Perspectives on the Principalship

Recently, students in a graduate school class of aspiring principals that I teach asked me to explain the evolution of knowledge and skills necessary to be a successful principal. The question made me realize that the answer is as complex as the demands of the job itself. It prompted me to reflect on my own learning and experiences as a principal. What I discovered was that there are no easy answers, but that success in the principalship involves examining the position from five key perspectives.

The Personal Perspective. Principals must strive to learn as much about themselves as they can in terms of their attitudes, dispositions, and communication style, all of which significantly affect their overall effectiveness. How we ask questions, explain matters, or hear others’ comments is in large part a matter of personality and temperament. As we come to understand and appreciate how others’ personal styles can work in harmony with our own, we find it easier to solve problems and make decisions.

The Organizational Perspective. Principals must be well-versed in the knowledge of leadership theory, group dynamics, the change process, and conflict management and resolution if they are to function in an effective and cohesive way within the school organization.

The Instructional Leadership Perspective. At the heart of school leadership is the role of the principal as instructional leader. More than ever, principals must be conversant about different learning theories, teaching methods, standards-based instruction, and performance-based assessment. However, perhaps the most significant aspect of the instructional leadership role is building a professional learning community in which teachers perceive the principal as trustworthy, competent, supportive, and serious about sharing leadership.

The Community Perspective. Many institutions have changed to accommodate the socioeconomic, cultural, and ethnic diversity of modern-day society. Schools are part of that reality. Successful principals must embrace the changing fabric of their community and work in meaningful partnership with community members to mirror their values and beliefs. At the same time, they must raise the awareness of their faculties and staffs to diversify learning in ways that accommodate differences. Principals should strive to transform their campuses into community schools, in which school personnel and community members create a democratic partnership that values purposeful involvement, a sense of equality, inclusiveness, and a commitment to social justice for all.

The Educational Statistics Perspective. In order to meet the requirements for student achievement and accountability imposed by the federal government’s No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, principals must change the way they think about teaching and learning. They must increasingly rely on the use of data to make sound instructional decisions.

Mandated testing programs have become a way of life in today’s schools, and principals must be able to interpret test data and explain their meaning to staff, parents, and the community. They also must use the results to drive professional development, realign curriculum, and allocate appropriate resources for purposeful instruction.

The work of a principal can never be reduced to a list of perspectives. However, they can serve as pathways to a broader and deeper understanding of what successful principals can and must do to create schools that are joyful, caring, and successful.

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