



Two veteran principals offer perspectives on what it's like to handle their increasingly diverse job responsibilities.

Bob Krajewski

Juggling Hats: How Principals Survive

Prin cipals have always worn many hats that represent the ever-increasing and complex dimensions of their job. But the tasks today are more challenging than ever as they seek ways to categorize and fit together a plethora of programs, plans, and promises to determine what actually works and what is critical for success.

This article profiles two veteran principals who are finding ways to handle their increasing responsibilities. Melva Matkin has been principal of Gregorio Esparza Accelerated Elementary School in San Antonio since 1989. Her school, which once had severe needs, has achieved state and national honors.

Darrell Barringer is principal of Carolina Springs Elementary School in Lexington County, South Carolina, one of several schools he has opened during his career in the district. He is an authority on professional development schools.

Guided by the quality indicators of *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do* (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2001) and their own experiences, these principals have focused on the five roles they consider most important to their schools' success.

Kids First

Both principals say that the primary concern of their jobs is the children they serve, and that focusing on excellent teaching for them takes a lot of

time and energy. In every decision they make they must focus on the needs of children, regardless of the kind of hat they are wearing.

Matkin: Making sure our kids have good memories of their childhood is what it's all about. We never want to end a year thinking of what we should have done for a child, because that means we've wasted a year of that child's life. So I meet often with team leaders and content-area and grade-level facilitators to analyze goals and plans, assess progress, and change or stretch as necessary.

I regularly reflect on the deeper implications of decisions we make in order to be sure we focus on kids first. For example, because we know our kids need enrichment opportunities, we allocate Title I monies for after-school enrichment programs. Because we know that our kids need real-life experiences, we work with our PTA to provide four to six field trips each year for each grade level.

Barringer: I'm interacting with kids all day, from the time they arrive in the morning until they leave in the afternoon, when I go outside to open car

IN BRIEF

The author profiles two veteran elementary school principals who describe the five most important hats they wear and how they have grown more comfortable wearing them.

doors and ask departing students, "How are you smarter this afternoon than you were this morning?" People know I really care about their kids. And yet, as I reflect on past experiences, I would like to have spent even more time with the kids, and been more visible and available to them.

Instructional Leader

Both principals are passionate about instruction, observing teachers daily and seeing themselves as "teachers of teachers." They believe that the instructional leader hat must be visible to everyone. Principals need to know what is happening in their classrooms if they are to help their teachers grow and stretch their teaching to new levels.

Matkin: I meet with each staff member in the fall and spring to discuss their roles—the different hats they wear—and their personal and professional development goals. As they identify growth strategies, I try to facilitate their growth via campus and off-campus observations, workshops, conferences, and videos and CDs. Over time, I've learned the importance of

investing in professional development. The money we spend on people pays back great dividends in better instruction for kids.

Barringer: My doctorate focused on elementary education and I try to keep my staff up-to-date by developing teaching units and sharing them in person and on our Web site. Our administrators observe 16 classrooms every two weeks for 15 minutes of narrative (reflective personal conversation) journaling, focusing on good teaching habits, as well as student responses and initiations. This formative process allows teachers to chronicle their growth throughout the year.

Learner/Facilitator

Principals need to see the big picture and have a vision of where they want to go if they want to motivate and challenge others to grow and do their best. Vision is the anchor on which all school decisions are made. Most of all, they must model a pattern of continuous self-growth.

Matkin: It takes energy and time to stretch and grow, and I've never asked my staff to do anything I'm not willing to do with them. I attend teacher-development activities in order to keep informed as to what they have learned and are expected to implement. Sometimes it seems old because I've already been there and done that. But what I see and hear about their experience, or what they need to do, is invaluable in guiding their growth.

When I first started out, I didn't listen as much as I do now. Listening comes with increased confidence in the long term. It takes three to five years to develop perspective and maturity in working with staff, learning not to sweat small stuff, deciding what issues to deal with, and how to delegate responsibility.

Barringer: I'm an avid learner and I always accept challenges to learn more. In reflecting on my experience in other schools, my behaviors may not always have been what I would like. But in a new situation, I try to bring in the "good baggage" and not focus on my past

" ... the tasks today are more challenging than ever as [principals] seek ways to categorize and fit together a plethora of programs, plans, and promises ... "

experiences. Rather, I ask, "Is this good or is there something better?"

Researching, talking to people, and reflecting are part of a powerful leadership style, and faculty and staff will follow leaders who are also learners. I am always open to teachers who want to try something new, or approach a problem from a different perspective. As they grow, I grow as well.

CEO

The idea of principals as CEOs comes from the overall scope of responsibilities their role now encompasses. As chief executive officer, Matkin understands that she is expected to juggle these roles and be accountable for her school's success. Barringer believes that to be an effective CEO requires personal power.

Matkin: If and when things don't go well, the buck stops with me—no one else. I have lots of responsibilities and I'm never finished with the job; however, I never want to seem too busy for those who need me. I constantly struggle to remain approachable and to invest in staff, community, and students because they need to see my human side.

But I'm still the boss. That's the yin and yang of leadership. I'm getting better at it, but it's difficult.

Vision is what helps it all make sense and give purpose to our lives. Sustaining a vision requires sharing it, having people believe in it, and making it a characteristic of a high-performance learning culture.

Barringer: Being personable and approachable, knowing faculty and staff and their families, and recognizing their joys (births, birthdays, and awards) and sadness (illness, injuries, and deaths) are crucial to being a good administrator. The social aspect of a school family cannot be overlooked, and my presence at faculty cookouts (where I cook), celebrations, and other events all send a message that I'm approachable. Individual conferences that I hold twice a year with each staff member around a specific agenda send a similar message.

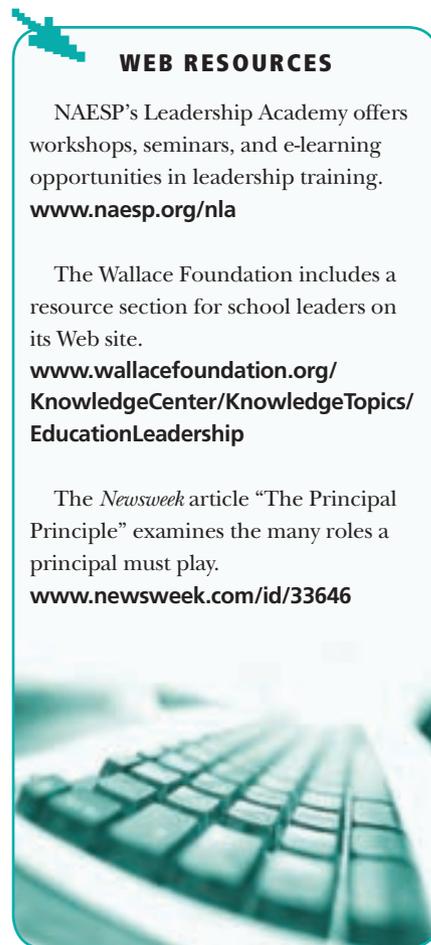
I define CEO as collaborative education officer. I don't mind being accountable for my decisions if I've been collaborative in my decision-making. When I speak, I feel that I speak for all of us. A few years ago, if someone said, "I don't agree" or "I'll appeal," it may have seemed threatening. I think I'm smarter now. I've learned to be more confident in my decision-making because I

WEB RESOURCES

NAESP's Leadership Academy offers workshops, seminars, and e-learning opportunities in leadership training.
www.naesp.org/nla

The Wallace Foundation includes a resource section for school leaders on its Web site.
www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/EducationLeadership

The *Newsweek* article "The Principal Principle" examines the many roles a principal must play.
www.newsweek.com/id/33646



research the issues and stay abreast of what's going on.

Technology Integrator

Technology is always changing and if you don't integrate it and use it consistently, you fall behind. Wearing the technology integrator hat, principals are responsible for adopting and using technology as a seamless part of their instructional programs. They must be current with respect to what is appropriate in all areas of technology integration.

Matkin: When we consider basic uses of technology, we are aware that not all of our parents have access to technology at home. Therefore, I have to keep an open mind about how to incorporate technology into my daily life and work. Nevertheless, I've made a conscious decision to embrace technology and not fight it—which is not easy for all folks. We cannot take people to places where we refuse to go.

“Principals need to see the big picture and have a vision of where they want to go if they want to motivate and challenge others to grow and do their best.”

Barringer: My school has state-of-the-art technology, including electronic whiteboards and ceiling-mounted projectors in every classroom. We try to make technology accessible to all, and I expect everyone to use it appropriately. But I've learned to not be a technology person for technology's sake. Technology can certainly make kids smarter, but it also can be a time-waster. Some technology that I used to think was wonderful I don't think is so wonderful

anymore. Looking back, I ask, “Did we accomplish more? Are the kids better prepared? Do they know more?”

The elementary principal has a difficult job that requires multiple skills. Since the skill requirements constantly change, the principal must constantly adapt. Thus, change is inevitable; flexibility is mandatory. Tough? Yes, but the joy is in the journey of growing and becoming a better person, a better administrator, and in knowing you are making a positive difference in children's lives. 

Bob Krajewski is a professor of educational studies at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse. His e-mail address is krajewsk.robe@uwlax.edu.

Reference

National Association of Elementary School Principals. (2001). *Leading learning communities: Standards for what principals should know and be able to do*. Alexandria, VA: National Association of Elementary School Principals.

Offer More. Offer Beta.

The National Beta Club is the nation's largest independent, non-profit educational youth organization. After nearly 75 years, The National Beta Club continues to serve as a preferred method for schools to honor character, leadership and service in addition to academic achievement.



Starting
a New Beta Club
is Easier than Ever.

visit www.betaclub.org

Beta Club at a Glance

- 416,000 Members in 44 States
- National Recognition for Achievement, Character, Leadership and Service
- Opportunities for Students in Grades 5-12
- \$250,000 in Scholarships Annually
- Local Chapter Flexibility and Authority
- Service Learning Projects
- Leadership Training Opportunities
- Friendly, Personal Support from National Headquarters

Copyright ©2007 The National Beta Club 151 Beta Club Way Spartanburg, SC 29306