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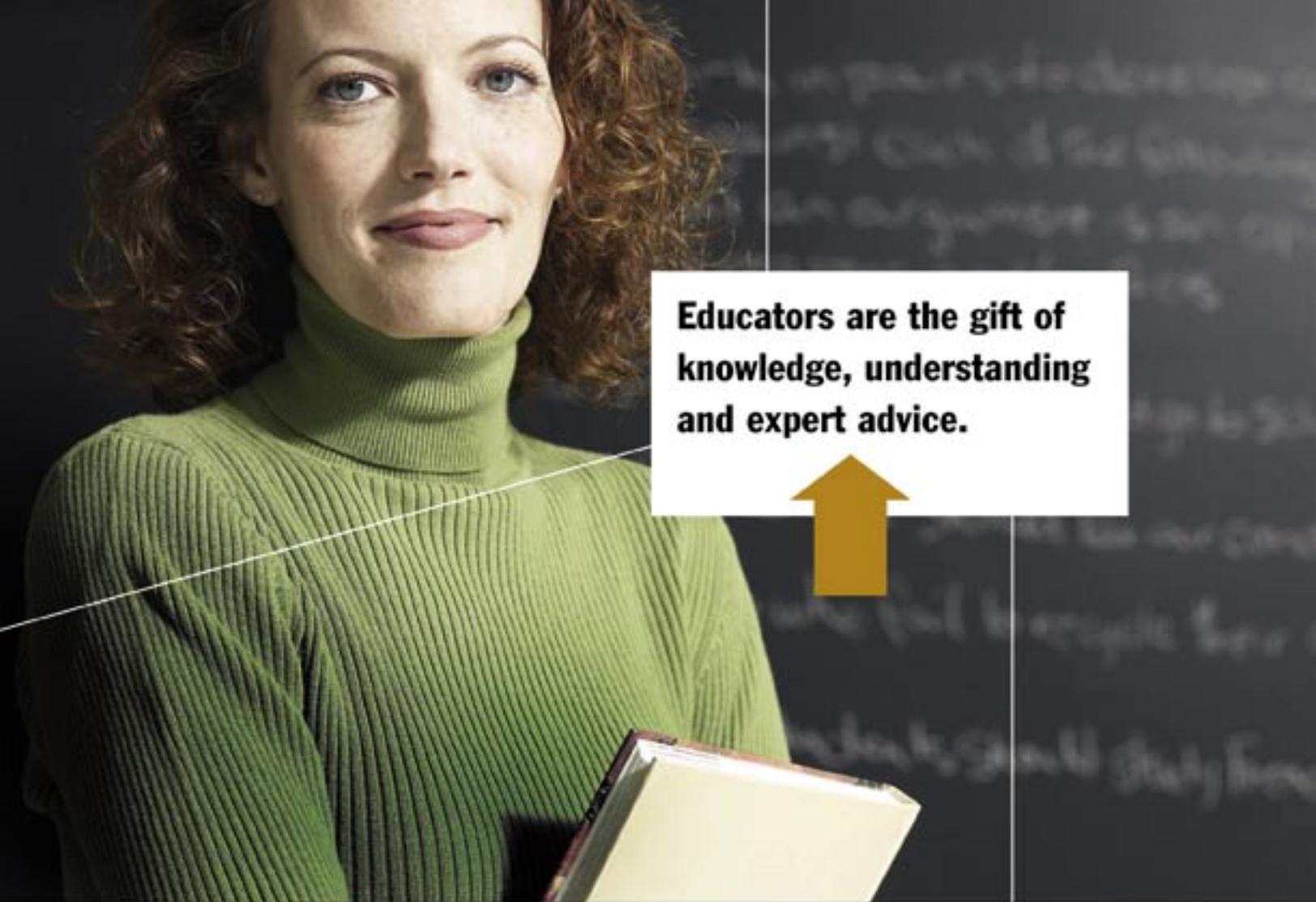
# S A A N Y S JOURNAL

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Winter 2007  
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# contents

WINTER 2007



## 2 Mentoring – Everyone's Obligation to the Profession

by Kathy Dougherty, Principal,  
Pleasant Avenue Elementary  
Johnstown City School District



## 6 14,320 Miles: Reflections on the First Year of My Administrative Journey

by Suzanne M. Miller, Dean of Students,  
AuSable Valley Middle/High School  
AuSable Valley Central School District



## 12 Learning the Principalcraft: Experiencing and Reflecting

by Dr. Barry W. Mack, CV-TEC Director,  
Champlain Valley Educational Services



## 16 Spending Time on Student Value

by Mark P. Gray, Principal,  
Milburn Elementary School  
Baldwin Union Free School District



# Mentoring – Everyone’s Obligation to the Profession

by *Kathy Dougherty, Principal, Pleasant Avenue Elementary School, Johnstown*

*As the now senior administrator of a seven-member building administrative team in the Greater Johnstown School District, I have had the opportunity to unofficially mentor several new principals over the past few years. There are certain commonalities to the process, some of which I knew instinctively, and others that I discovered over the course of several mentorship experiences. Each category cited below has proved to be one in which I have seen new administrators benefit from my contribution to their growth, and each has proved its value over time.*

## Personal Contacts

Maintain close personal contact with your mentee. Use a variety of forms of communication, including phone, e-mail, in-district courier service, and face-to-face meetings. Try to use at least one form of contact per day, and mix them up. Some, such as e-mail, are easier and more accessible for the novice administrator. Others, such as a personal visit, may take more time, but may also be of more benefit. A general rule of thumb is, if the contact takes a bit more effort on your part, it will probably result in greater value to the new administrator. Know in advance why you are making the contact, and stick to the point. Let the administrator share feelings and concerns with you, and if the conversation seems one-sided, with the mentee doing most of the talking, you are probably on the right track.

## Honesty

Don’t believe everything your mentee tells you. It is important to listen to the voice as much as the words. New administrators are often reluctant to divulge any issues they are having, fearing that a confession will show a weakness in their performance or skills. Let them know that no one expects perfection, and that the greatest learning

occurs when one accepts that premise. The mentee will feel a sense of relief at not having to be so guarded, and will be more open to constructive criticism and suggestions when they are not perceived as threatening.

## Style

Become familiar with the new administrator’s style, and honor those differences, while you attempt to help the person see other points of view. One of my mentees was extremely technologically and paper oriented, and tended to see answers in things, rather than in people. While I always gave credence to his viewpoint, I also made sure to guide his thinking toward a more personal, people-oriented view. I occasionally reminded him of my belief that “people come before paper.” Another new administrator reacted in a very different way to issues, mulling things over and over, carefully considering everyone’s point of view. It became my job to help him understand that, while I absolutely do believe in and use distributed leadership and consensus-building techniques, eventually principals may have to end a conversation, make a decision, trust their judgment, and put the issue to rest. It is okay to (occasionally) use some version of the line, “It’s that way because I made that choice and I’m the principal – that’s why.”

## History

Be careful how much past history you share with the new folks. Unless there is a real justification for reliving past hurts, injustices, or episodes, it is best to let the past stay there. New administrators will soon discover where the truth lies, and learning the truth themselves allows them to accept it more rationally than if a past scenario is presented to them by someone else. This applies to situations with students, parents, staff members, other administrators, board of education members, and people in the community. There is enough to deal with in the current reality without having to worry about how a situation played out in the past. If it doesn’t directly affect the administrator at the present time, don’t bring it up.

## Duplication of Effort

With the tremendous increase in paperwork as the responsibilities of principals increase, it is easy for a new principal to feel overburdened in trying to stay current with forms and record keeping. I have always made it a point to e-mail as attachments many of the forms I had already created and just revise from year to year. Oftentimes, the new administrator doesn’t even realize that a form or memo could help clarify a process, along with saving much time and

energy that might otherwise be wasted on procedural errors. The time you save the new administrator can be better spent on people.

## Why Are We Here?

Without seeming too cynical, I have learned that the job of a building principal is to polish the image of the district and central administration. By that, I mean that by doing the very best job for the students and staff within a school building and achieving maximum student achievement, a principal not only

one, but I always found a reason to get up the next morning and do it all over again. New principals need the reassurance that good things will happen, and that some of the negative parts of the job will get better. (But they also may get worse, first, so prepare your mentee in case that happens.)

## Say Thanks, Often, and Mean It

The mentee will undoubtedly have many people to thank the first year. You, as mentor, are the least important person on that list. A new building

will caution the mentee to find ways to delegate, allowing others to lead, and in doing so, build greater leadership capacity within the school. Just as a parent must gradually trust a child with increased responsibility, so should the new administrator trust building staff to shoulder some of the many demands within the building. The mentor can use himself/herself as an example, citing examples in which she/he has developed this trait in the staff.

## Let Your Mentee Teach You

Every new principal comes equipped with a variety of skills and knowledge. Oftentimes, these abilities supersede what we veterans have developed over the years. With so much to learn, a new administrator will feel that she/he is consuming but not giving back. Let your mentee teach you, either through a new technological application, professional development initiative, data analysis technique, or new personal contact. The mentee will feel that she/he has contributed to your success in a small way, and you will certainly benefit from the new learning experience.

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*Informing a new principal of the reason why we are here, and the benefits to everyone if we all recognize that fact, does him/her, you, and all others within the organization a great service.*

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benefits all of his/her constituents, but the side effect of those accomplishments is positive public relations for everyone else within the principal's sphere of influence. When one wins, we all win, and we can all take credit (because someday we will also want others to share the blame). Informing a new principal of the reason why we are here, and the benefits to everyone if we all recognize that fact, does him/her, you, and all others within the organization a great service.

principal has to find ways to thank the people who are doing the job of running the building. The secretary, custodian, nurse, teachers, aides, food service workers, bus drivers, central and business office staff, and so many others – all contribute to the success that is experienced in any school building. Remind a new principal that she/he must never overlook the contributions of those people, and should tell them often, both verbally and in writing, what they mean to the school. A simple word or note of thanks is often the greatest reward, and can make the difference between an employee staying or leaving.

## Quit at Least Once a Year

I spent a visitation day with a veteran principal early in my career, to learn more about the character education program she had instituted in her building. She shared with me that the previous day she had “quit” and had told her staff that that day was her “quitting” day for the year. By that, she meant that things had gotten so overwhelming, she just needed to take a break from everyone and everything. She didn't actually quit, but she did use the time to walk the grounds, talk to people who lived in the neighborhood, and reflect on why she continued to serve in the role of building principal. She taught me that the demands of the job are so great, and to do it well, you will feel pulled in a thousand directions every day. When

## Find Something to Find Every Day

The first year goes by in a blur, and when June arrives, the new administrator will wonder where the days went. My mentor cautioned me to take a moment on the drive home and think about one thing I did that day that benefited someone else. Some days it was hard to recall doing any good for any-

## Delegate Leadership

A common mistake of new administrators is trying to be everything to everybody. In an effort to help the building operate smoothly, it is tempting to do everything yourself. A good mentor

*It is incumbent upon the veterans to continue to provide the support to the entering class of administrators, to ensure that people of quality and dedication receive all that they need to be successful in this most difficult of jobs.*

the day comes that you just can't take it anymore, "quit," walk away for a while, tell your secretary to inform the staff that you are not available and they will have to handle the issues themselves, and change your view for a few hours. (But make sure the superintendent has approved of this plan!) You will return with a fresh perspective on what your job means to you, what you mean to everyone else, and the staff might even appreciate you a bit more. New principals need to know that they will reach a

breaking point and will need a strategy for dealing with it when it comes.

This list is by no means exhaustive when it comes to the mentor-mentee relationship, but if it helps a few new administrators and their mentors make the transition from novice to veteran a bit smoother, it will have provided a needed service. We are all newbies at some point in our career, and without the guidance of the mentors who served us, many of us may have chosen to leave

the profession. It is incumbent upon the veterans to continue to provide the support to the entering class of administrators, to ensure that people of quality and dedication receive all that they need to be successful in this most difficult of jobs. The real secret to all of this is the immense feeling of satisfaction the mentor will experience when, eventually, one of his/her mentees assumes the role of mentor for someone else. When the gift of giving back comes full circle, we are all the better for it. ●

*Kathy Dougherty is the principal at Pleasant Avenue Elementary School in Johnstown. She received her bachelor of music degree from Syracuse University and holds a master's in educational administration from the University at Albany. She is a graduate of the Superintendent Development Program (SDP).*

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# 14,320 Miles: Reflections on the First Year of My Administrative Journey – A Very Memorable and (often) Humbling Story

by Suzanne M. Miller, Dean of Students, AuSable Valley Middle/High School

*After almost 20 years as a certified special education teacher, I decided to return to graduate school in order to complete the necessary course work to enable me to become certified as a school administrator (or “go over to the Dark Side,” as my fellow teacher friends called it).*

My particular administrative journey covered 14,320 miles for the school year, as my school is located 40 miles from where I live. In those miles, I was afforded the opportunity to reflect – upon where I had come from, where I was, and where I hoped to go, both in my present position and in my professional career. The following is an overview of those reflections, and a synthesis of those reflections into some of the knowledge I acquired during my first year as an administrator.

Following many interviews, I was able to obtain a position as the dean of students at a middle/high school. Our school is a grade 7-12 building, which houses approximately 720 students. I am fortunate to work with a great administrative team, all of whom, with the exception of our director of athletics and physical education, were new to their administrative position within the district during the 2005-06 academic year, including our superintendent. The middle and high school principals, director of guidance, and I were all first-time administrators. I feel that we worked well together, and came together well as a team. We did a good job of ensuring a safe environment that emphasized the importance of learning within which our learning community

was able to function effectively and efficiently. Things, of course, weren't perfect, but I am not sure such perfection ever exists in any system where the variables are human interactions based upon the abilities and areas in need of improvement of all of the humans involved.

One of the more interesting aspects of my first year was arriving in a district where I knew *no one*. The learning curve for names alone, with 700+ students, and 120+ faculty, support, and other staff, was amazing. It brought to focus, for me, some of the things that were im-

portant only to learn quickly and well, and to develop positive relationships on the journey.

Philosophy, or what an individual believes to be true about something, can be an interesting piece of assimilation. A simple shift in emphasis or placement in a statement can dramatically alter how one approaches topics as disparate as making tea to dealing with students. Areas of conflict, particularly when they arise from a difference in views regarding how best to deal with students, can be an interesting dynamic. Adherence to personal beliefs, particularly if they

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*. . . it is very important to retain your individual belief, even if it appears to conflict with the existing culture of the system in which you are engaged, merely because integrity allows you to engage in a more positive, directed manner.*

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portant, and those that were not so terribly important. I strive to continue my assimilation into my adopted “country,” for it was very much like traveling to a place in which you do not know the language, culture, and customs, and

are contrary to existing cultural norms or beliefs in a system, can lead to some friction. I feel it is very important to retain your individual belief, even if it appears to conflict with the existing culture of the system in which you are

engaged, merely because integrity allows you to engage in a more positive, directed manner. It also provides ample opportunity for development of positive relationships with all involved. It also makes establishing a positive support relationship imperative.

This dynamic can be dramatically enhanced by finding a mentor. Your mentor should be someone who is either formally assigned by the district, or with whom you informally make

sense of belonging. It is important for all individuals to feel part of their learning community – these friends can help to accelerate that process.

My friend Dr. Paul Vermette, who is on the faculty at Niagara University, shared something that he has used with his students for a long time, which I have since dubbed “Vermette’s Rule.” I have used this many times in my classrooms through the years, and even with my own son. I think it remains true of

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*There are many foibles in the life of a first-time administrator, and having someone to provide direction, assistance, and a safe place to reflect upon some of what you encounter can be really helpful.*

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contact. Your mentor, as a longer term member of your learning community, can provide support, guidance, insight, and a helping hand as you navigate the waters of assimilation. This person has, in my case, proved to be an invaluable support. There are many foibles in the life of a first-time administrator, and having someone to provide direction, assistance, and a safe place to reflect upon some of what you encounter can be really helpful. This person can also help you with some of the routine tasks (attendance paperwork, knowledge of your contract, whom to contact in the district office for various questions, and the various miscellany of being an employee), which, although remarkably similar across employment lines, can often vary tremendously from district to district.

Finding friends where you can, whether they are faculty, staff, students, parents, or other members of the learning community, is another positive way to enhance your assimilation into the existing culture, as well as providing a

the relationships people encounter in the world, particularly in school and work. Vermette’s Rule is as follows: “I don’t have to like you. I have to work with you and respect you.” This simple tool provides a frame for dealing with people, and indicating how you, in turn, would like to be dealt with. It is simple, direct, and effective, and can be understood by a variety of individuals, from very young children to adults. I use it often with students who are sent to my office. It provides a framework of acceptance – we are all entitled to like or not like whomsoever we choose. That does not remove the responsibility from us to deal with them respectfully, and to work with them.

I learned that the information from all the articles, books, and other information assimilated in my graduate classes was nice background, but that most of the “real” learning I experienced during my first year happened in very real ways, with very real people, and in very real situations. I don’t think I did anything really stupid, but I certainly

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did make my share of mistakes. I also learned that I could dwell on those mistakes, and allow them to captivate my focus, or move forward after making amends, and deal with the reality in front of me. In a similar vein, finding time to continue my professional reading, although a challenge, has continued to provide me with a sense of my-

self as a learner, and offered my mind additional avenues for engagement that were not totally focused on the tasks at hand. This is a welcome outlet, and necessary redirect, and helps provide an engagement with the larger whole – the task of educating future citizens. It also enhances an awareness that your problems, which can seem fairly consuming

and overwhelming sometimes, need to be kept in a fair perspective.

Being able to retain a sense of perspective can sometimes become difficult, with the overwhelming sense that you are not really accomplishing *anything substantive* that looms large at times. It is really important to retain a sense of humor, respectfulness, and self. Finding time for you, although at times this may seem impossible, is something that I found really important. You cannot allow yourself to become so totally focused on what is going on in your job that the other elements of your life become a lower priority. I admit that it is difficult at times, but these connections to friends, family, home, pets, and whatever activities you find important and valuable to you, can really provide a fulfilling and positive outlet to the day-to-day “stuff” of the job.

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For me, the most profound lesson from my first year as an administrator was that it most definitely cannot be about anything more than the students. Keeping that in the forefront certainly provides a positive perspective from which to make decisions, form relationships, and continue to meet the challenges that each day presents. And so, I will continue to travel to and from school, with a reflective gaze at each day, using what I learn from my reflections, to inform my position, my learning, and my continuing development as a human being.

In processing this school year, my first as an administrator, I fleshed out a working list of things that guided my thinking, helped me be my most effective, and focused my efforts on being the best I could be, each and every day. This list is not prioritized, and contains only a fraction of all that I reflected upon throughout the year. It is offered as something to ponder, whether you are an administrator somewhere in the middle of your career or nearing the end point, or whether you are someone considering whether or not administration is for you. As it is important for teachers to engage in the practice of sharing their reflections upon curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices utilized in the classroom, it is also, I feel, important for administrators to share their reflections and insights on their practice with others in the field. This kind of dialogue allows us to reflect, grow, improve, and become more effective. This can only serve to enhance what it is we are entrusted to do with the students for whom we are responsible, each and every day.

Travel with me now, as I share the 20 things I feel have been most beneficial and effective in helping me to learn, grow, and continue to develop into a successful administrator. Please note, again, that these are NOT “ranked” in any particular order.

## Ms. Miller’s Top 20 Bits of Wisdom for New Administrators

1. Find a superintendent who values you and what you do, who respects you, and who is someone you can respect. If it doesn’t feel “right” – it probably isn’t.
2. Be a good team player – remember: there is no “I” in TEAM.
3. Forgive yourself – early and often. Understand that you are HUMAN, and therefore, will make mistakes.
4. Accept responsibility for your mistakes, and address (or redress) them as soon as possible.
5. READ. READ. READ. Never stop developing, broadening, and deepening your knowledge base.
6. Find a MENTOR – someone you can turn to in time of need for his or her wisdom, guidance, and support. (Thanks, K-Lo!)
7. Dr. Paul Vermette’s (Niagara University superstar) Rule applies to EVERYONE, ALWAYS: I don’t have to like you. I have to work with you and respect you.
8. REFLECT – not for the purpose of self-deprecation (aka, beating yourself up), but to help you process, use what you glean from processing/digesting, and continue to LEARN and GROW.
9. Allow yourself a sense of HUMOR – it keeps you grounded, connected, and human, and it is a wonderful stress reliever.
10. Expect and accept criticism – remember: you can’t please everyone all the time, to paraphrase a great and wise leader, Abraham Lincoln.
11. “Slow but steady wins the race” – that’s wisdom from Aesop, a Greek dude, who is even older than I am!
12. Keep in mind that change is hard for EVERYONE, and that each person reacts in his or her own way, and in his or her own time.
13. Stretch yourself when you can comfortably do so, and be open to challenges – they keep you learning, engaged, and humble.
14. Be HONEST. Be SINCERE. Be YOURSELF.
15. Learn as many names, and as quickly as possible. Everyone likes to be acknowledged for who they are.
16. Don’t stop thinking about tomorrow . . . and next week . . . and next month . . . and next year....
17. Find a friend (or friends) – fellow administrators, teachers, staff, students, and parents – with whom you can be open, learn, and laugh.
18. Never consider moving to an educational administration position if:
  - You think you should have all the answers.
  - You take criticism too personally.
  - You don’t care passionately about kids and learning.
  - You don’t think/know ALL kids CAN learn.
  - You aren’t there to make a difference.
19. Find time for YOURSELF – exercise, pray, meditate, and enjoy family, friends, pets, hobbies, and interests.
20. Remember: there are no BAD CHILDREN – there are children who make BAD CHOICES.

The distance, and the time required to travel that distance, between my home and school, have really provided me with the luxury to think things through, decompress, process, and move forward. I am very proud to be a member of the learning community of which I am now a part, and even though I write this as one year draws to a close, I know that the beginning of the new year is just around the corner. The coming new school year will be my second as an administrator. I hope to continue to develop my list,

grow and learn as a human being and an administrator, and one day reach a place where I can look back and say I have been able to make a positive difference in as many lives as possible. So, toward that end, I will continue to drive, think, reflect, grow, learn, and BE, as well as BECOME, whatever it is I am intended to be each and every day. I will continue to put one foot in front of the other, and make my best effort to do the best job possible, each and every day. ●

*Suzanne M. Miller is currently the dean of students at AuSable Valley Middle/High School in Clintonville, NY. She is a proud alumna of the South Colonie Central School District, the College of St. Rose, and St. Lawrence University, and she lives in Saranac Lake, NY.*

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*For me, the most profound lesson from my first year as an administrator was that it most definitely cannot be about anything more than the students.*

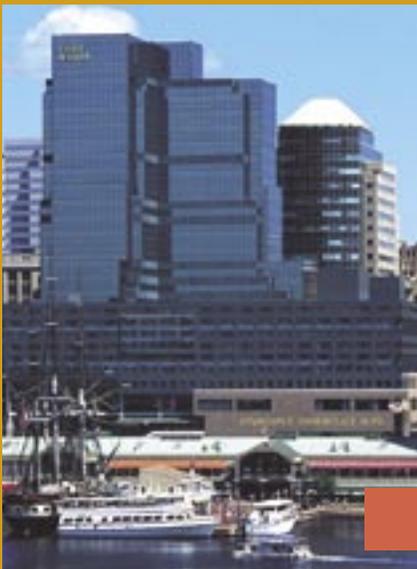
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# Learning the Principalcraft: Experiencing and Reflecting

by Dr. Barry W. Mack, CV-TEC Director, Champlain Valley Educational Services

*Any forum that helps to support the formal and informal networking by principals in learning their administrative “craft” should be strongly supported by superintendents and school boards. In addition, principals should avail themselves of every opportunity to learn and share with their colleagues for numerous reasons. This might include workshops, conferences, institutes, retreats, academies, and regional meetings, which provide the opportunity for principals to actively participate in a conscious “reflective” (Schon, 1983) process.*

It is apparent that each principal develops his or her own highly individualized “principalcraft” (Mack, 1990). This term was coined to best describe the very essence and nature of the principal’s work. It comes from the notion that each principal was somehow crafting, on an ongoing basis, a very specialized relationship and “presentation.” Blumberg (1984) first introduced the notion of school administration as a “craft.” Principals, as administrators, work, reflect, adjust, and develop their individualized craft in the workplace called school.

The image of the principal in action, displaying the full array of his or her principalcraft skills, like a master crafts-person, has quite a unique sense, touch, and feel to it as each principal works with his or her own particular mix of “materials” (Blumberg, 1989). The author submits that what administrators “craft, for the most part, are workable solutions to problematic situations.” Then it seems to reason that each principal develops a very special principalcraft in his or her own professional development. This ongoing developmental learning process seems to be based on an extremely complex interchange of both past and current experiences intermingled with the principal’s own special abilities, talents, skills, and values.

One erroneous assumption frequently made is that once a principal is hired, he or she is fully capable of handling all of the demands and so does not need to continue learning. Many times we make the same assumption about teachers. A survey of 1,153 principals by Gottfredson (1987) gave us a “portrait of an enormously complex and demanding job.” Some of the roles and expectations that contribute to this demand include staff leadership, community savvy, policy development, instructional management, coping with disorder, budget management, union negotiations, facilities management, teacher observations, crisis intervention, communications with parents, bureaucratic adaptability,

along with data collection and analysis, among others.

Much of the literature on principals and the principalship is descriptive or prescriptive in nature. It deals mostly with the most appropriate methods to use for specific tasks the principal faces or describes traits or competencies principals exhibit. Beyond the identification of the key characteristics, skills, and competencies needed, little attention has been devoted to trying to understand the individual craft development of the principal.

Learning the principalcraft is an ongoing, dynamic process rather than a

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static one. Blumberg (1989) informs us that “knowing the right thing to do” comes from the principal’s individual life and job experiences from which one “develops a memory.” Successful principals are able to learn from their professional mistakes, or the mistakes of others, in building their memory craft bank if they listen and reflect and then draw on that bank in their daily tasks. This notion has tremendous implications for professional development of principals as adult learners.

Principals need a regular forum for sharing, as “many principals feel isolated from their peers. Most of them do not have an on-site administrator to work with and they rarely see other principals in action” (Barnett, 1985). Principals need a safe environment with practicing and even retired principals where they can share and reflect on “mistakes” they or their colleagues have made. This can

serve as an important part of the craft learning process as principals share their lore and stories, which frequently include mistakes they have made in their daily professional experiences.

When high school principals meet monthly in the Champlain Valley Educational Services region, they are willing to share because they feel safe with their current and former colleagues. Over the years, we have denied a number of requests from non-principals to join the

principals group. Although these requests have come from people with legitimate connections with our schools, it has been kept a closed group due to the overriding benefits of professional sharing in a safe environment. We felt it was essential to maintain that sense of safety and security provided by colleagues who meet regularly and have an established level of trust. This level of trust leads to greater sharing of mistakes and as a result greater reflection and professional growth for the principals in our region.

Cervero (1988) reminded us that “professionals learn through books, discussions with colleagues, formal and informal educational programs, and reflections on daily practice.” Principals should be given opportunities to reflect on their mistakes with the support of other practicing or retired principals

*Professionals learn through books, discussions with colleagues, formal and informal educational programs, and reflections on daily practice.*

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*The ongoing professional development of each principal in the development of the craft is essential to the success of our schools.*

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who can offer their own craft experiences as proven models.

As mentioned, currently practicing and some retired high school principals in the Champlain Valley Educational Services region in Clinton and Essex counties meet monthly in a safe and supportive environment to share, learn, reflect, and support each other. Our area school superintendents strongly support these meetings and encourage their principals to attend each month despite the multiple demands on their time. A written agenda is always developed in advance which structures opportunities for both formal and informal learning to take place. Naturally, the agenda always has a SAANYS update given by Robert Garrow.

These agendas are based on the current expressed needs of the practicing principals and include the latest SED directives, rulings, important professional readings, different topics of interest, and a special focus on improving student results. In addition, opportunities are built in during the roundtable portion of the agenda to share “breaking” stories, new initiatives, celebrations, and reflections on professional mistakes.

This part of the agenda is also designed for a principal to ask questions of their colleagues relevant to current challenges they are facing. Many of these questions are related to management challenges.

New principals are regularly encouraged to contact any of the veteran principals for assistance on current issues and challenges. Our retired principals are always invited to attend our monthly luncheon meetings, as they have a storehouse of experiences and stories forged from their own principalcraft development and they are very willing to participate and share.

In summary, the learning of the complex and individualized principalcraft should be acknowledged and supported by all stakeholders in the educational community. The ongoing professional development of each principal in the development of the craft is essential to the success of our schools.

The role of principals actively learning from other principals seems to be very powerful as their lore and stories are shared and they reflect on the “mistakes” they or their colleagues make while developing their own craft. The

importance of building their memory bank is essential as they develop mastery in their craft.

The importance of reflecting and experiencing for developing and experienced principals in a supportive forum also has implications for our colleges and universities. They could play an expanded role in the career-long principalcraft development of our nation’s school leaders by creating opportunities to help principals master their craft with the support of other principals. Greater emphasis on early field-based experiences seems to be a critical component in the development of new principals. Perhaps “Principals’ Reflective Retreat Centers” should be developed where principals could study and reflect on the lore of being a principal with other practitioners. ●

*Dr. Mack has been the director of CV-TEC for 12 years and has 27 years of experience as a school administrator, 15 of those as a building principal. He has served as director of regional academic summer school for nine years. Dr. Mack earned his doctorate in educational administration from Syracuse University and his master’s degree from Colgate University. He is an adjunct instructor for SUNY Oswego and Clinton Community College, and he serves on Regional Workforce Investment Board and with Boy Scouts of America. He chairs monthly Regional High School Principals Group meetings for CVES.*

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# Spending Time on Student Value

by Mark P. Gray, Principal, Milburn Elementary School, Baldwin Union Free School District

*I don't quite know how many times I have heard a teacher make the argument that business or corporate strategies don't work within the context of an educational organization due to the fact that we work with children, not stocks or pieces of steel. While the surface implications are certainly true, there is more to a statement such as this when we attempt to understand our role in establishing safe and nurturing learning environments for our children.*

No, our students are not chunks of real estate, valuable metals, clothing lines, entertainment, or mutual funds. But we do invest in them, don't we? We do, as teachers and administrators, have a stake in their outcome and performance while they are with us.

On the more romantic slant, we are motivated by all that is good in our intentions to help children become successful learners and, eventually, productive citizens. It's why we become teachers in the first place. One of our few rewards is to have our former students come back and report their successes in whichever field of work they choose.

On the more immediate and less romantic side, however, is our realistic need to have students perform on state assessments and up to the standards of their parents and families. This isn't necessarily negative, and can actually be perceived as positive motivation built around setting high expectations and rigor in the curriculum. Both of these driving forces, no matter how different they are from one another, point out a system of commodities that needs to be recognized, understood, and utilized if we want to make a true difference in the safety (both physical and emotional) of the students who walk through our doors every day. Administrators need to remember that the first set of doors a child walks through each day is that of

the school, not the classroom. Safety, as defined within the context of this piece, is an entity that allows a student to learn, explore, create, and grow without even the impending risk of physical or emotional harm. Safety, in the economy of education, is a part of a trickle-down system.

The reason that educators feel the need to differentiate between students and other products of profit is that the comparison makes sense to some extent. We do not have to say "our students are

commodity that they are. From the global perspective of being educators, this isn't necessarily an evil reality, or even unproductive. There is a deep need to be able to understand this "commodity" from above as we attempt to organize and facilitate broad instructional practices that will benefit large quantities of students. This understanding does not need to extend beyond the organizational mind-set of administration. This is just as most of us don't really need to understand what our financial advisor is doing with our money, just so long as

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*Safety . . . is an entity that allows a student to learn, explore, create, and grow without even the impending risk of physical or emotional harm.*

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not elephants" or "our students are not grains of sand on the beach." We know, from a global perspective, that the analogy has some merit, and we therefore jump in to diffuse further comparison. We blow the whistle to remind everyone that we are working with human beings with hearts, dreams, and developing minds. But what we must be most careful of is the underlying theme that is left over. We never move away from children being a commodity. We simply work to fully define the type of com-

modity that they are. But as we venture into the landscape of daily living and learning in our public schools, we *must* understand the currency that children are working with in order to truly establish safe environments. This is the essence of behavior management and safer schools. We must care enough to investigate the currency being generated and circulated amongst our children. Just the attempt to do so speaks volumes to very aware young minds as to how important they are to us. This type of investment, on

our part, clearly defines to students their worth to us. And when you breed importance, you are infusing additional currency into what can be a suffering economy.

Children who are a threat to safe environments come into our schools and into our classrooms lacking currency. Let's think about this for a moment. Most children who cause disruption, in one way or another, are acting out of frustration. They are coming to us lacking home support, conventional wisdom, or internal tools of control. They are simply grasping for negative forms of currency. A young boy or girl who bullies another child, or invades the emotional security of another child, is gaining some sense of power and control, therefore creating leverage in the economy of the classroom. The same can be said for teachers who react and act negatively when they find themselves teaching in the realm of an uncomfortable regime. So how do we negate the need for students and teachers to grasp at negative power? The only viable solution is to generate positive power opportunities. How do we go about doing that?

No matter what anti-bullying program is implemented at the school and classroom level, there needs to be a genuine attempt to understand the child. Any amount of research can and will identify various schools that have both failed and succeeded in using the same conflict resolution program. Why is that? Because a program is just that – a program and a structure for thought and practices. What needs to be at the heart of any successful project is the internal drive, on a schoolwide scale, to understand the individual child. If a child, who is at risk of negative behavior, does not find what he or she seeks in positive currency, he or she will in fact revert to securing negative power. A child must know and understand that a teacher sees them for who they are as learners and little human beings. They must feel that their teacher can create opportunities

for them to take advantage of the multiple intelligences; a chance for them to be understood; a place for them to convert their own feelings of insecurity into strengths within the context of the classroom. If these avenues are opened to “at risk” students, their energy can be focused on achieving currency in positive ways. The most important question then becomes: Who is capable of giving this to our children?

In modern education, too much emphasis has been placed on the system. When we see something that works (e.g. an inner-city school that cuts their disciplinary incidents in half), we are quick to credit “the system” in place. This is done so quickly, and we tend to

is embedded in what we do, it becomes a viable currency, and students respond. So how do we, as administrators, utilize our limited tangibles in order to obtain the intangibles?

For one, we must recognize that teachers are humans too. We must embrace the accountability that we have in this process. It is our responsibility to create the same risk-free environment for teachers that we want them to create for our students. We need to understand and appreciate the various styles of teaching, just so long as the base and motivation remains universal. We need to be IN the classrooms, learning about each of our youngsters. We need to model best practices in regard to indi-

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*The single most important intangible in education is the intrinsic drive to love and understand our children on every level.*

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ignore all of the places where the system is failing the children. That is because, as we discuss the “commodity of children,” we like to work with numbers and facts. But we cannot continue to dismiss the intangibles just because they are harder to define. The single most important intangible in education is the intrinsic drive to love and understand our children on every level. This means taking the time to individualize our assessments of students on both curricular and emotional grounds. This means that we lean on the much more complicated strategy of investing countless hours in the research of our kids. This means that we foster the cultural movement of caring first and foremost, and then we place a system over top of that base in order to organize for effort (one of the principles of learning). This means that teachers teach above and outside the contract; that teachers perform unrecognized acts; that teachers VALUE a child's right to feel secure inside the system of learning. Once this VALUE

vidualized instruction through intimate conferencing and investigation. We need to wrap professional development around a teacher's growth in the arena of creating engaging lessons, differentiating instruction, and learning about the currency that children use. Only after this is in place should we think about using this or that program to organize our efforts.

We need to first and foremost care about our teachers and children. This is the secret ingredient in creating a climate and culture for change that cannot be found or replaced in any fashion whatsoever. We need to instill both the opportunity and the collective drive for teachers to become a part of a culture that values the understanding of student currency. These priorities involve emotional, financial, and curricular investments – all of which are a part of a leader's calling.

By generating common planning

time, investing money in appropriate professional development (this can be something as simple as spending time in an effort to increase the productivity and strategies of effective conferencing), and placing an emphasis on ownership through teamwork and decisionmaking, an administrator can direct and manipulate the flow of energy in converting tangibles into intangibles. There is no science to ultimately caring deeply for children and teachers. But it needs to be that “caring” that drives us into the sciences of assessing, instructing, and understanding our students.

The absence of home in this discussion does not negate or diminish its influence. But as long as we are speaking in the language of “science,” we need to understand that, in many ways, a home situation is a given. Whether the home is single, married, abusive, supportive, capable, or negligent, it is our first priority to KNOW what it is. It helps us to understand what currency a child is

*Whether the home is single, married, abusive, supportive, capable, or negligent, it is our first priority to KNOW what it is.*

working with; to comprehend WHERE a child is coming from; and to begin a relationship where we can offer what is missing – or enhance what is already there. Then, when we do enter into relationships with the family behind the child, we are speaking a common language, instead of the foreign language that is education. Only then can we offer currency, or a buy-in option, to the family, so that our learning community becomes just that – a community.

What we cannot change, as school leaders (both teachers and administrators, and sometimes students!), is what comes through our doors at the beginning of each year. The only point of fo-

cused change, as an imperative priority, is to place a distinct emphasis on professional chances to care through the following: purchasing (professional development and materials), organization (careful placement of personnel and student arrangement), hiring practices (what types of candidates do we want?), and systems that, through research, best fit the culture being created. By using concrete currency to create intangible currency, we in turn create true and genuine communities that value student worth, and negate the need and space to build negative forms of spending. Then, and only then, can we understand ourselves as a learning family. ●

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