



## Taking Temporary Leave

**Maternity requires preparation for a principal's absence and return**

BY RYAN DANIEL

**W**hen my husband and I found out I was pregnant in January 2019, there was excitement, joy, and happiness. Then reality kicked in: I was going to go on maternity leave just one month into a new school year. As a single administrator, you can only imagine the anxiety that I felt.

The questions began immediately. Who would replace me during my absence? What information should they know about the staff? Would they continue lunch with the principal? Planning for an extended absence as a school leader is a difficult task—there are so many things that need to get done, so you must start as soon as you can.

### **Preparation Pays**

I was fortunate that my secretary and I got the jump on planning for my absence fast, because my daughter arrived on the Sunday after my last Friday student “lunch bunch.” Even with plans in place, however, it was difficult to separate myself mentally from the building. I wouldn’t be able to get this time back, so I wanted to ensure that I could enjoy it with my daughter.

Three things helped me turn my building and school community over to the substitute principal:

- 1. Initiating a conversation with the substitute before the transition.** Although the substitute principal was not able to meet the staff prior to her first day, we had an extensive conversation beforehand. We took that time to get to know one another, and I shared information that would help her in the role.
- 2. Equipping the substitute with resources.** We created a binder of resources and important information to which the substitute principal could refer in my absence. This helped her lead and decreased the number of times she needed to reach out to me. The resources included key information about staff members (performance issues, family concerns, attendance, etc.), student information, a master schedule, and monthly calendars of events.
- 3. Trusting my staff.** I have a dynamic leadership team, and I learned to trust them more through this experience.

Expectations and responsibilities were established at the outset, and every member of the team was able to satisfy them in my absence. I also communicated roles and responsibilities to my instructional director, who supported the school consistently during the transition.

### Transitioning Back

Coming back to the principal's desk felt like my first year all over again. I walked back into my building and felt so unprepared. When the substitute principal and I met to transition me back into the building, I remember sitting there, feeling completely clueless.

Transitioning back to your school building after a leave of absence is also difficult. The first few weeks were a roller coaster of emotions. I had to rely on others for information in order to bring me up to speed on multiple issues. Try these two strategies to help with the transition:

- 1. Take an observation role for the first few weeks.** You're new again, so you have to see how all of the pieces have moved in your absence. Take notes and slowly begin to address behaviors, concerns, and questions.
- 2. Hold an assembly and staff meeting during the first week back.** Set expectations for your school community now that you're back in the building. Offer appreciation to the substitute principal and celebrate the successes that occurred in your absence. I used this time to remind students of our school's "Champion" expectations and set a course for the remainder of the year for the staff.

## Even with plans in place, it was difficult to separate myself mentally from the building.

Speaking as a member of the #MomsAsPrincipals group online, I found it difficult to balance the roles of mother and principal. I remember having a hard time being present for my newborn and other children while trying to stay on top of things happening in the building. After a month of trying to be a principal and welcome a newborn at the same time, I had to choose.

I distinguished between home and work, and I communicated the boundaries. I cut back to weekly check-in meetings with my secretary and leadership team, giving them 30 minutes to share anything of extreme importance. These opportunities allowed me the chance to stay in the loop and prepare for my eventual return.

While spending time away was difficult, I learned how to support my community and leadership team in different ways. The time away also uncovered areas of my leadership and the school's structure that needed revision. That school year will always feel incomplete, but it made me a stronger leader and showed me the importance of creating a balance between home and work. ●

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### Questions for Reflection

- **Have you briefed your substitute sufficiently?** If they're aware of the specific issues, procedures, and personalities that make your school unique, they will be better prepared for the everyday rigors of running it.
- **Have you provided binders that outline operational procedures, personnel, instructional plans, and important dates?** The more you can commit to writing before you leave, the fewer questions you'll have to field during your time away.
- **Still feeling out of touch?** Establish regular conference calls or meetings with your substitute and leadership team via an online platform, and you'll be able to address or assist with most nonurgent issues at a specific, scheduled time.