Surviving and Thriving With Change

Ten years ago, I was placed at a school in a somewhat unconventional manner. After participating in the usual interviewing process and being selected at one school, the superintendent changed my placement to a school whose principal had been promoted to a central office position. I was directed to meet my supervisor at the school the next day to be introduced to the staff. While I was excited that I had met my professional goal of becoming a principal, I could only imagine what the staff of the school was thinking. Most likely it was, “Who is this person, who all of a sudden is our leader with no input from the staff or community?” Needless to say, I had my work cut out for me.

I followed advice from Michael Fullan, the noted author on change and school improvement, who became my mentor in absentia. I trusted the words he wrote in his timely paper, “The Role of the Head in School Improvement:” “There is no doubt … that effective schools virtually always have strong school leaders. The measure of a strong school leader is one who develops the school’s capacity to engage in reform—a capacity which is stronger at the end of the leader’s term than at the beginning.”

I knew that I had to secure in the staff and community a sense of trust, the belief that I had the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to lead, and the assurance that I would always put the needs of the students first. I spent eight successful years at that school and have a lifetime of wonderful memories and lasting friendships.

Now, as a veteran principal, my experiences have allowed me to take on the challenge of opening a new school in a new school district, as well as participating in NAESP’s Mentor Leadership Program. My protégé and I have had many opportunities to discuss the effects of creating a positive culture of change and I have left her with the following considerations to ponder:

- Each school community is unique. What are the qualities you feel will impact change in your school?
- Every school has its teacher-leaders (some self-proclaimed). How will you bring the staff together as a cohesive group, focused on the same goal?
- What are the lessons learned as you seek to create a climate of change and student achievement?

—I Angela Gwynne-Atwater

I have always aspired to be a principal, and when the opportunity arose I felt it was the right time to commit, even though the school year had already begun. Looking back, taking over a school midyear is not necessarily the best option for a new principal.

Change begins with transforming the mind-set of veteran teachers who are vested in the school community and who are adamant about doing things their way, regardless of new leadership. As the leader, I have my own vision for the school, and know the district has a mission and vision that I need to fulfill. But I spent the first few months simply getting to know the staff, students, and community, and a great deal of my time was spent on handling discipline issues that classroom teachers could have easily handled.

Bringing my staff together required looking for the best teacher leaders based on student assessment data and classroom management. I asked each teacher to become part of the school leadership team and last summer, I held a retreat for the team to set the tone for a positive school year and to bring the staff together as a cohesive group focused on a shared goal.

During the retreat, data was disaggregated, discussed, and compared to the year before. A needs assessment was conducted to see what strategies students needed to be successful. Team leaders were given the responsibility of delivering the goals and expectations for discussion in their grade-level meetings, and each team was asked to submit an action plan that detailed strategies to improve student achievement.

To be an effective principal, there are changes that must be made in the best interest of students. Creating a climate of change is an arduous task and beginning the principalship midyear didn’t help. There was no summer planning, no opportunity to analyze data for professional development, and no time to hire qualified teachers based on results. There was no first-day-of-school energy that is felt by teachers, staff, students, and parents.

In the past, discipline consumed most of my day, but now my focus will be on student achievement. I have learned that it is essential to plan and be organized. Visibility is important, as is the need for frequent data. A summer of preparation has made for a smooth beginning so far.

—Peggy Taylor

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Angela Gwynne-Atwater and Peggy Taylor are mentor and protégé in the NAESP Mentor Leadership Program, where experienced school leaders mentor new and aspiring principals. For more information, visit www.naesp.org.