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The Reflective Principal: Surviving the Journey

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Surviving the Journey

I recently retired from the public school system after 34 years of service in the rural West Virginia county where I was born, reared, and educated through grade 12. For 22 of those years I was an elementary principal. Those years were an exciting and challenging time for me, and I hope that sharing some of my experiences will be entertaining and useful to young principals who are just beginning their journey. It is impossible to prescribe all of the steps that will be a part of that journey, but I can't think of any better source of guidance than those who have been down the road, met the challenges, fought the battles, and still believe it was a worthwhile and rewarding trip.

I became a principal at the tender age of 25. I had been teaching for four years in a rural elementary school with eight grades and four teachers (one of whom was also the principal). The school was a rather austere brick building constructed in 1939 on a rocky hill. By the beginning of my fourth year, I had worked under three different principals. I had no training in administration and, in fact, had just achieved my certification as an elementary teacher. To say that I had no idea of what I was doing when I was named principal is an understatement!

The superintendent gave me the keys to the building, some words of encouragement, patted me on the back, and sent me forth to lead(?)! Having taken a few education classes and read some John Holt books, I really figured

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I would transform the school with my knowledge and enthusiasm. All of the flaws I had so perceptively noted would soon be remedied. Our school would be warm and inviting, students would be motivated and excited about learning, teachers would be role models and mentors, and parents would be supportive and impressed!

On the first day of school, I confidently unlocked the door, greeted the other teachers, and waited for the

buses to arrive. It was a moment of great excitement. Needless to say, it wasn't long before I began to appreciate that being a principal wasn't quite as glorious as I had assumed. Most days started very early and ended very late. Students did not always appreciate the wonderful opportunities for expanding their horizons that we were providing for them. Some didn't even want to do their worksheets. Teachers could sometimes be cranky and stubborn. The cooks viewed me as unproven and slightly delusional. Parents called, but not to offer their appreciation for my visionary leadership. In fact, a few had very pointed suggestions to help me be a better principal (such as, “Try it somewhere else!”). Machines broke down, commodes overflowed (especially when the janitor wasn't around), and deliveries didn't arrive on time. Meanwhile, the silence from the central office was deafening.

Yet, despite my lack of experience, I did survive. In fact, I came to love the job and formed lasting friendships with my colleagues, parents, and a number of the students. Even today, as I look back at more than three decades in education, the first few years as a principal stand out as especially enjoyable and rewarding.

In time, I received a master's degree and a doctorate in educational administration. And after three years as a teaching principal, I spent 19 more as a nonteaching principal. I also served as a supervisor of county principals and curriculum supervisor. In reflecting on my own experiences, I would like to share a few things that I think would be valuable lessons for those in the early stages of the principal's journey.

What Principals Need to Be

First, a principal must be more than a manager. While the facility matters, and budgets and bus schedules are important, the principal's job must never be reduced to a narrow focus. All of the literature supports the fact that a principal must be a leader of instruction, deal with people effectively, and emphasize learning and student achievement. But

principals also must be genuine, warm, and even vulnerable human beings. A principal has the unparalleled opportunity to influence a variety of people, young and old. This realization should be both sobering and inspiring. Schools are not and cannot be factories. The principal is the key to retaining the special quality of humanness that not only our schools, but our world desperately needs.

A principal also must be a scholar, a researcher, and a seeker of knowledge. The knowledge I speak of is not just the coursework that I and others teach in graduate classes. In addition to that core of knowledge, a principal needs to be a student of history, the arts, and nature, as well as the spiritual and commonplace affairs of life. Principals need to take time to read, reflect, interact with a variety of people, enjoy the little moments of life, and write.

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John Dewey (1925) wrote: “Since growth is characteristic of life, education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself. The criterion of the value of school education is the extent to which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies the means for making the desire effective in fact.” The principal should be a role model as a scholar and one who promotes a thirst for knowledge in teachers and students.

As I look back on what I’ve just written, I recognize that it does not offer a prescription for being an excellent principal—nor have I found one elsewhere. You can’t manufacture or clone good principals. In fact, the “good ones” are the result of testing by fire. So if you are just beginning the journey, don’t

overanalyze yourself or the job. Don’t look for magical answers. Be who you are, but try to grow every day. The knowledge you have gained in your preparation program won’t be wasted, but the lessons you learn on the job will ultimately become the real basis for your success. And your achievement is critical to the success of the children you serve. ☐

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Reference

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