

Leadership Strategies for New and Aspiring Administrators

By Dan Schroer and Janet Baughn

School leadership is rewarding and challenging. Driving education to become data based and student centered is rewarding, as administrators and teachers make a positive difference in the lives of students. However, school leadership has its challenges, as administrators work to implement fair and consistent student discipline and keep positive relationships with parents and stakeholders.

We got together to brainstorm what we felt was the ticket to success for administrators. The strategies provided in this article are based upon 13 years of collective administrative leadership as well as from the advice gained from many professional mentors. At no point will we say that we have all of the answers or that these are the best strategies for everyone. We are only saying that these strategies have been helpful in our years of education.

Teaming

An important part of effective administration is developing a team concept. The staff should be a part of the educational team. Involve staff in all areas

of school district initiatives and school committees. Having teachers help plan staff development days and using those experts to share their best practices have resulted in some of the most beneficial staff development days.

Staff members work with students every day and are the best resource in determining student needs. Administrators need to listen to the staff and develop a “we work together” attitude. We have enjoyed working with staff, as the conversations have made us better administrators.

Integrity

Administrators must “practice what they preach.” If there are policies or rules that staff members follow, an administrator must follow them as well. A building leader earns respect and gains knowledge of the school building by “leading by walking around.” We have learned so much about our respective school programs by spending time in the classrooms and laboratories talking to students and teachers.

A school administrator also must have the backbone to make decisions, but when those decisions are wrong, a good leader will admit the mistake, seek input for solutions, and move forward with a better plan. Remember, you cannot make everyone happy. A good administrator will take a stand when it is the right thing to do, even if it is not popular. Having that mentor to help steer you through the rocky times not only gives you a clear perspective, but also can help you think through challenging situations. Chances are good that those who serve as mentors have dealt with similar circumstances, and

their expertise can be very valuable.

Communications

Administrator communications should be timely and positive. An effective administrator will practice two-way communication and will have an open-door policy with all staff members. Most importantly, any potentially emotional issue or important issue must be communicated face to face or over the phone if a face-to-face meeting cannot occur. E-mail and written letters are ineffective and poor ways to communicate these important issues. Written forms can be used as follow-up memos, but never as the first form of communication.

An effective administrator will also communicate with the stakeholders. Effective communications with parents, postsecondary schools, business and industry leaders, the state department of education, and neighboring school districts can only aid in the educational options for the students.

Knowledge

An effective administrator will use data and research to make decisions. Data-based decisions can guide effective instruction. Making decisions without data cannot drive education in the correct direction. When making decisions, documenting those decisions is very important. In terms of student discipline issues or staff meetings, the information must be documented so that all parties are treated fairly.

Developing knowledge is also very helpful. Selecting administrative mentors will help in your education process. Each of us has worked with professional mentors throughout our educational

careers. Being able to “bounce” ideas off of another leader and share information will allow your educational growth to remain positive. Shadowing other administrators will help you understand all educational environments.

There is no such thing as a typical day for an administrator. It is common to go into work planning to cross off items on the “to do” list, only to find by the end of the day that the list has grown. It is still important to find time to attend workshops and professional meetings. Taking time to network with other administrators at meetings is as important as coming back with information or strategies to

help improve your school.

Enjoy the Game

Students and staff need to be congratulated on outstanding effort. As educational leaders, your encouragement will definitely bring about a positive attitude. That encouragement needs to occur on a regular basis. The encouragement can be as simple as a congratulatory card or letter or giving praise in a staff meeting.

Participatory management is the key to enjoying your profession. Spending time in the classrooms, at school events and at after-school events will show students and staff that you care,

and will help you learn more about the programs, students and staff.

Again, life as an administrator can be hectic, but taking time out to enjoy the game or to celebrate those successes and to laugh and put things into perspective are key to maintaining the positive attitude needed in this position.

Taking Chances

It is important to take chances and try new things in terms of educational leadership. As administrators, our learning continues every day. It is important to find ways to better lead the staff and students. Administrators need to stay in touch with new educational innovations and make every attempt to increase the quality of instruction and curriculum development.

It is also important to step back and evaluate the new initiatives. Gathering input from staff and students and collecting data are ways to check on progress. It is all right to admit that something isn't working and to move in a different direction. If staff sees that you are willing to try new things and admit mistakes, they will be more willing to do the same.

A Rewarding Journey

We both have quite a few years to go in our professional careers and know that we will continue to face challenges along the way. We feel fortunate that we have been able to share ideas and brainstorm solutions with each other over the past six years. It is our hope that new administrators will find our ticket to success helpful to them as they embark upon their journey to a rewarding and challenging career. ■

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First down and life to go

For new and aspiring administrators we prepared a list of specific things that can be done to get into the game.

Eight Things That You Can Do Tomorrow

1. **Group activity at a staff meeting.** Games can bring a group together. Make sure you have gifts!
2. **Schedule one day a week to “walk around.”** The staff and students will enjoy your presence, and you will have a better handle as to the activities of the programs.
3. **Weekly update e-mail.** Include student and staff success stories as well as school activities.
4. **Update for stakeholders.** Keep the stakeholders informed as to student and staff success. This includes parents, postsecondary leaders, associate schools, business and industry, and the department of education.
5. **Birthday cards for staff signed by the administrative team.** Obtain the list of birthdays from human resources and purchase birthday cards for the entire staff.
6. **Occasion cards in your desk drawer.** Keep thank you, anniversary, wedding, baby born, sympathy and congratulations cards for special occasions.
7. **Bulletin board for student/teacher pictures.** A teacher team can keep this updated with pictures of school events.
8. **Select three to five mentors.** These people can help you with professional decisions.

Five Things for the Future

1. **Staff Appreciation Committee.** Select a team of staff members who develop fun activities/awards for your staff.
2. **Student Leadership Council.** This group of student leaders can represent all areas of your building.
3. **Junior Activity Day.** This event is specific for career-technical schools but can be related to any school setting. This is an event that welcomes new students with fun games that are led by staff.
4. **Celebrate success through staff awards.** Awards such as “most respected,” “best smile” and “funniest” can improve staff morale.
5. **CTSO Officer Workshop.** This professional development workshop can develop professional skills of student leaders.