

# The Real Work of the Principalship

Think back to when you first decided to become a teacher. If you're anything like me, you fondly remembered teachers who made a difference in your life and felt giddy about the relationships you'd build with students, about the positive mark you'd leave on their lives. Now fast-forward to when the principalship started appealing to you. "I want to make a difference for *all* students in my school," you probably thought. "I want to avoid administrative missteps I've observed as a teacher and run a truly great school."

Sound familiar? Our idealism when we enter school administration often focuses on students, on the opportunity to build relationships, to work one-on-one with the toughest kids, to ensure quality education for all. Once we enter the profession and get our feet under us, it turns out that the work of the principal poses significant challenges, stretches us thin, and often pulls us away from the students we all set out to serve. I've tackled many of these challenges while serving nine years as a principal and assistant principal at the middle level. Here are some pitfalls to avoid while getting to the real work of education.

## Distractions

In his study "What Doesn't Work in Education: The Politics of Distraction" (2015), John Hattie argues that education reform suffers due to pervasive "distractions," the tendencies of educators and policymakers to focus on the wrong things. Too often, educators get caught up in initiatives that make little or no difference in student learning. The principalship can easily go in this direction, with people working very hard on efforts that do little to drive students' growth in our schools.

Sure, there are lots of distractions in education, but what factor *does* make the biggest impact on student learning? Where should principals focus the most time, energy, and expertise? There is a very simple answer supported by tons of research: teacher quality.

## Teacher Quality

I'll get this point out of the way first. Principals and district leadership need the courage to help poor teachers find a new path in life. This is hugely important. The impact of poor-quality teaching on a year in a child's life is too significant to let slide. I imagine we agree on that aspect of the work despite how profoundly challenging it can be.

Next, and with much greater emphasis, comes the meat of my argument. Principals should spend most of their time focused on work that is proven to increase teacher quality. And I mean *proven*. Here is a list of focus areas that should occupy the professional lives of our nation's principals day in, day out:


- Ongoing and systematic teacher collaboration, such as the professional learning communities (PLC) model;
- Powerful, sustained mentoring programs and teacher apprenticeships that focus on proven teaching practices;
- Quality instructional coaching for all teachers;
- Cutting-edge classroom practices in assessment, instruction, and classroom management;
- A culture of peer observation, lesson study, and reflective practice; and
- Supervision and evaluation models that provide actionable feedback to teachers.

You can easily find extensive research to support each of these practices, demonstrating that each, if executed well, can improve teacher quality in schools and therefore dramatically improve student growth and learning.

And yet, it's so easy to get sidetracked. We find ourselves reconfiguring master schedules, searching exhaustively for new curriculum, securing new technologies for classrooms, or coordinating volunteers to help out in our schools. We organize Title I nights, manage tree-nut-free tables in the lunchroom, and ensure that parent newsletters get into backpacks every Wednesday. In no way am I suggesting that we shouldn't do this work, which is often required by our districts and states. My point is that these pursuits will never improve student learning in the way that developing our teachers will.

## The Real Work

We answered the calling of education with students as our focus, dreaming of spending our days in classrooms full of children who will one day build our nation's future. But the reality of the principalship is just not that simple. If we hope to make a difference for kids and live up to the lofty dreams of our youth, principals must focus on teachers, on improvement through systematic collaboration, on growing educators beyond what even they believed possible. This is my own ongoing challenge as an educational leader.

As for my colleagues around the country, I invite you to look at the list above, pick one focus that makes the most sense for your school right now, avoid the distractions, and get to work improving teachers for the sake of the children. Let's roll up our sleeves. This is the real work of the principalship. 

---

**Mitch Craft**, a former middle-level principal, is the curriculum and assessment director for Sheridan County School District No. 2 in Wyoming. He is a 2016 National Distinguished Principal.