Transforming Challenges Into Opportunities

Beginning a new school, or a new program within a school, offers a wealth of opportunities for school administrators. Before the opportunities can be realized, however, challenges must be overcome. District administrators, community members, school staff, and parents must be included in the process of developing appropriate programs for students.

Early in my administrative career, I was appointed principal of a new school where staff and students came from all elementary schools in our district. Our first priority was to develop an inclusive school culture, so prior to moving into the new facility, the staff worked diligently to become a team. We had to find our common focus and set standards for our students. We also worked with business partners and parents in a site-based council format to enhance our curriculum. Community partnerships soon developed.

The school’s identity gradually emerged into a sort of blended family. Growing pains were apparent and difficult, even after banning the phrase, “That’s not how we did it at my other school.” From these challenges, however, emerged countless opportunities. The commitment of a creative and thoughtful staff brought a diverse student population together to begin new traditions. Community pride blossomed as student achievement became apparent.

High expectations for all aspects of student development were essential. We had to find our voice and share it with all school stakeholders. We also collaborated to develop quality opportunities for student success. We found methods of meeting student needs when we focused our hearts and minds on this priority.

Through NAESP’s Mentor Program, I worked with a new principal who was working to shape a new alternative program into her building. I offered encouragement as she and her staff developed the plan that would best meet the needs of their students. We considered:

- Methods of working with the students who were placed for six weeks in the alternative program before returning to their home schools;
- Means of identifying the students’ academic needs;
- Strategies to evaluate student progress;
- Staff input into the total process for students;
- Obstacles to be faced throughout the process; and
- Communication with the students’ home schools.

Our district added STARS Academy Alternative Program to an established campus, but the program was met with many on-site, organizational challenges. A new principal may immediately feel a degree of inadequacy and apprehension when he or she must immediately revisit the original plan to determine potential process gaps. For me, this was a challenge since so many variables were at play.

I spent some time with my mentor and central office staff discussing the program’s current procedures for obtaining weekly lesson plans and activities from the visiting students’ home schools. The essential challenge we addressed was to seriously improve academic continuity despite a complex situation (different students at multiple levels, from multiple schools, arriving and exiting week to week).

My team conducted an on-site analysis—reviewing essential issues, current processes, and root causes—which revealed that there were active process and communication gaps affecting academic continuity.

With the support of my team, I developed the STARS Academic Continuity Process Flow Chart, an ongoing quality management plan that included regular reporting of academic continuity based on key performance indicators; ongoing monitoring, communication, and correction of issues; and continuous data analysis and improvement. I shared this process with secondary school principals, who then offered many invaluable suggestions that were added to the plan.

Undoubtedly, being a part of a school district that offers extensive central office support for new principals is certainly an advantage for any novice principal. NAESP’s Mentor Program has allowed me to bounce ideas and concerns off of a seasoned professional who has successfully faced and addressed many challenges. Each challenge that I face will be an opportunity to leverage district resources to enact positive, progressive change for my students, faculty, and staff.

As I reflect on my first year with my mentor and central office team, a few of the key lessons I have learned are to establish high expectations early, transform all challenges into opportunities, and to reflect for continuous improvement.

—Linda Harper

Debra Hildreth is the former principal of Rock Quarry Elementary School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Her e-mail address is hildrethmd@bellsouth.net.

Linda Harper is principal of Oak Hill School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Her e-mail address is lharper@tusc.k12.al.us.

Debra Hildreth and Linda Harper are mentor and protégé in the NAESP Mentor Program, where experienced school leaders mentor new and aspiring principals. For more information, visit www.naesp.org.
MISSION Possible:
Enrich Your World and Beyond

NAESP’s 89th Annual Convention & Exposition
Join us for learning, leading, and building community. April 8-11, 2010 • Houston, Texas

THE EVENT FOR PRE K-8 PRINCIPALS: CONVENTION • EXPOSITION HALL • NETWORKING

Current Speaker Lineup
GET FULL DETAILS AT WWW.NAESP.ORG

CHRIS GARDNER
CEO, Author of The Pursuit of Happyness and Motivational speaker

MARLEE MATLIN
Oscar-winning actress and advocate

GREG MORTENSON
Humanitarian, international peacemaker

NAESP’s 89th Annual Convention & Exposition • April 8-11, 2010 • Houston, Texas

www.naesp.org/2010

Register today and take advantage of discounted registration fees and great hotel rates!