

Help! I'm a New Principal

Making the leap from the classroom to the principal's office can feel daunting. To make the transition a bit easier, experts offer some words of wisdom from their early days as administrators.

It's your second week as principal. And you're terrified. Your past experience as a teacher has gotten you this far, but do you know how to be an instructional leader, effectively teach adults, or implement a schoolwide initiative? What about how to take disciplinary action against staff, deal with allegations of staff members having an affair, or run an efficient staff meeting?

When you're taking on a new role, sometimes even the most basic routines can prove challenging. "I can remember so well my first principal job of more than 30 years ago, having to do a fire drill and not knowing how," says Cathie E. West, an award-winning principal at Mountain Way Elementary School in Granite Falls, Wash., and author of the forthcoming *Problem-Solving Tools and Tips for School Leaders*. "Some of these practical things just can't be covered in university prep work or even while interning."

But new principals have help—if they choose to ask for it.

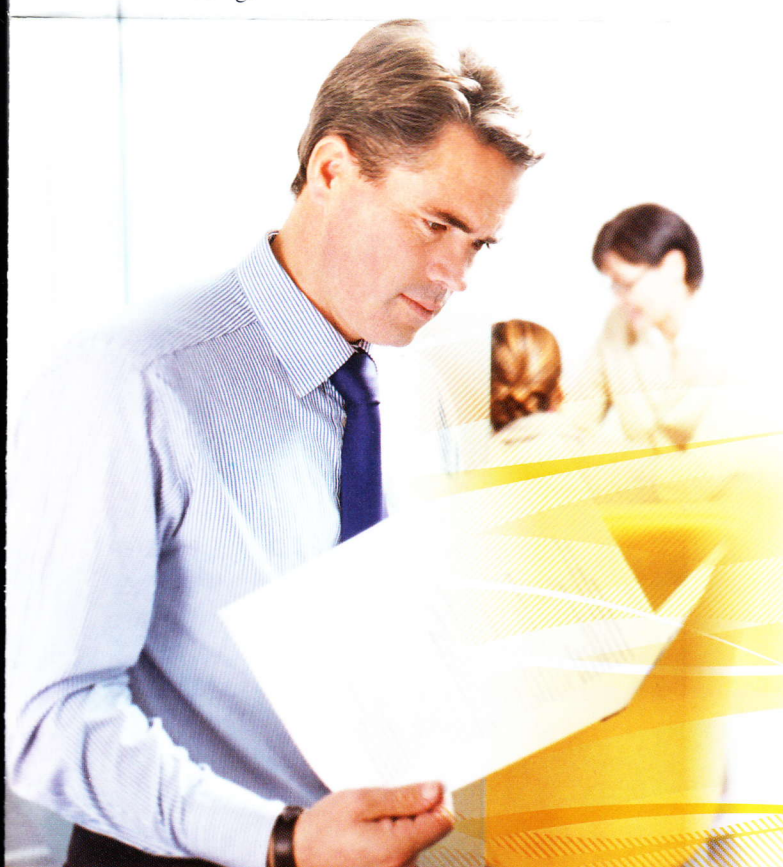
Try tapping a veteran leader you admire to be your mentor. "It's a lonely job sometimes. You need someone you can talk to about the hard stuff, like hiring decisions. Ask that person to shadow you and give you feedback," suggests Julie Lause, chief academic officer for the charter-management organization Crescent City Schools in New Orleans, La.

At age 29, and after only six years in the classroom, Thomas Ralston became a principal. He made a lot of innocent mistakes before reaching out for help. "The other principals in my district became great role models for me," he says. "We bounced ideas off each other and helped solve problems."

Ralston, who is currently principal at Avonworth Middle School in Pittsburgh, Pa., and a recipient of a 2010 Pennsylvania Middle School Association Administrator's Award, also took advantage of his local university's two-year training program run by former public school administrators. "The most valuable piece was spending time with colleagues and finding out I wasn't crazy," he says, laughing.

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Understanding the Role

New principals often trip up because they don't leverage their time wisely, Lause states. "You have to work on projects that build capacity," she says. "Don't jump in to teach that after-school elective because the teacher quit. Find a replacement or train another teacher."

Lause recommends breaking down the job in this way: 50 percent of your time should be coaching teachers, 30 percent should be "kid time" (e.g., modeling for teachers, talking with students having difficulty), and 20 percent should be "other." The "other" category poses the biggest challenge. "You got the job because you did everything; but as the school leader, you have to organize the doings of everyone else," she says.

New principals also must be aware of the intense public nature of the position. "You truly are the last stop before the superintendent," says Sue Homrok-Lemke, principal of Henry James Memorial School in Simsbury, Conn., and a 2008 winner of the William Cieslukowski Outstanding First-Year Principal Award. "When I was assistant principal, I could ask someone above me to look at a letter I wrote. Now everything I do is a reflection of me."

Important First Steps

Develop a strong working relationship with your superintendent, West recommends. "You need to sit down with your superintendent and discuss your challenges and problems,"

she says. She also suggests getting to know the district office personnel—especially the human resources staff, special education director, and technology staff.

Principals need to understand their schools inside and out. To get a handle on what's going on in your school, interview your staff and faculty about their work. Ask for their honest thoughts on the school. Review data, and scrutinize your programs to determine their quality.

Also, take the time to learn some basic facts. What is your building's square footage? Where are supplies delivered? How many classrooms have computers?

"You have to make the trains run on time, and being able to rattle off some of these facts can help. Running the trains efficiently frees your teachers from other worries so [that] they can focus on teaching and learning," says Paul G. Gasparini, principal of Jamesville-DeWitt High School in New York.

West suggests making regular classroom visits and watching buses arrive or leave. New principals should make themselves visible to students and their staff. "I take the 4th and 5th graders to lunch, I read books to the younger kids, and I supervise flag football at 5th grade recess once a day," says West.

Homrok-Lemke tries to learn every student's name because it makes kids feel important. "If I can say, 'George, I really like your new haircut,' that can make all the difference for that child. You never know what children are coming to us with or what happened after they left. They love to be recognized," she says.

Like her colleagues, Homrok-Lemke is aware of the time constraints of a school day; she chooses to spend her time with students. "There will always be time for e-mails or meetings, but when kids are in the building, they are your priority," she says.



Recognize Your Staff's Hard Work

When Gasparini, who has been out of the classroom for about 15 years, observes strong teaching practices, he passes that information on to other teachers. "As an administrator, you are in a position to spread effective teaching. The role of the principal is to bring the secret to life," he says.

Also, principals should tap faculty to act as leaders, says Gasparini: "Find out who's doing good work. I know each teacher's strength, which I use to help everyone see what's working well in the school. Help others feel good about what's happening, and use that to create collaborative communities."

Building strong relationships with your teachers is essential to being a strong leader, Gasparini adds. Show that you understand and care about your staff. Ask about their family, send cards, and look for ways to make teachers' lives easier. Demonstrate to teachers that you appreciate their dedication and hard work.

If you can honor the individual contributions each person makes and align your words and deeds, people will know you are trustworthy and behave similarly, says Pam Robbins, coauthor of *The New Principal's Fieldbook* and *Learning From Lincoln: Leadership Practices for School Success*. Creating a personal leadership vision and leading by example are important to a principal's success, says Robbins. Modeling desired behaviors and attitudes are powerful tools for transforming behavior in schools.

Principals should also prioritize the development of trusting relationships within both the school and the extended community, says Robbins. But doing so takes time, she adds.

And try to remember that you'll only be a new principal for a short amount of time. "Above all, understand where the job fits into your life," says Ralston. "I've been a building principal for almost 15 years. It's behind father, husband, and son. If you allow the principal job to consume you, your role in all places will suffer."

Quick Tips

- **Celebrate success.** "Whether it's a quick note or something more, let teachers know that they make a difference," says Homrok-Lemke. "I have note cards that say 'I can count on you.' I'll write a couple of sentences, and I always see them on teacher's bulletin boards."

- **Brush up on your writing skills.** When she became a principal, Homrok-Lemke says she was surprised by the amount of writing required. "I always did a lot of writing, but the amount and the intention you have to put in it surprised me. It [has] a grave importance that I initially underestimated."

- **Admit when you don't know something.** "The official title does not bestow instant wisdom," says Robbins. "Many regard the principal as expert or sage because of the role. If you don't have an answer, model being a learning leader. Say, 'I don't have that answer, but I promise you I will research that and get back to you.' Write it down in front of the person and get back to him within 24 hours."

- **Keep your eye on your staff's workloads.** "If people are staying at school way too late and having a hard time managing their lives—they're late, irritable, or sick a lot—you need to manage that. Tell them to go home, if need be. Be responsible for making sure everyone is healthy," says Lause.

- **Let students know more about who you are.** West suggests creating a bulletin board with lists of your favorite books and movies, photos, and artifacts. **EU**

—ELLEN ULLMAN

A Call for Candidates

Do you know a forward-thinking ASCD member with a passion to make a difference? Could this person be you? ASCD is seeking candidates from diverse backgrounds for governance positions. Elected leaders have the responsibility of ensuring that programs, products, and services focus upon the success of learners and that ASCD resources are wisely used to promote the association's values. Please consider self-nominating or encouraging potential candidates to submit a nomination form. The form may be completed online at www.ascd.org/nominations, or you can contact Becky DeRigge at bderigge@ascd.org for a print version.

