard.

Brewer: The whole concept is to take them out of the building, inspire them, and get our staff

highly motivated to start back with their team. So with this approach to professional development, we create this culture of "we're all in it together."

You both aren't shy in your unique approach to leadership. Why is thinking outside the norm vital to taking principalship to the next level?


Brewer: I'm really aggressive in my approach to leadership. I've got a whole wall mural of a boxing ring that says "one more round," because we encourage our kids not to quit and to give it one more shot.

Jacks: I talk about green-light leading, and in my office I have a green [traffic] light. I took out the red and yellow bulbs purposely, because it's on green every day, all day long. So, if a teacher comes in asking, "Can I try something?" the green light is on; I always tell them to go for it!

Brewer: We went to another level when we stopped trying to be what we thought the principalship should be, and we owned the principalship for ourselves. We are just being us, and we continue to bring our story to the game.

What's your advice to other school leaders (novice and veteran) on developing their leadership?

Brewer: As a leader, you have to think about the people around you, and try to build and inspire. It goes back to being you—be genuine in who you are, and be OK with that. You then have to maximize your gifts. In addition, you have to be OK with your staff, too. You can't try to fix everybody; instead, help them grow, build their capacity, and maximize their potential in order to maximize their skill sets.

Jacks: Be you. Principals get caught up in this trap of trying to do everything, where we learn, sometimes the hard way, you're better off doing specific things, and just nailing those down. Make sure it's aligned to the school vision, the vision you have as a leader, and the vision your community has. Every decision you make has to be based around the kids. 

LaGloria Wheatfall is the digital communications associate at NAESP.



TOP TIPS FROM TWO EXTRAORDINARY PRINCIPALS

- Let it go, move on, focus on the big picture and your goals. (Principals tend to get stuck on little things that bog them down.)
- Do more. Go even further than you're thinking.
- As a leader, you should always show a high level of energy. Model what you want your staff and students to be.
- Involve your students in everything and GO BIG!