

The Role of the Assistant Principal



THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR (DOL) DESCRIBES THE ROLE of the assistant principal as aiding the principal in the overall administration of the school—such a simple description for a job filled with complexity. Assistant principals may be responsible for tasks that include scheduling classes, ordering textbooks and supplies, and coordinating transportation, custodial, cafeteria and other support services. Responsibility for student discipline and attendance problems, as well as health and safety matters, often rests on the shoulders of the assistant principal. They also may offer personal, educational and career counseling to students.

While small schools may have a single assistant principal, the number on staff usually depends on the number of students enrolled at the school; where the job takes them depends on the individuals. The DOL notes that some are assistant

principals for a few years while preparing to become principals, while others remain as assistant principals for the rest of their careers.

All across the country, there are a number of outstanding assistant principals serving their schools, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) recognizes these individuals through its annual award program. The NASSP State and National Assistant Principal of the Year Award Program honors “outstanding secondary school leaders who have succeeded in providing high-quality learning opportunities for students.” Recipients of the award have demonstrated excellence in areas that include collaborative leadership, personalization, curriculum, instruction and assessment. In 2008, Mitchell Weiss of Howard High School of Technology was named the assistant principal of the year for the state of Delaware.

Evelyn Edney, the principal at Howard says, “Mitchell Weiss is more than an assistant. He is like having another principal around me. When my three assistant principals sit at the table to make decisions, we do it as a team, a unit. Assistant principals are invaluable to the smooth operations in the running of a school. Mitch is top notch and makes everyday decisions that I do not even have to think about. When I give Mitch a task, it will get completed and then some!”

Weiss notes that the tasks associated with his job tend to fall into two broad categories—instructional and organizational. He describes the organizational items as those responsibilities that serve to support the climate of the school and the well-being of its students, including guidance, discipline, testing, student supervisions and interactions with the community.

“The challenge I often see is to manage these important responsibilities in



an efficient manner that allows me to focus on what I enjoy most as an assistant principal—the opportunity to provide instructional leadership,” says Weiss. “I am lucky enough to work at a school that provides both opportunities for professional development and a staff that is strongly interested in getting better every day.”

The jobs of teachers and administrators are very challenging, but for Weiss, working in collaboration with other teachers and administrators on a daily basis to solve any problems the school might face is what makes it so rewarding. “There are few things more gratifying than when a new program, curriculum or instructional strategy begins to show results, and I know that my teachers are helping students in a way that has never happened in the past,” Weiss explains.

There is one challenge to the job that Weiss says supersedes everything else—time. While he believes that almost any problem can be solved given sufficient time to tackle it, he adds, “Unfortunately, there is just never enough time to do everything an assistant principal wants to do to meet the needs of students and staff. As a result, one of the items I’ve put more and more

focus on in my seven years as an assistant principal is how I use my time in school. More than ever, I now try to develop simple rather than complex plans, I try to prioritize on what’s most important, not what’s most immediate, and when I can, I try to delegate.”

One of the things he has learned: The more time he spends informally in classes, the fewer e-mails and drop-in meetings he has later on. He also finds that consistent communication with instructors can prevent many problems that could have become hugely time-consuming problems at a later date. Weiss feels that a great deal can be learned from being an assistant principal; he has been lucky enough to have had many different responsibilities over the years, including being a supervisor of approximately 15 different career and technical areas. Being an assistant principal also opens up other avenues of opportunity, including a job as a principal.

“In the best situations, assistant principals have been constantly prepared for this change by their principals through the responsibilities assigned to them over time,” says Weiss. “That way, assistants arrive in

the job at least somewhat prepared for all of the new challenges they will face.”

Another path an assistant principal might take is to move into a leadership role outside the school but still within the district. Weiss notes that this might be an instructional position, a supervisory position, or some combination of the two. He believes that an ideal position for many assistant principals following this avenue would allow for instructional leadership across several schools without isolating them from the teachers and students.

“Assistant principals who move outside the school still need to get into schools, work with teachers and students, and use those practical ‘nuts and bolts’ skills they worked so hard to develop as a school administrator,” Weiss says.

Weiss notes that being an administrator in a career and technical school is really different from working in a traditional school, largely in the breadth of content awareness that is needed. He supervises both academic areas and career-tech areas.

“Welding is completely different from culinary arts, and nursing is completely different from software, and plumbing is completely different from electronics,” explains Weiss, who also has a background as an English teacher. “Although there are many, many similarities between the knowledge needed to run a successful career class, there are some legitimate differences as well. It is imperative that new assistant principals in career and technical schools take the time to learn about the careers they supervise. Only then will they have the skills necessary to give back to the career and help the instructor to even greater success.”

There is one more responsibility that Weiss feels is important in his position, and that is to educate others about career and technical education. “Many people outside of technical schools don’t understand what we do or what our mission is,” he says. “It is important for the continued health of our programs that we continually demonstrate for those outside the system just what an added value we bring.” ■