

# The *e*nd balanced Principal:

Veteran principals' best practices are  
a new principal's strongest weapon

Franzy Fleck



**A**s I reflected on my principal preparation, I noticed that even though I felt prepared in the theoretical sense, I was not completely prepared in the practical sense. The university had prepared me well in theory to serve as a school leader, but practical knowledge was based on my teaching experiences and principal internship. Universities only have so much time to prepare you for that first year in administration. Thus, veteran principals must take the time to share their best practices with new and aspiring principals. This will help school leaders to be prepared in both theory and practical application.

#### IN BRIEF

A principal's first few years are among the most difficult, especially since many university programs don't sufficiently blend theory and practice. The author contends that new and aspiring principals can benefit from veteran colleagues' best practices and provides strategies that peers, districts, and universities can implement to help new principals be better prepared in their jobs.

# Joining Theory and Practical Knowledge

As a first-year assistant principal in southern Indiana, I was blessed to have both a wise principal and superintendent. Serving as an assistant principal allowed me the opportunity to learn and grow as a school leader. A few tidbits that I learned early on from them were:

- **It's all about relationships.** If you focus on building positive relationships, then everything will take care of itself.
- **Reflect.** Reflection is critical to growth and success. Make time to reflect and it will help you grow as a building principal.
- **Network.** Develop and create relationships with peers from within and outside your district. They will have years of experience to share that can make your job easier.
- **You will not be expected to have all the answers.** Rely on guidance from your peers and superiors. Don't be afraid to ask for help.
- **Mistakes come with the territory.**

Part of life is learning from mistakes. Don't be afraid to act because of fear.

- **Collaborate and communicate with all stakeholders.** Create avenues for stakeholders to share their thoughts and ideas. Involve everyone in the decision-making process before a final decision is made.
- **Leadership is serving others.** Students and adults want to follow leaders who put others before themselves. If you learn to support and serve others, then you will have an abundance of followers who want to be part of your team.

Too many new principals are forced to struggle through their beginning years and only learn through trial and error. The life of a principal should not be a lonely and frustrating experience. The principalship is much too demanding and difficult to succeed without the support of the district and practical knowledge of veteran teachers and peers.

#### Veteran Principals' Role

How can veteran principals better share their best practices with new and aspiring principals? Times have changed for those becoming principals. In the past, a principal was expected to be organized with good management skills, and a deep understanding of the school and community. Today, principals are expected to be experts in all aspects of administration, leadership, and education. These high demands make it more challenging to succeed and sustain longevity as a building principal.

In addition, more and more teachers are becoming principals after just a few years of teaching experience. In the past, most principals had 15 to 20 years of building experience and relied on those experiences as a teacher, coach, department head, counselor, or assistant principal before becoming a principal. Some districts require that principals first serve as a dean or department chair, followed by serving as an

assistant principal before becoming a principal. This natural progression of responsibility helps to mold prospective principals. This is not to say that a greater number of years is the key to principal effectiveness. People rely on and use experiences to guide most decisions. But a limited amount of building experiences makes it more challenging for a beginning principal.

Districts must understand that universities have a limited amount of time to share pedagogy and provide field experiences. Universities prepare aspiring students with a solid foundation to serve as principal. Districts and veteran principals have the responsibility to further mold beginning principals with the necessary tools to be successful. Obtaining a principal license from a university should not signal the end of leadership training. To help fill the gap left by some university programs, veteran principals and districts should do the following:

**Invite new principals to informal gatherings.** Be sure to include new principals

in all get-togethers, luncheons, and informal meetings of building leaders. Every person is the new person at some point in his or her life. Be sure to make everyone feel part of the team.

**Schedule regular luncheons.** Veteran principals should meet with new principals every other week to discuss general concerns. Small intimate and informal meetings between veteran and new principals create opportunities to reflect and share concerns.

**Create networking opportunities.** Insist that new principals attend regional and districtwide principal meetings by offering to drive. Veteran principals should serve as ambassadors for new principals.

**Offer to help.** New personnel are reluctant to ask for help. Be persistent and don't assume that a new principal is doing well. Every report and issue will be a new experience for a beginning principal. Veteran principals need to offer assistance regularly.

**Ask for their help.** A wonderful way to build confidence is for veteran principals to ask for the help or thoughts of

a new principal. For example, new principals tend to be better with technology. Ask if a new principal can assist you with technology or create a PowerPoint presentation. Asking for assistance helps to build a relationship of give and take between new and veteran principals.

**Build confidence.** Send congratulatory notes or call to praise their successes throughout the school year. Everyone wants and needs to hear that they are doing a good job, and acknowledgement from a veteran principal will do wonders.

**Create a new principal induction program.** Ensure that the induction program is meaningful and consistent. Although most districts have teacher induction programs to help ensure teacher success, there are very few principal induction programs. The district should create a meaningful program that includes the district's mission, values, philosophies, and expectations.

**Create a quality mentoring program similar to beginning teacher mentoring experiences.** Provide consistent opportunities for the apprentice and mentor to work in close proximity during their first two years. Also, ensure that the mentoring program is properly funded and has a consistent and meaningful set of guidelines.

**Districts should set goals with new principals and meet to discuss them on a regular basis.** Collaboratively create goals together and meet regularly to discuss progress.

**Create networking opportunities for new principals to meet together regularly.** In one district, the principals meet monthly to discuss strategies and concerns following each school board meeting. The principals take turns hosting peers in their buildings. Following a tour of the building, principals share concerns and engage in brainstorming sessions.

**Require new principals to visit other principals within their district.** Create a checklist that requires visits with principals, central office personnel, and supportive services in the first year.

**Encourage attendance at principal meetings within their region.** I recently attended a dinner with retired principals. Their No. 1 recommendation was for all principals to attend a monthly meeting with other principals from their region. Also, allow opportunities to attend new principal workshops

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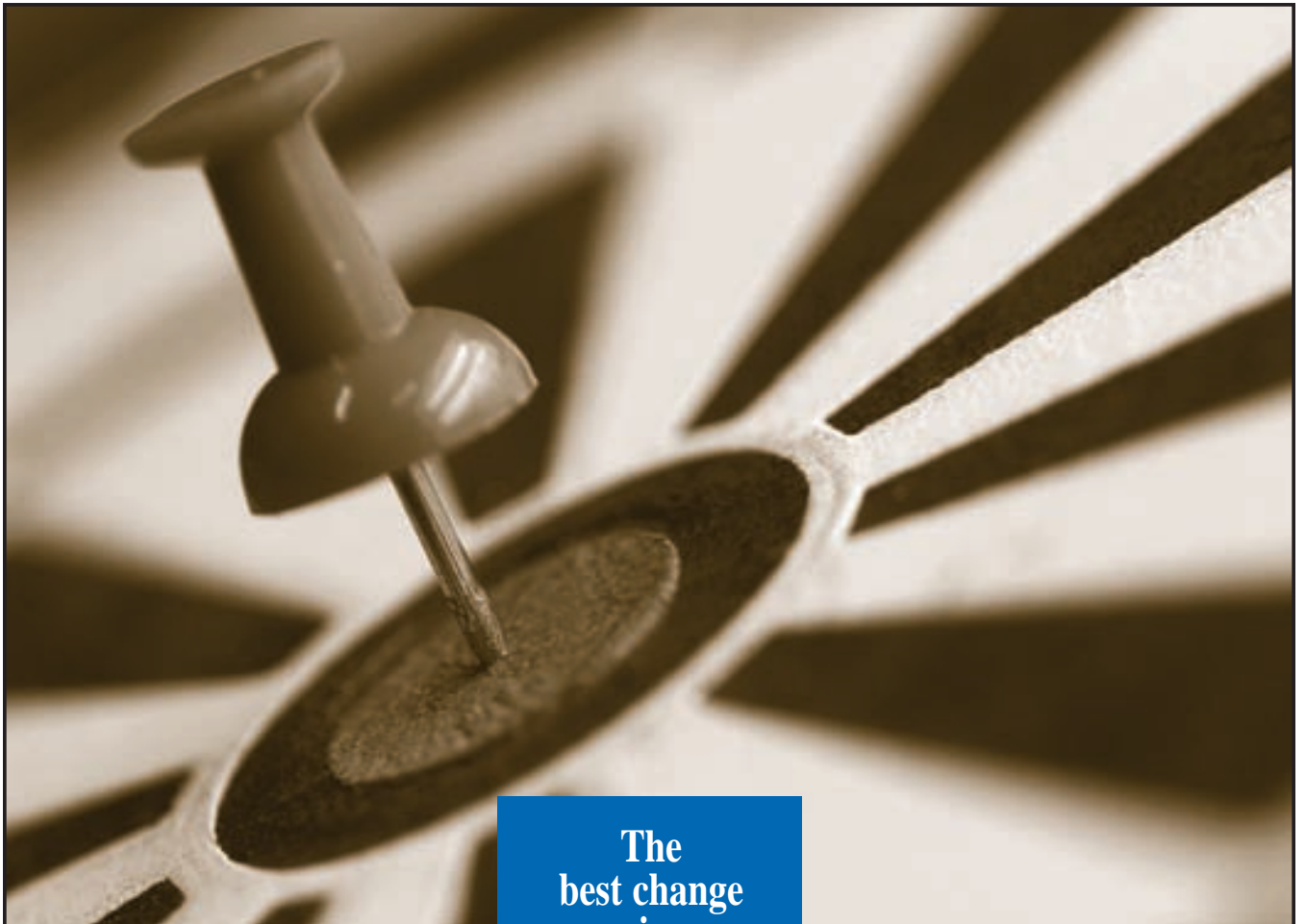
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*Create consistent professional development opportunities within the district.* Districts must understand that universities provide a solid foundation but districts and veteran principals have the responsibility to hone a new principal's craft.

*Districts and mentors should create a list of suggested books and training videos.* New and veteran principals should study the experts and regularly engage in learning sessions. The district can help by creating a timeline of sessions and completion dates.

### Role of Universities

How can universities better marry theory and practical knowledge? Consider the differences between teacher preparation programs and principal preparation programs. We wouldn't require education majors to complete their teaching preparation with little or no actual classroom time. However, many principal preparation programs don't allow candidates this critical hands-on time. While creating a solid infrastructure with history, pedagogy, and philosophy is critical, practical experiences are just as valuable.

Few principal preparation programs require a full-semester internship, much less a full-year internship. Field experiences are usually limited to before or after school, or during preparation periods. Many of these experiences are limited in scope and depth. Further, most principal field experiences are limited to their own building principal in contrast to teacher education classes that require experiences in several buildings, with different age groups and levels, and with various practitioners.

Principal field experiences are contingent on the effectiveness and willingness of the building principal. More effective principals see internships as opportunities to assign meaningful tasks, divide work assignments, and engage in brainstorming sessions with a different set of eyes and ears as they prepare the next wave of principals. Internships are great opportunities for the principal intern to grow as well as help the supervising principal with a daunting list of responsibilities.

Mentoring requirements are another area of contrast. Most states require new teachers and principals to have mentors. Teachers are usually assigned mentors

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from their own buildings. Principals typically don't have that luxury. Whether you have a mentee from within or outside your district, frequent and consistent communication is paramount to a successful mentoring experience. Weekly or biweekly meetings, weekly telephone conferences, or e-mail correspondences are valuable opportunities to reflect and discuss concerns with a mentor. Mentoring sessions must be viewed as a priority. Schedule meetings into your weekly calendar. Consistent and regular communication is the key to a successful mentoring experience.

In an effort to improve principal preparation programs, universities should consider the following recommendations:

*Universities should sufficiently fund principal preparation programs.* It should not be an unfunded mandate that adds responsibility to existing faculty.

*University classes should provide a good mix of theoretical and practical experiences.* Interns need positive opportunities to closely work with a variety of principals and in different buildings and levels.

*University classes should include relevant and authentic projects as part of coursework.* Studying cognitive models and best practices are critical to laying a solid foundation, but students need to apply learned knowledge.

*Field experiences should gradually expose interns to more responsibilities as they progress through a program.* They also should be meaningful and practical for the intern and principal. The university must be involved to ensure that the needs of the principal and intern are being met. To ensure that both parties are gaining from this experience, professors and the university must be proactive and provide more than a list of suggested activities. University personnel must be able to answer the questions for the principal and intern, such as "What will I gain from this?" and "What is the purpose of this experience?" The university should reconsider field experiences as part of the program if the experience is not valuable to either the principal or the intern.

*Encourage involvement.* Principals and districts want individuals to help lead school initiatives. Encourage, provide extra credit, or infuse these requirements into

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the program. These opportunities help prospective principals learn and grow in key leadership roles while providing meaningful assistance.

**Encourage interns to join and attend networking opportunities in the district or state, or at the national level.** Interns should discuss with their principals the opportunities to attend local administrator meetings, state and national conferences, aspiring principal workshops, or educational workshops.


**Ensure that students are exposed to a variety of practicing principals.** The role of the principal is constantly evolving. The skills of the principal needed today are vastly different from skills needed five or even 10 years ago. Central office personnel who were once principals are commonly used to share their experiences and knowledge. The university might consider adding current principals as adjunct professors or include them as guest lecturers if the faculty has limited experience. A solid program also includes the expertise of female and minority principals.

**Resist the temptation to lower program expectations.** It is disparaging to hear prospective principals say that they attended a less rigorous program. The principal is the key to a successful school. I encourage universities to keep their standards high while finding a balance that accommodates the busy lives of aspiring principals.

### The Key to Success

It is critical that we help prepare our future building leaders with practical knowledge and theoretical perspectives. The principal profession, similar to the teaching profession, can be as frustrating as it is rewarding. As a result of the frustrating aspects of the principal's role, many principals are returning to the classroom, taking early retirement, moving to a central office position, joining an educational consulting group, or leaving the field of education altogether.

The research is clear with regard to student achievement—the principal is the key. If a beginning or veteran principal struggles, then there is little

hope for teachers to succeed. If teachers struggle, then there is little hope for students to succeed. And if students struggle, then there is little hope for the future of our society. A key element to having successful students is to keep successful teachers in our schools. And a key element to keeping successful teachers in our schools is to have successful principals in our schools. The key to the success of a principal depends on a good balance of theory and practical knowledge. 

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### WEB RESOURCES

The Institute for Educational Leadership makes available on its Web site "Preparing School Principals: A National Perspective on Policy and Program Innovations."  
[www.iel.org/pubs/PreparingSchoolPrincipals.html](http://www.iel.org/pubs/PreparingSchoolPrincipals.html)

Veteran principals offer tips to first-year principals for their first days of school, as compiled by Education World.  
[www.education-world.com/a\\_admin/admin/admin317.shtml](http://www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin/admin317.shtml)

The theme of the September/October 2006 issue of *Principal* magazine was "The Veteran Principal." Read the various articles that provide insight on the veteran principal's role.  
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