



## But First, Relationships

**New principals must prioritize and simplify their goals while continually building stakeholder trust**

BY M. DIANE McCORMICK

**N**ew principals could be forgiven for believing that every task belongs at the top of their must-do list. Not so, say veteran principals. Instead, prioritize. Simplify. In the first two years, concentrate on key leadership skills that plant deep roots for future growth, while cultivating personal wellness habits that keep the body healthy and the mind sharp.

Prioritizing is a foundational approach outlined in The Wallace Foundation-supported research synthesis, “How Principals Affect Students and Schools.” The researchers say that effective principals focus on four key behaviors: creating instructionally focused interactions with teachers, establishing productive school climates, building collaboration and professional learning communities, and developing strategic processes for resource and personnel management.

Ask top principals their shorthand for early-career simplification, and all agree that relationships open the door to everything that follows. And as seen in the Wallace-

supported research, interaction with people is a key skill set built on the interrelated components of caring, communication, and building trust. Here’s some advice principals offered for the initial years in the role:

### **Get to Know People**

- “As eager as I was to turn things around in my first year as principal, I received good advice from veteran principals: Don’t be so quick to judge people. Spend time with them. Get to know the community. I spent a lot of time in classrooms. I visited lots and lots of families. I got to know the neighborhood, the staff. I went into the teachers’ lounge and learned about their fami-

lies. I got to know them in and out of school, so we had a positive relationship. When it came time to say, 'Here's where the rubber meets the road,' they understood where I came from."

- "Professional learning communities are the teams that support the school mission and vision. Make sure that you are listening to people and hearing their concerns, that they have a voice, and that everyone is part of that process. It doesn't just fall on you. It's *our* school. It's not your school."

—Amy Denney, principal, Perry Creek Elementary School, Sioux City, Iowa

### Focus on Simplicity and Climate

- "My whole first year was during COVID, so it was about simplicity. I didn't want to stress teachers out, because the situation itself was stressful. As a new principal, I was not looking to change anything. I was trying to keep everything pretty much what they had done the year prior."
- "My whole focus—past the simplicity—was the climate of the school and of the kids and of the community. I used social media a lot. I did morning announcements via Facebook Live. I called out birthdays. The culture was to still have parents feel a part of the school that they couldn't come into. With the teachers, I did things to make them enjoy coming to school when they never knew from week to week what was going to happen. On the 100th day of school, I gave two teachers each 100 \$1 bills, with a sticky note on each bill indicating a reason why I was proud to be their principal. These were things to appreciate the teachers—to make them feel good about our situation despite what was happening around us."

—Farrell Thomas, principal, Waterloo Elementary School, Greenville, South Carolina

As the researchers note, the ability of principals to develop and demonstrate a sense of caring for their teachers "can be a factor in positive relationship development."

### Commit to Improving School Culture

- "At a previous assignment, we felt that school culture needed a close look. We did a self-assessment using the 'School Culture Rewired' typology, identifying things we did well and things we needed to work on. I asked staff—myself included—to make personal goals around 'What I'm going to do to improve the culture.' Be willing to admit to and confront those things you know you need to work on, and make a collective commitment."
- "One of the things I learned to help change the culture was me pushing myself to be more transparent and collaborative in my decision-making. When people get a chance to hear you think out loud about what we're all



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confronted with, they get a sense of how you approach decision-making, and that breeds trust. It also gives them a sense of having control over the situation when they're asked what they think. You are truly saying, 'I didn't think about that,' and you change your plan."

—Justin Swope, Principal, Gene George Elementary School, Springdale, Arkansas

What makes a strong school climate? According to one study cited in the synthesis, it typically features collaboration, engagement with data, organizational learning, and "a culture of continuous improvement and 'academic optimism.'"

**Listen and Build Instructional Strength**

• "In my first year, I focused on building trusting relationships. That meant being able to be vulnerable upfront, to say clearly, 'I don't know. I need to find out.' I was never one who felt pressure to have all the answers. Every time I have changed positions, especially in the principalship, I have sat down with every individual and asked, 'What's going well? What can be improved? What can I do to help and support you?' You listen—really listen—and then act on what you hear."

• "Building instructional strength is absolutely a priority. That's the core business of teaching and learning. Put those non-negotiables on your planner first. If you're not intentional about how you're spending your time, it can be easy to get swept away with things that feel important but are not urgent."

—Latoya Dixon, director of early childhood, elementary, and gifted education, York School District, York, South Carolina

"Successful principals," the report says, "communicate purposefully, implementing strategies such as open-door policies, sending weekly emails with information staff need and recognition of staff contributions, and being willing to have challenging conversations with staff when necessary." ●

M. Diane McCormick is a Pennsylvania-based freelance writer and author.

**3 Tips to Prioritize Wellness**



**SCHOOL LEADERS AGREE** that weaving personal well-being into your professional priorities makes you a better leader, prepared to manage distractions and focus on goals. Their advice:

1. Schedule wellness in your calendar, including workouts and family activities.
2. Don't take work home; work hard and "home" hard, as Swope puts it.
3. Find mentors who will guide your social-emotional wellness as well as your professional progress. "I came to a realization that the work has no finish line," says Dixon. "Like a hiker on an arduous trail stops for rest, water, and food, you have to treat the leadership journey the same way."



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