





Find Your Tribe

How to leverage professional learning networks to fill voids and refine work-life balance

By Kaylen Tucker

With widespread budget cuts and restricted travel in some states and districts, now more than ever school principals are taking advantage of online opportunities for professional learning. Principals such as Julie Bloss of rural Grove, Oklahoma, are finding that they used to spend more time en route to trainings than the entire length of the training itself. Bloss says, “Most of my personal professional development is now being served through webinars and social media like chats and Voxer.” Online learning has not just changed the way principals learn; it’s also changed the way principals connect with colleagues and develop their leadership craft.

Popular professional learning networks such as #PrincipalsInAction and #KidsDeserveIt are performing double duty both as a professional learning resource *and* as a much-needed lifeline for busy educators who want to thrive. The networks that have emerged over the past couple of years have moved beyond using a hashtag to categorize postings on specific subjects such as #earlyed, #ARTSed, or #PTchat, to serving as a new space for educators to share best instructional practices, encourage work-life balance, and inspire a new generation of school leaders.

A Hashtag Is Born

A group of like-minded principals connect on Twitter, finally meet for the first time in person at a national conference, and then go on to collaborate and develop a movement that fills a void in professional networks. That sequence is the successful formula that led to networks such as #KidsDeserveIt and #momsasprincipals.

Todd Nesloney and Adam Welcome connected in person at NAESP’s 2015 annual conference. They recount the origins of #KidsDeserveIt in their book *Kids Deserve It!: Pushing Boundaries and Challenging Conventional Thinking*: “From Erik [Wahl]’s talk, we knew we wanted to create a space where we could push conventional thinking, challenge the status quo, and eliminate excuses.” Now, the

#KidsDeserveIt platform also includes the book, a robust Twitter feed and chat, blog, swag, and shareable library of branded images to use on social media.

According to Massachusetts principal Liz Garden, the #momsasprincipals network was already established by the time the seven founding members met in Philadelphia at the 2017 National Principals Conference. But the attention they garnered with branded T-shirts and other tchotchkes resonated loudly, as did their tagline, “All kids are our kids.”

The women, who were connected through other networks such as #PrincipalsInAction, wanted to push each other to write more frequently about the often competing roles of motherhood and school leadership. What started as a Voxer group and hashtag has morphed into a multitentacled alliance where each day, educators rely on each other for guidance on instructional leadership as well as support for balancing career and motherhood.

“Now it’s more of a support group where people share ideas with each other,” says Garden, principal of Florence Roche Elementary School in Groton, Massachusetts.

#Identity

Principals widely report that the principalship can be a lonely position. Garden felt this isolation acutely as the only female principal in her school district, and especially in 2014, when she was pregnant with her first child. Many women are reluctant to discuss life balance issues at work because “there is a certain level of formality with district colleagues,” Garden says.

The #momsasprincipals group allows Garden to seek support for both roles—being a principal and a mom. “When you’re making connections on Twitter and Voxer, it is more informal,” Garden says. “Because the connections were formed online and because those people are not part of my daily world, I’m more comfortable opening up.”

Such connections are important to leaders. “Being with other like-minded women is empowering,” Garden says.

“The group really gets the challenges of women in leadership who are also trying to be the best moms they can be,” says Lynmara Colón, another of the founding members of #momsasprincipals. “I participate daily and look to my tribe for advice,” says Colón, who serves as principal of Mary Williams Elementary School in Dumfries, Virginia. “We have met in person and often have Google hangouts to discuss so many things that have made me a better mom and leader.”

Principals Liz Garden (second from right) and Lynmara Colón (second from left), along with the other founding members of #momsasprincipals: Claire Giardino, Lindsay Stumpfenhorst, Tracey Allen, Kelley McCall, and Melissa Kartsimas.



Photo courtesy of Lifetouch.

Principals in Action

The Principals in Action professional learning network was founded by then-principal Adam Welcome when he challenged principals to get out of their offices and ride a slide with kids. That challenge started a movement. Today, weekly challenges push group members to think outside the norm and raise the bar for education.

The Principals in Action Voxer group currently has more than 150 members and includes principals from other countries. The Principals in Action PLN also is active on Twitter using #PrincipalsInAction. Here, leaders post information and pictures of how they are getting out of their office and putting smiles on kids' faces. PIA Chat (#PIAChat) is held every other Tuesday at 8 p.m. Central time. It is a time for us all to come together and support each other and others who need support. — **Ryan Sheehy**, elementary school principal and author of *Be the One for Kids*.

Principals who are fathers are seeking connections and support for work-life balance as well. The #dadsasprincipals network also stems from #PrincipalsInAction and took off at the 2017 National Principals Conference. Eric Ewald, one of the five founding members, says the founders already knew each other from #PrincipalsInAction, but met for the first time at the conference.

"We were five dads sitting together before a session started," says Ewald, principal of Van Allen Elementary School in North Liberty, Iowa. "We took a selfie poking fun at #momsasprincipals, and the hashtag started blowing up." Echoing Garden's sentiments on the value of networks of professionals with similar goals and life experiences, Ewald explains that the #dadsasprincipals community cares about both roles of principal and father.

"Sometimes we feel we need permission to do both," says Ewald. The community allows principals who are fathers to engage with other professional fathers and feel safe.

Passion and Inspiration

Regardless of the group—or their reasons for joining—principals can count on one constant deliverable: inspiration. Consider, for example, fitness-related groups such as #FitLeaders and #RunLAP. "It's about running ... doing what's hard and coming out at the end," says founder Adam Welcome, a former elementary principal who is now the director of innovation and technology at Mt. Diablo Unified School District in Concord, California. Welcome used the #RunLAP hashtag (Run Like a Pirate) in 2017 when he challenged himself to run a marathon each month for a year.


"So much of life is like a marathon," he says. "You need people and a network when you're doing something hard."

#RunLAP is not a network for principals only; according to Welcome, some participants don't even run. "They just want inspiration to be consistent," he says, noting that the group encourages its members "to be fanatical about what you want to be fanatical about" with "no excuses." #RunLAP members publicly share their challenging goals, gaining accountability partners along the way. (Welcome's current goal: to revolutionize all 50 of the libraries in his community to make them more relevant.)

Social networking can't, and shouldn't, replace local networking. Although Welcome has contributed to the growth of an ecosystem of online networks (including #RunLAP, #PrincipalsInAction, and #KidsDeserveIt), he still shares freely with educators in his local school community. In fact, Welcome believes that social media interactions help develop local connections because they "take the walls down for more collaborative teaching."

A Lifeline

Principal Julie Bloss leads an early learning center in a rural area, far from traditional forms of networking and professional learning, but she gets a daily dose of inspiration on Twitter and participates in #KidsDeserveIt chats on Wednesday nights and the #PrincipalsInAction group on Voxer.

Bloss says that while she belongs to a local chat group specifically for early childhood educators, she felt that to continue growing, she needed other perspectives. Her advice to principals who are new to social networks and want to engage: "We all have the same vision for what we want for our kids, whether they are 3 or 12. Join groups that reflect what you are interested in, that share your vision." 

Kaylen Tucker is editor-in-chief of NAESP's *Principal* magazine.



THERE'S A GROUP FOR THAT

Find a group that feeds your passion and inspires you to new heights. Here's a limited listing of what's out there:

[#PrincipalsInAction](#)
[#BeTheOne](#)
[#KidsDeserveIt](#)
[#Momsasprincipals](#)
[#Dadsasprincipals](#)
[#RunLAP](#)
[#RockStarPrincipals](#)

Are you a part of an amazing group that you want *Principal* readers to know about? Tweet the hashtag to @naesp.