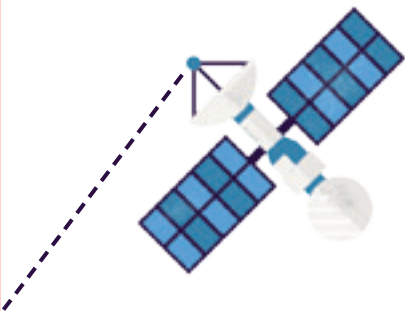


# ORCHESTRATING LEADERSHIP

Principals lead by skillfully conducting their orchestras of staff and students for overall school improvement





BY JENNIFER FINK

**T**ransitioning a third-grade teacher from the classroom to physical education was one of the most strategic moves Emily Miles has made as a principal.

The teacher, Miles says, was great at building relationships with students, but not as effective as other teachers in helping students meet academic benchmarks. The teacher was also a certified yoga instructor with a deep personal interest in health and fitness. Miles asked her if she would consider teaching physical education.

When she was principal at Montclair Elementary School, one of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina, Miles lacked an effective PE teacher. (Miles is currently principal at Sterling Elementary School, another school in the district.) “So, I pitched it to her,” she says of her conversation with the third-grade teacher. “I told her she could use her experience as a classroom teacher to really bring academics into PE. She ended up taking the exam she needed to be a PE teacher, and now she’s one of

the best PE teachers I’ve ever seen.”

According to The Wallace Foundation’s 2013 report *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning*, effective principals consistently implement five key practices. Miles’ teacher transition is a good illustration of key practice No. 5: Principals manage people, data, and processes with the goal of school improvement. In essence, good principals orchestrate leadership.

Much as orchestra conductors select, organize, and train the best instrumentalists with consideration as to how each individual’s skills complement those of the others, principals manage and educate school staff, making sure that the right people are filling the right roles. Conductors choose music based on the interests and skills of the orchestra, with an ear toward the needs of the orchestra’s patrons—just as principals prioritize educational initiatives and processes based on the talents and needs of the school community. Conductors do what they can to ensure that the orchestra collectively has what it needs

to succeed; principals do the same for their schools.

And just as a conductor stands in front of an orchestra, directing the group in real time—a wave of the arm requesting more sound from the horns at one point or calling on the percussion to speed up or slow down—principals are constantly listening and readjusting. Like conductors, principals use their expertise to recognize areas that need improvement, and they clearly communicate their vision to all members of their team.

Here’s what that looks like in practice.

### Managing People

“When I hire people, I’m not only looking for skill, because if you’re lacking skills, I can coach you through that,” says Carmen Concepción, principal of Oaklawn Language Academy in Charlotte, North Carolina. “I’m looking for the dynamic of the person. A positive outlook. Someone who is very hardworking.”

As a Spanish immersion magnet school, Oaklawn recruits teachers from around the world. Approximately

one-quarter of the school's staff members are visiting international faculty that work at the school for five years before returning to their home countries.

Concepción devotes time and energy to getting to know each of her teachers and support staff. "When we don't have relationships, we have blind spots," she says. "As principals, relationships are so important because we can't do everything. We're not omnipotent. I want people to feel comfortable enough to come to me and tell me what isn't working, or what's working really well."

Building relationships with school staff also helps principals better

understand—and meet—the needs of educators. When Miles took over the principalship of Sterling Elementary in July 2017, she realized that staff retention was one of the school's most pressing issues, as only a handful of staffers had been at the school for more than five years.

"The first thing I decided to do was meet with the teachers and get a feel for where they've been and what they see this school becoming," Miles says. "I spent a lot of time getting to know them and found out that culture and morale were big issues. A lot of people didn't like coming to work."

Because the school was failing academically, previous school leaders increased the emphasis on academics. The pressure was extreme, and teachers felt like there was no room for fun. Miles made space for fun, while maintaining high academic expectations.

"You have to have a balance between culture and academic press," Miles says. "Let's have fun and make the joy happen, but also give assessments to make sure we're on track."

### Managing Data

Simply collecting data is not enough. Effective principals, like the best



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—Emily Miles, principal, Sterling Elementary School, Pineville, NC

Photos courtesy of Lifetouch Photography

conductors, use feedback to make both short- and long-term improvements.

When Mark Angerer took over as principal of Bruns Academy, a low-achieving K–8 school in Charlotte, he crunched the available data to look for possible quick wins, as well as opportunities for improvement over time.

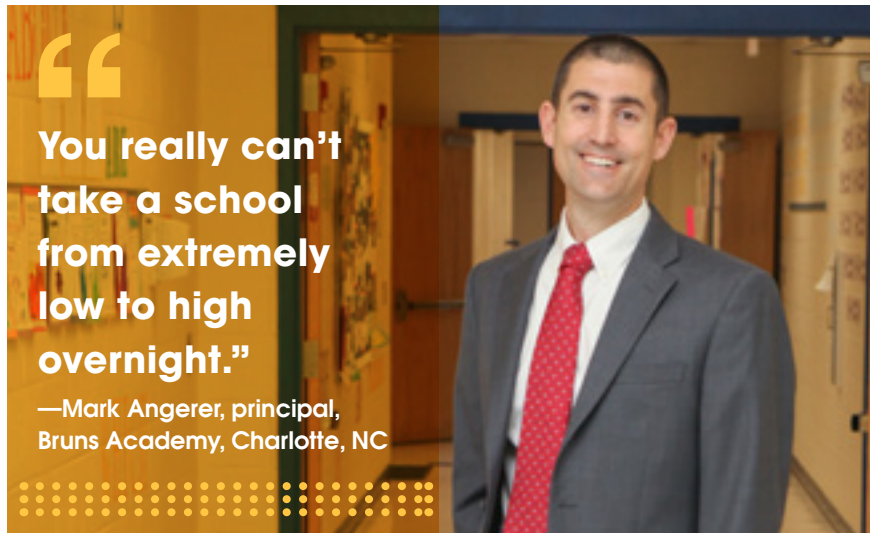
“Bruns Academy was the lowest-achieving school within the traditional school district, with just 18 percent of scholars on grade level,” Angerer says. “You really can’t take a school from extremely low to high overnight.”

Devoting some immediate time and attention to areas that could see improvement with just a little effort allows the entire team—staff and students alike—to experience success and satisfaction. Those small successes build confidence and give staff members the encouragement and stamina they need to work toward longer-term improvements.

Along those lines, Concepción has built in time to analyze data, set goals, and assess progress toward benchmarks. Schoolwide goals are set at the beginning of the school year and re-examined in January. When the school staff decided to reduce the amount of homework assigned to students, the January check-in included questions such as, “Do you feel like your students are lagging behind?” and “What kind of reaction are you getting from parents?”

“It’s very important to have check-in points,” Concepción says. “We’ll keep going if it’s working, and trash it or make adjustments as needed if it’s not.”

Concepción has also created a data protocol that she uses with staff to analyze student assessment results.



## Leadership 101

Principals at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina share their most common leadership practices.

**RECRUIT FOR PERSONAL DYNAMICS OVER SKILL.** Skills are teachable, but having a positive outlook and being a hard worker are invaluable traits to have in a staff member.

**GET TO KNOW YOUR STAFF.** Building relationships helps build morale, and it will make your staff feel comfortable enough to tell you what is and isn’t working.

**USE FEEDBACK TO MAKE BOTH SHORT- AND LONG-TERM IMPROVEMENTS.** Small successes can boost staff confidence and give the motivation to tackle longer-term improvements.

**ESTABLISH CHECK-IN POINTS FOR BENCHMARKS.** This allows you to maintain momentum if a strategy is working, or make adjustments if it’s not.

**BUILD PROTOCOLS.** Create processes for practices such as new teacher onboarding and professional development, which facilitates order and consistency across the staff.

**BE PREPARED TO IMPROVISE.** Principalship is not a perfect science. Part of the job means being able to successfully prioritize issues as they present themselves.



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—Carmen Concepción, principal, Oaklawn Language Academy, Charlotte, NC

"We really dig into the data to determine action items and next steps," she says. "We determine from the data what students need—these kids need to be remediated on this particular standard, these can be enriched."

### Managing Processes

Because Concepción has new teachers rotating into (and out of) Oaklawn Academy on a regular basis, she devoted extra effort to establishing onboarding processes for international teachers.

"Previously, there was a negative dynamic between the English and the Spanish teachers because there weren't supports in place to support the Spanish teachers, so that fell to the English teachers," Concepción says. "Processes were lacking, and therefore people were not fitting well together."

So, now, when Concepción hires an international teacher, she sends them two books by Harry Wong; the books introduce American education and include classroom management

tips. When the teachers arrive in the United States, they engage in differentiated professional development that includes logistical information—such as how to make copies and log on to the school's attendance system—and curricular details.

"Once we put those processes in place, people were able to relax and create the relationships we need to be effective," Concepción says.

In his first year at Bruns, Angerer is also focusing on process. He says that as the school prepares to transition to a magnet school over the next few years, "we've put in some systems and are partnering up with people." Angerer has systematically scheduled time to attend school board meetings, build relationships with stakeholders, and get positive information about his school out into the community.

"I've been on the news more over the few months I've been principal at Bruns than I ever was at my previous school," Angerer says. "This year, we're really working on setting up some

wraparound services to support both students and parents."

At the same time, Angerer is taking care not to move too quickly or introduce too many changes all at once. "I didn't want to come in all gangbusters and say it's time to wipe the slate," he says. "So, we build protocols and expectations. You monitor. You coach. You conference."

Effective principals are prepared to improvise. Much as a masterful conductor has the ability to make an "off" note feel like an essential part of a performance, a great principal knows when to highlight beauty and back off from challenges.

"You've got to kind of roll with the punches as you see what comes at you," Miles says. "You learn how to be really good at prioritizing 'this has to happen right now' and 'that's going to have to wait a bit.'" •

*Jennifer Fink is senior editor of Principal magazine.*