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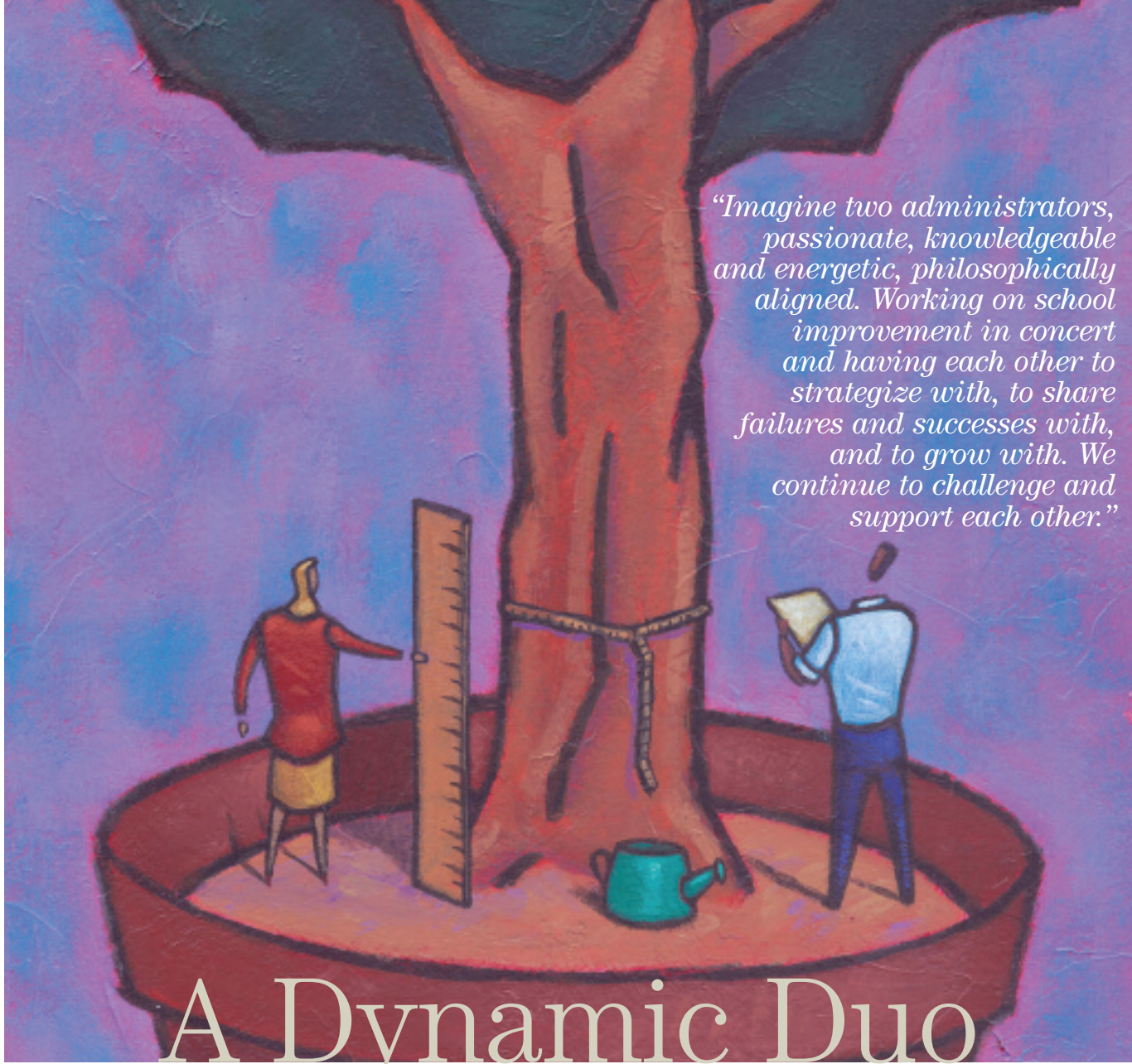
4-1-2007

A Dynamic Duo

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Published version. *American School Board Journal*, Vol. 194, No. 4 (April 2007): 47-49. [Publisher link](#). Reprinted with permission from *American School Board Journal*, © 2007 National School Boards Association. All rights reserved.



“Imagine two administrators, passionate, knowledgeable and energetic, philosophically aligned. Working on school improvement in concert and having each other to strategize with, to share failures and successes with, and to grow with. We continue to challenge and support each other.”

A Dynamic Duo

In some schools, the principal's job is too big for one person. Why not consider two?

Ellen Wexler Eckman

An administrator made this comment to me when describing the value of her work. I was examining the role of the principal, looking for ways to make it a more attractive career choice given the increasing complexity and expanding workload that principals face. This comment was particularly noteworthy because the administrator was a co-principal.

As a former teacher and administrator, I was intrigued with the idea of a co-principalship and began asking questions. Were other schools using this model? Why implement a co-principalship? How does it work? Is it a viable alternative for leading schools?

Using information from the National Association of

Secondary School Principals and from Internet searches, I identified 170 individuals serving as co-principals in public and private schools across the United States. I surveyed them to find out more about their personal and professional attributes, their reasons for implementing the model, and their job satisfaction. I also interviewed 13 co-principals and three superintendents about the model.

More than 40 percent of the co-principals responded. Nearly all of them—average age 45—were married. Fifty-six percent were traditional solo principals before becoming a co-principal; 46 percent were male and 54 percent were female.

I found co-principals at elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools, with student populations ranging from 40 to 4,800 pupils. The schools were in rural and sub-

urban areas, small towns, and inner cities spanning 18 states, including California, Illinois, Maine, and New Mexico.

What I found were two co-principal models. One, used in 90 percent of the schools, is where two individuals both serve as principal. They each receive a full principal's salary and have their own offices and secretarial support. A few full-time co-principals served simultaneously in different buildings of the same school campus.

The second type of co-principalship is the part-time or job-sharing model, where two individuals share the position by working on different days of the week. This divides the principal's traditional role as well as the salary and office space. About 10 percent of the participants were part-time co-principals. Some were retired administrators who chose to return on a part-time basis, while others shared the position to meet child-care or family needs.

Sharing the work

The earliest mention of the co-principalship model that I found was a 1978 article in the *High School Journal* by Edwin West. As superintendent of North Carolina's High Point Public Schools (now part of Guilford County Schools), West argued for a restructuring of the principal's post to make the workload more manageable and to emphasize the position's instructional leadership qualities.

West proposed a co-principalship where each administrator was equal in authority and pay. Responsibilities were divided so that one person was the "principal of administration" and the other was the "principal of instruction."

I was surprised to learn that today's co-principals do not separate their job responsibilities in that manner. They divvy up the principal's work based on individual strengths and experiences. All of the co-principals insisted on serving as instructional leaders. Their emphasis on being "teachers of teachers" is indicative of the importance they place on the principal's instructional leadership function.

The co-principals reported that both parents and teachers were pleased with the model because they can always go to "someone at the top." Furthermore, if they don't have a positive relationship with one principal, it often is more comfortable to work with the other. Having co-principals also encourages more shared leadership by teachers in terms of leading committees and collaborating with others.

More than a pair of reasons

An increase in the student population is the reason most cited for initiating a co-principalship. Parents, teachers, and community members expect to be able to talk to the principal, see a lead administrator at extracurricular activities, and have someone available in the building when important issues arise.

As the student population increases, the survey participants said, the principal's role just becomes too much for

one person. One principal suggested the model as a district prepared to merge several elementary schools and create a student body of more than 1,200 children.

Another district placed co-principals at the head of its massive comprehensive high schools, each of which served more than 2,000 students. In this instance, a co-principalship model provides more access to decision makers because "adults want to hear from the principal." The traditional model, in which a solitary principal has an assistant serving as second in command, does not work in this case.

Schools also turned to the co-principalship model to fill sudden vacancies. When a popular principal left suddenly, two assistant principals applied for the open position as a team to provide stability and to "soothe parents." One superintendent, finding himself without a high school principal a few weeks before school opened, sought the help of a previously retired principal. This individual agreed to take the position only if he could share the job.

When schools experienced weak leadership or frequent turnover, superintendents sought to stabilize the situation by selecting teachers or other administrators on staff to work as co-principals.

Several survey respondents indicated they actively sought an alternative to the traditional lone principal post. One respondent lobbied for the co-principalship model because she wanted to create a stable leadership team and did not want to continually train assistant principals who then moved on to a solo principalship.

In another district, administrators looked for a leadership approach that emphasized collaboration and team-





work. “We were asking all of our teachers to be trained and to become part of four-teacher teams,” an administrator noted. “I contended that the only way to ask teachers to do that was to model with co-principals with equal authority.”

How does it work?

Survey participants compared being co-principals to being in a marriage, with the same issues of commitment, communication, trust, sharing, and friendship. Many described how teachers, parents, and students test the team, playing one principal against the other. To protect against this, the co-principals presented a united front on issues, continually checking in and talking to each other, and handling any disagreements behind closed doors.

Constant communication is an essential element. Those who were surveyed used notes, e-mails, phone calls, and numerous meetings. Sometimes they talked in the halls or at bus duty; at other times they held formal meetings. Whatever the format, communication occurred many times

during the day. One co-principal acknowledged that the amount of communication made the model appear inefficient.

The co-principals stated clearly that everyone had to “check their egos” for two individuals to effectively share the role. They had to understand when to argue for their position and when to compromise. Sharing leadership depended on developing a trusting relationship with their partners and on knowing how to share equally in the successes and failures of the job.

One superintendent described the principalship as one

of the hardest and loneliest jobs in education “because you are constantly making decisions, split-second decisions, that on any given day can land you in court.”

It is not surprising that a majority of the co-principals named the ability to share decision making and problem solving as the most important strength of the co-principal model. They liked not being “lonely at the top.”

A co-principal explained: “We rarely make poor decisions because we are able to sound ideas off one another and see things from multiple perspectives.” The co-principals felt they could balance their personal and professional lives because they could share extracurricular activities and meetings and always be assured there was a principal available for parents, teachers, and students.

Just as in a marriage, there has to be a good “match” between the co-principals. This creates problems for superintendents and school boards as they try to sustain the model beyond the first team of co-principals. Hiring co-principals creates an “arranged marriage” because the individuals do not apply as a team and may not know each other very well.

Co-leadership as an alternative model

Several major American corporations have used a co-leadership model, including Intel, HP, Microsoft, Berkshire Hathaway, Boeing, and TIAA-CREF. These corporations find that, as challenges in the business world become increasingly complex, it helps to look to a model where leadership is distributed equally between two individuals.

A superintendent further expanded on the value of co-leadership. “Not only is the job big enough for two principals, but they both could complement each other in such a way as to really give the leadership of the school a synergy and a dynamic vitality that would be better than one individual.”

The co-principalship model is seen by many school districts as a way to face the complex and demanding tasks of raising student academic performance while managing a school’s day-to-day operations. It offers an alternative for leading schools that benefits the individual principal, parents, teachers, and students.

There are still unanswered questions regarding the model. Does it make the principalship a more attractive career choice? Does it provide more stability? Is the change in administrative organization too costly or too dependent on personality to be sustainable? These questions must be determined over time with continued research. Meanwhile, it’s a model worth considering. ■

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