The Potency of the Principalship: Action-Oriented Leadership at the Heart of School Improvement

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Acknowledgement

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Foreword

As part of her third grade Social Studies curriculum, my daughter recently went on a field trip designed to explore historical landmarks within our Connecticut town. One of their first stops was a tour of the Wallop School Museum, a one room, brick schoolhouse built in 1800 and currently maintained by the Enfield Historical Society. While she excitedly shared the details of handmade wooden and metal desks built to seat two students and the fact that students were required to carry in the firewood used to heat their schoolhouse, my mind explored how these early learning environments had morphed into our modern day public schools.

Given the professional conversations and interactions that I had with the school leaders in my district earlier that day, I was especially focused on the responsibilities of current principals. Conversations regarding the integration of virtual reality software, teacher evaluation, school safety drills, benchmark assessments, and the use of social media platforms to communicate with parents and community members had clearly delineated the stark differences between the responsibilities of today's school leaders and those associated with the earliest schools. Further consideration on the topic highlighted the fact that the one room schoolhouse was the starting point of an educational timeline that has witnessed a complete transformation of the role of the school principal, with significant changes happening almost annually as a result of myriad economic, political, societal, and community events and circumstances.

According to the Wallace Foundation (2013), the five key functions of principal leadership are establishing a vision of academic success for all students, creating a climate that supports learning, developing leadership within the school, improving instructional practice and managing resources in order to reach the established vision. Multiple research findings have confirmed that school leadership is the second most important school-based factor in a child's academic achievement, second only to teacher effectiveness (Wallace Foundation, 2013; National Association of Secondary School Principals and National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013).

Anyone who has recently spent time in a school, especially those schools struggling with the effects of poverty, knows that the key functions of a school principal are much easier to write about than to actually achieve. The work of a 21st century school principal requires an individual to simultaneously be a visionary and a conformist, a leader and a follower, an inspiration and a task

master. The contradictory nature of the role comes from principals having a range of leadership responsibilities while filling the middle management rung on their district's organizational ladder. They are held accountable for leading their buildings forward to new levels of practice and student achievement while simultaneously asked to ensure that the district's vision, however traditional, is clearly evident in their approach. They may be asked to adhere to the policies and procedures adopted by their school district in response to a past event or legislative movement, while simultaneously tasked to be forward thinking in their improvement efforts.

Developing and sustaining a school vision that mandates academic success for all students is both noble and moral; yet this effort is further complicated by federal and state mandates seeking to eliminate achievement gaps that exist across the country for students identified in racial and socioeconomic subgroups. Hansen, Levesque, Quintero, and Valant (2018) looked at the latest National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) results, to discover that the nation has made progress over the past decade narrowing the achievement gap between white students and their black and Hispanic counterparts yet has failed to close the gap between students living in poverty and their wealthier cohort. While the teachers and staff members in a given building are obviously sharing in the efforts to ensure equity in achievement, the contributions of a school principal are often highly scrutinized despite national trends suggesting the difficulty of such an undertaking. The educational leaders of our earliest schools could not have imagined the level of accountability related to student achievement that would become commonplace for our modern-day principals.

Principals are charged with developing and supporting a vision of academic success for all as well as with ensuring the school climate is conducive to learning. This climate is the foundation by which all school improvements are built. Principals who develop climates that value and empower teachers and students will be more likely to maximize their instructional time and regularly produce tangible examples of student learning. To do this effectively, school principals must address classroom management, inclusive practices, staff collaboration, student discipline, parent communication, data analysis and scheduling to name just a few. As one would imagine, any of the aforementioned topics could by itself require a great deal of time, human capital and fiscal resources (National Association of Secondary School Principals and National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013).

Most principals, however, are expected to address several of these key areas concurrently, while also acting as the primary disciplinarian and parent contact of their school. In larger schools where a team of principals and vice prin-

cipals share these duties, the principal is then responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of the team and its individual as well.

Principals must work collaboratively with students, teachers, support personnel, families and the community at large in order to ensure a school climate and culture that supports their academic vision. Modern day societal circumstances are often working against the school principals as a recent survey reports that more than half of the nation's children below the age of 12 have experienced one or more forms of serious trauma (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, 2014). This statistic has significant implications on the kinds of learning environments our students require, the types of behaviors they exhibit and the likelihood they will achieve grade level expectations. Nonetheless, principals are charged to develop and maintain a school culture that affirms the worth and diversity of all its members, thereby ensuring they reach their fullest potential.

On a national scale, the recent teacher evaluation movement has more clearly defined the systematic process of teacher accountability used to reach the achievement goals that guide the work of our principals (Huber & Skedsmo, 2016). The level with which a school leader provides instructional leadership is a key factor in school and district success. Instructional leadership is a series of actions that positively contribute to the consistent implementation of research-based practices within a school. The school principal is often the only staff member to actually observe the entire teaching staff; thus, the modern-day principal is expected to have expertise in curriculum, instruction, assessment, and classroom environments. By developing the kinds of relationships that allow teachers to be open to receiving actionable feedback, building principals can ensure high quality instruction is delivered on a daily basis in their classrooms.

Principals are also expected to provide meaningful professional development, encourage staff members to observe expert colleagues in action, and support coaching and mentoring opportunities with and amongst their staff members (National Association of Secondary School Principals and National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013). It is through the lens of instructional leadership that principals are able to be the kind of inspirational cheerleader that motivates teachers to take risks that will improve their instructional practice. Opportunities to delegate and share leadership responsibilities centered on instructional improvements are also a prudent decision given the level of accountability and the limited time school principals have.

Principals who work to develop teacher leaders and functional teacher teams within their buildings will increase the likelihood that the change effort

is organically grown and maintained. While instructional leadership and the development of a shared leadership model requires a steep time commitment, principals who positively increase the collective efficacy of their staff members are more likely to see higher results in student achievement and staff satisfaction. Unfortunately, things like school safety concerns and student discipline often pull principals away from the very classrooms that need the instructional leadership they are required to provide.

Today's school principals are asked to lead and follow simultaneously, leaving them metaphorically with one foot in the past and a foot in the future. This phenomenon is further complicated by the necessary juggling of both time and energy on a lengthy list of daily responsibilities within their schools. While this realistic description may make the role seem daunting, the reality is that the impact of an effective school principal is almost palpable when you walk through the doors of a school. While vastly different than the simple role of our earliest school leaders, the personality of today's principal becomes inextricably woven throughout the culture of the building as they are directly and indirectly connected to all of the decisions made within that school.

The Potency of the Principalship: Action-Oriented Leadership at the Heart of School Improvement recognizes the profound impact that an effective principal can have on a community of learners in the 21st century and the challenges that accompany this critical role. Unlike many other books written about one particular aspect of school leadership, this reference guide provides a variety of practical tools and tasks directly linked to the responsibilities of the school principal. Understanding the need for principals to continually produce higher levels of student achievement, it walks its readers through a series of key areas that will directly and indirectly impact student performance while acknowledging the ever-changing demographic profiles of our students and families, the increased emphasis on instructional leadership and the need for technology integration and effective community outreach. *The Potency of the Principalship: Action-Oriented Leadership at the Heart of School Improvement* strategically places the principal in the center of an interconnected web of key leadership focus areas and is designed to prevent school principals, and those supporting their efforts, from becoming obsolete like the one room schoolhouse or the handmade desks for two.

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Preface

The Potency of the Principalship: Action-Oriented Leadership at the Heart of School Improvement is a book written for building and district administrators, aspiring school leaders, graduate education students, educational policymakers, education professors, and school practitioners who are interested in the evolving principal role and/or the potential of this position to facilitate substantial student and school achievement. It reflects a keen understanding of the most important ideas in administrative leadership to date and guides the reader on a comprehensive journey through the diverse responsibilities of the 21st century principal.

While there are numerous books describing leadership tasks and styles, this tome delves into the very heart of leadership and how the alignment of myriad responsibilities positively influences student outcomes. As such, our motivation for writing this book comes from the following:

- *Our desire to inform the reader that the role of principal has changed dramatically and, concurrently, principal expectations have multiplied, while the time for any given task has been minimized;*

- *Our interest in sharing principal best practices that will influence teacher praxis; thus, having an immediate impact on student attainment of skills and knowledge;*

- *Our knowledge that principals help to create excellent teachers when professional development opportunities are sustained throughout the year, when adequate time is allocated to practice skills learned, and when actionable feedback is provided;*

- *Our awareness, through experience and a careful examination of relevant research, that a successful principal must actively engage families and community-based members to ensure student success;*

- *Our belief that, despite the many administrative duties and necessary requirements that come along with the principalship, school leaders must be passionate about their work;*

- *Our understanding that when principals guide and support all educators, they can achieve building-wide student academic proficiency; and*

- *Our deep commitment to shaping a vision of education that is inclusive, personalized, and focuses on the needs of all students.*

Most principals are tasked with leading a large group of individuals with varied beliefs, educational backgrounds, expertise, and expectations; yet it is worth acknowledging that teachers and paraprofessionals are assumed to have entered the field with a belief that they can make a positive difference and have a strong desire to educate the next generation (Young, Bonanno-Sotiropoulos, & Smolinski, 2018b). In this cauldron of ideas and expectations, success must begin with a sense of purpose (Sinek, 2011). This clarity of purpose is the building block for a string of others that, in turn, encompass who a principal is and what a principal does.

A principal is responsible for budgets, discipline, assessment, observation and evaluation, engaging with families and the community, as well as a host of other items; yet those are merely the tasks that fall under the job title. To inspire others, a principal must connect the work to why they do what they do – that is their sense of purpose (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018; Sinek, Mead, & Docker, 2017). Once the purpose is clearly defined, they can move to the strategy or approach that will be used to engage all staff; while, finally, principals will add the tools that attract the employees to think and work in a particular way (Sinek et al., 2017; Rasmussen, 2016).

It is easy to say that that administrators and teachers believe they can make a difference; however, it is only through the creation of a bold purpose statement that the belief becomes a reality (Sinek, 2011). Therefore, to use the example by Rasmussen (2016), an enlightened principal might say

> *Everything we do, we believe in challenging our students' thinking. We believe in inquiry. The way we challenge our students is by making our school safe and innovative, with passionate and knowledgeable teachers who are caring and compassionate, who cater to the needs of all students. And, we happen to graduate honorable and educated citizens (n.p.).*

This sounds vastly different from the principal who comes to work each day merely for the paycheck, who has settled for the status quo, and does not engage staff in a common purpose. That principal might say "We teach high school. Our culture is spirited and sound. Our curriculum is rich. Our test scores are high" (Rasmussen, 2016, n.p.). Who would you follow?

School leaders who are passionate about making a difference to the lives of others, bring a high level of energy to the task (Burgess & Houf, 2017). These same principals lead with love and have a well-articulated and clear purpose that inspires their faculty to teach at a higher level and their students to believe in themselves and their power to learn despite obstacles (Grundler & Grundler, 2017). There is an undeniable belief in building a positive school

culture that will transform all who are willing to put in equal effort, and this is palpable to staff, students, family and community members.

Those who aspire to lead in this way are usually referred to as servant or transformational leaders, while those in the position for the power or glory are often referred to as autocratic leaders. Servant or transformational leaders put the needs and well-being of others first and help to develop their skills; thus, the culture provides security, a sense of autonomy, and the freedom and safety to ask for assistance when needed (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2016).

Principals who serve their staff lead by example to "raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation" (Burns, 1978). They believe that it is their job to model and encourage academic, social, and behavioral greatness. Those who "serve-first" instead of "lead first" (Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2016, n.p.) set clear goals and have high expectations for their staff; yet support, encouragement, and recognition are provided to ensure everyone achieves these lofty ideals (Bass & Riggio, 2014; Hoerr, 2005). Leaders, therefore, especially for principals who want to see high levels of sustained change, must think, act, and communicate differently (Sinek et al., 2017).

Entwined with being a transformational leader, these same principals are tasked with being instructional leaders. Here the focus is on management of assets such as using resources effectively and being an instructional resource as well as servant-first characteristics such as being a role model for staff, having communication skills that "inspire trust, spark motivation and empower teachers and students" (Concordia University-Portland, 2018, n.p.). This is a tall order. Principals spend a great deal of time being both a servant and an instructional leader, while simultaneously being a master negotiator, a diplomat, and more – often within the span of a single day (Concordia University-Portland, 2018). Finding balance can be difficult, if not impossible, thus, another necessary skill for any well-rounded principal is time management.

It has been argued that in order to affect whole-school improvement it is more important to develop high-quality leaders rather than individual teachers due to the over-arching influence that belongs to the principal (Jensen, Downing, & Clark, 2017). For this reason, principals must be experts at communication, ensuring professional development that is sustained and driven towards improving teacher practices as well as academic achievement, inspiring others to become leaders themselves, bringing together families and community members to increase school opportunities, and partnering with unions to support staff and student success (Jensen et al., 2017).

The authors are deeply concerned about the principalship as they are invested members of educational teams themselves: at one time or another having been a teacher, director, administrator, principal, and/or a superintendent as well as college professor and dean of education. With a rich and long history of leadership between them, the authors hope to reinvigorate current administrators and inspire the next generation of educational leaders to become inspirational, impactful, and engaging in their own right.

It is not surprising, then, that this book takes a critical and comprehensive look at the myriad issues mentioned and offers equal parts history and strategy as a means to encourage and sustain principals and others interested in the field. The role of the school leader is vital to the success of staff and students alike; therefore, it behooves all of us to better understand, assist, and support those who assume this position of great responsibility.

Chapter 1

Promoting Passion in Others:
Recruiting, Evaluating, and Retaining
a High-Performance Team

Staffing a school is a complicated process. There are challenges with finding committed teachers with the proper credentials within established budget constricts as well as retaining these highly qualified faculty - especially for those with specialized training in the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields who can be easily pulled away by promising careers in industry (Ronfeldt, 2012). The needs of teachers at different phases of the career cycle complicate professional development and merely considering the needs of teachers starting out, in isolation, provides some hint at the complexity of staffing schoolwide.

Early career educators encounter unique problems. Whether or not they progress to full time teachers depends on various factors, such as the conditions specific to the school setting and support they receive during training sessions and the school year in general (Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Ronfeldt, 2012). Regardless of the level of experience in the profession, the good news is that teacher retention can be improved through supportive leadership, appropriate compensation, and the use of teacher evaluations that give comprehensive, personalized feedback to improve teaching practices (You, Kim, & Lim, 2017; Darling-Hammond, Beardsley, Haertel, & Rothstein, 2011). As if this were not enough to keep in mind, effective schools run by engaged leaders promote continuous improvement, including lifelong professional development processes for teachers from preservice thru retirement.

Impact of Hiring

Staffing within a school can greatly affect whether or not that school succeeds, and research shows that effective schools tend to follow certain hiring trends (Loeb, Kalogrides, & Beteille, 2012). These schools are inclined to attract effective teachers from other schools; and when new teachers are hired, they are ideally assigned to classes in such a way so as to not overburden them. Effective schools hire teachers who are capable of raising achievement

performance in a relatively brief period, suggesting the positive impact that good teachers might have (Loeb et al., 2012). Further, Loeb et al. (2012) proved that stronger schools were able to retain their high-quality hires rather than lose them to turnover. These findings suggest how effective schools differentiated themselves from ineffective schools and demonstrated the value of employing and retaining effective teachers (Loeb et al., 2012). For these reasons, principals must make difficult decisions regarding staffing and school organization that then effects other aspects of the building and culture.

By following best practices and attempting to meet the needs of teachers, principals can help to lure talented instructors and retain them for the long term. These needs range from providing effective administrative support to providing sufficient salaries (Partee, 2014; You et al., 2017; Hendricks, 2014). Evaluation is also considered important to both principals and teachers who feel it assists their ability to improve their own instructional delivery; yet it is impossible to evaluate staff until quality faculty members have been retained (Taylor & Tyler, 2012).

Early Career Teachers

Teachers entering the field encounter problems that, while similar to those with more experience, are magnified by a lack of specific supportive resources for first year or new faculty (Feiman-Nemser, 2012). Newly hired staff may find themselves mired by a range of problems that can dissuade them from staying on at a school to include struggles in creating relationships with students, difficulties managing school bureaucracy, and a lack of understanding of how to apply pedagogical techniques (Feiman-Nemser, 2012).

The problems for novices are compounded at larger schools, as well as vocational schools, where they are more likely to have poor perceptions of their own self-efficacy (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014). Novice teachers at smaller schools may avoid this pitfall if they are provided adequate formal and informal collegial mentorship to help them learn the ropes; however, their self-efficacy perceptions can also be improved with a supportive work climate fostered by the building leadership (Meristo & Eisenschmidt, 2014).

New teachers have been compared to individuals marooned on a desert island, often facing a plethora of challenges without a clear direction or helping hand; thus, support becomes imperative (Feiman-Nemser, 2012). Difficulties can dissuade people from continuing within the teaching profession, and although retention continues to be important from one year to another, the early years, in particular, are an intense time in which the novice is continuing to learn and apply what he or she was taught during his or her preservice

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Dr. Nicholas D. Young has worked in diverse educational roles for more than 30 years, serving as a principal, special education director, graduate professor, graduate program director, graduate dean, and longtime superintendent of schools. He was named the Massachusetts Superintendent of the Year; and he completed a distinguished Fulbright program focused on the Japanese educational system through the collegiate level. Dr. Young is the recipient of numerous other honors and recognitions including the General Douglas MacArthur Award for distinguished civilian and military leadership and the Vice Admiral John T. Hayward Award for exemplary scholarship. He holds several graduate degrees including a PhD in educational administration and an EdD in educational psychology.

Dr. Young has served in the U.S. Army and U.S. Army Reserves combined for over 34 years; and he graduated with distinction from the U.S. Air War College, the U.S. Army War College, and the U.S. Navy War College. After completing a series of senior leadership assignments in the U.S. Army Reserves as the commanding officer of the 287th Medical Company (DS), the 405th Area Support Company (DS), the 405th Combat Support Hospital, and the 399th Combat Support Hospital, he transitioned to his current military position as a faculty instructor at the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, PA. He currently holds the rank of Colonel.

Dr. Young is also a regular presenter at state, national, and international conferences; and he has written many books, book chapters, and/or articles on various topics in education, counseling, and psychology. Some of his most recent books include *Securing the Schoolyard: Protocols that Promote Safety and Positive Student Behaviors* (in-press); *Sounding the Alarm in the Schoolhouse: Safety, Security and Student Well-Being* (in-press); *Embracing and Educating the Autistic Child: Valuing Those Who Color Outside the Lines* (in-press); *The Soul of the Schoolhouse: Cultivating Student Engagement* (in-press); *From Cradle to Classroom: A Guide to Special Education for Young Children* (in-press); *Captivating Classrooms: Student Engagement at the Heart of School Improvement* (in-press); *Soothing the Soul: Pursuing a Life of Abundance Through a Practice of Gratitude* (2018); *Dog Tags to Diploma: Understanding and Addressing the Educational Needs of Veterans, Servicemembers, and their Families* (2018); *Turbulent Times: Confronting Challenges in Emerging Adulthood* (2018); *Guardian of the Next Generation: Igniting the Passion for Quality*

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Dr. Mead has over 35 years of experience in the early childhood education field. Her career has spanned professional roles as a family child care provider, child care center director, preschool special education instructor, early childhood education trainer and consultant on organizational and system management. Dr. Mead is currently the administrator for early childhood programs and extended learning for the Danbury Public Schools in Danbury, Connecticut where she has been credited with the development of a family and community engagement center, before and after school programs, and the formation of a family learning center. She received a BA in Human Services from the University of Connecticut, a MEd in Educational Leadership from National Louis University, and an EdD in Organizational Leadership Studies from Northeastern University.

Dr. Mead has served on numerous local, state and boards related to early childhood education and was a founding member of the National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement She is a member of the Campaign for Grade Level Reading and serves on the family engagement design team for the State of Connecticut State Department of Education. Dr. Mead is a bi-weekly contributor to the Tribuna Newspaper where she writes about family engagement and child education and development. She has written several book chapters about family engagement and is a primary author for

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