

First Steps:

Sage Advice from Administrators Who Have “Walked the Walk”

by Amy E. Tucker



New York State is rapidly approaching a wave of administrative retirements that could cripple the field of education such that finding, training, mentoring, and launching a new breed of diligent, resourceful administrators is paramount to our children’s future success.

The most practical and useful advice is often born from experience – from those who have walked before us, paved the way, made the mistakes, and learned the ropes. Five newly retired administrators share their insights honed over more than 100 collective years in the trenches of America’s school districts.

The Challenge

On January 8, 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act, resulting in the biggest challenge facing teachers and administrators in education today.

"No Child Left Behind (NCLB) is killing schools," said Bill Castellane, former principal in the Newburgh City School District. "They [State Education

with helping students be successful with the new testing program and ensuring graduation for students. NCLB is part of what drives that, but if it didn't exist, districts would still have to commit to attaining the highest graduation rates possible."

"We're losing a lot of kids," he continued, "who don't see K-12 as a full education, or feel that graduation is necessary for their success."

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"Parents should be the students' first teachers, so it's vital to include them in all phases of the learning process," agreed Jean Saunders Phillips, former principal for Syracuse City Schools. "Parents need to be kept abreast of all aspects of the educational process, and be taught effective means of advocating for their children if they don't know how."

Cassese focused on the reading and academic areas in the very early grades, holding monthly meetings with parents of children for whom "learning was labored." Where there were language barriers, he made interpretation arrangements – often using their actual children – to avoid reluctance or embarrassment on the parents' part and ensure participation in their children's success.

Castellane stressed the collaborative approach and demonstrating flexibility.

"It's a struggle today for parents – especially single parents – to survive the rigors of raising young children," said Young. "No matter what opinion administrators form of parents at first meeting, they need to remember that they're probably doing the very best they can – as are their children in most cases."

Young plotted parents along the bell curve, drawing comparisons to student intelligence quotients (IQs) with the standard deviation down the

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Department (SED)] need to look at different ways of funding education. They're taxing NYS taxpayers terribly, and continually asking us to do things but never coming up with money for it."

Paul Young, past president (2002-03) of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and former principal in the Lancaster City School District in Lancaster, Ohio, agreed.

"Principals are really feeling the squeeze trying to implement all the implications of NCLB and balancing that with everything else that comes down the way," said Young. "How do you justify whether you cut out recess or playtime to devote more time to academics, yet still combat the obesity issue? There's sort of a no-win scenario and vicious circle that's been created."

It goes beyond NCLB for John Cassese, former principal of Sachem School District, a suburban district in Suffolk County and the second-largest district in Long Island.

"The challenge," said Cassese, "has to do

Cassese feels children become disaffected early on, and the belief that they can be learners or not is reinforced along the way.

"The more you can work with parents," explained Cassese, "the greater the chances are for success with the students."

The Catch-22

The catch-22 in education is the parents: you can't live with them, and you can't live without them. Cassese dispels the myth that parents cannot be engaged.

"I believe all parents want their children to succeed in their heart-of-hearts," said Cassese. "You have to reach out to

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middle representing 100. Students, two standard deviations away, with IQs of 70 would typically be placed in special education classes and those with IQs of 130 would be perceived as gifted or talented.

“There’s about two-thirds of supportive parents in the middle who would do anything in the world for you – the Ozzie and Harriet type parents,” said Young. “Then, there’s about one-sixth that will dominate all of your time. They’re the ‘special parents,’ often called the mediocres.”

“The one-sixth on the other side are your ‘super parents’ who can do anything,” Young continued. “Super parents make the best models. And, there are helicopter parents throughout all of those groups.”

The key, according to Young, is identifying what these super parents need and want, and teaching them to fly so they’ll pull the rest of the parents and the school along.

The Team

Young also applied the bell curve to his staff.

“They knew who were backbones, who were superstars, and who were mediocres,” said Young. “If you allow a culture to exist where the mediocres can dominate, they will.”

But, finding and recruiting those “superstars” within your staff can appear daunting.

“You need to dialogue, collaborate, and work together as a team. Don’t just allow teachers to provide input – you need to actually use it.”

Cassese said to find the best teachers, administrators must develop a backbone and know when to make the cut.

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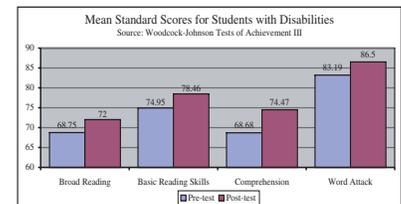
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“REACH works very well for students who have a capacity for learning,” said Mimi Barnes-Coppola, professional development specialist for Buffalo Public Schools.



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“Administrators must be strong and critical enough to ensure that only those teachers with the passion for teaching, and who are willing to make a long-term commitment to their career, receive tenure.”

Mentoring is the solution, according to Young, who feels the administrative shortage could be solved if every current administrator found five potential teachers to coach and mentor into the fold.

“The practicing principal has the key to what the real world is like,” said Young. “There are so many things for a principal to learn in that first, crucial year, but things keep coming at you in the second and third years also.”

“A good mentor stays with that person until they’re assured they’ve been through the experiences and are comfortable with the position,” he continued. “And, the best way an aspiring principal can be trained is to work side by side with someone or have access to someone they can call anytime during the day with questions.”

Young also puts the onus on aspiring principals to be aggressive, identify good mentors, and build the relationship.

“It’s a give-and-take,” Young explained. “The mentor doesn’t just give to the protégé. If you identify and cultivate a network of mentors who will support you, you can get through anything.”

The Magic Key

The key to success, whether implementing a new change or holding staff accountable, rests with ongoing, collaborative communication.

“You have to develop all your relationships so that they trust you first and foremost,” said Joanna Valente Orr, former principal and administrator

in Northeastern Clinton. “If you give them the information, they can develop it, understand it, acknowledge it, and own it, and usually everyone will come along.”

“You need to dialogue, collaborate, and work together as a team,” added Castellane. “Don’t just allow teachers to provide input – you need to actually use it.”

“The days are over when educators can point fingers at parents, funds, or conflict in the district or budgets,” said Cassese. “It’s not enough to say, ‘I did my best job and taught the curriculum.’ The outstanding teacher should accept responsibility for the pattern of learning and the degree of success of the student.”

“I see too many new principals who become overwhelmed and forget to work with their staffs,” Young stated.

“People have to know what your expectations are going to be with their teaching, with assessments, concerning working with children, and with managing,” Young continued. “All of that needs to come from the principal in multiple ways including written and oral formats, modeling and conveying expectations.”

“A school comes to a standstill like gridlock if the principal doesn’t establish the vision pretty quickly.”

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“Sometimes in education we hop from one innovation to another without completely examining those innovations for one’s particular setting,” said Cassese. “It’s crucial that we become better analysts in choosing programs and innovations for schools.”

“New administrators often get caught up in making a name for themselves,” said Jean Saunders Phillips. “It’s important to meet with stakeholders, seek input, and provide data that supports the change. Don’t just make changes for the sake of it.”

“A classic problem in education,” said Cassese, “is that we analyze data for one group, then apply it to a whole new group that might have different learning parameters.”

Cassese feels that too often schools wait to get assessment results, when information about students is right at their fingertips.

“Getting data in a timely fashion is important,” he said. “We need to access this readily available information, compile it, and use it to create a learning prescription for every student very

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For Castellane, doing a survey, gathering data – including parental input – and analyzing the situation were just the beginning of the process. Working with staff and getting their buy-in to implement the change was the secret ingredient to success.

He also attended training with his teachers for every new program, so he understood it and knew what his staff should be delivering when he walked into their classrooms.

A Balancing Act

Achieving the delicate work-life balance is an essential skill for administrators to acquire.

“You have to put your personal and home life first,” said Saunders Phillips. “You need to remember that this is a job, and that your family deserves a special place in your life.”

She also advocates establishing a strong support system of relatives, neighbors, and friends who can step in when you need them.

When Valente Orr moved to Clinton County, there were less than a handful of female administrators in the area, and at many meetings she was the only female.

“I think it’s more of a balancing act for

a female than a male because it hasn’t been long since women have come to the forefront of administration,” Valente Orr explained.

“This is a difficult job for a young mother with small kids and other priorities tugging at her,” she continued. “There are more men staying at home now, but I think women don’t want to give up the control of wanting to be everything, and to have and do it all.”

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“I was always in the classrooms every day no matter what. . . . That’s how you keep your staff accountable. It also helped me keep my sanity, because it reminded me that I was there for the kids.”

Young, who tries to run every day, feels teachers and administrators help perpetuate the obesity issue.

“We’re the worst models for our children,” said Young. “We’ve become very sedentary; we work long hours and don’t take care of our health.”

For Cassese, achieving the balance is a

matter of becoming well organized and streamlining processes.

“You need to focus on what’s important in terms of getting the job done, don’t mix priorities, and develop techniques to streamline the important things you have to do,” Cassese explained. “For example, balancing evening activities gets into contract negotiations, so you have to be creative and use your available personnel effectively.”

MISKIF

Defining success often boils down to acknowledging from whence you came. Throughout five different school districts, Castellane never forgot that.

“I was a teacher first, and I came from the classroom” Castellane said. “I was always in the classrooms every day no matter what.”

“Too many administrators feel they have too much on their plates,” he continued, “but that’s how you keep

your staff accountable. It also helped me keep my sanity, because it reminded me that I was there for the kids.”

“If you have the very best interests of kids in mind, you can make a mistake and still survive it,” said Young.

Valente Orr missed being a teacher most when she became an administrator – so much so that she spent 19 years as

an adjunct at Plattsburgh State to help fulfill that need.

"I was in the classroom as much as I could be and subbed whenever teachers were ill," she conceded. "Being a teacher got me where I wanted to be. And, I think it helped for people to know me as not just the person down in the office."

When Valente Orr became an administrator, mentoring programs didn't exist. She found networking and keeping abreast of issues crucial to her success.

"I learned early on that I couldn't work in isolation," said Valente Orr. "I networked with other principals in the immediate area and beyond and read constantly to keep up with what was happening. I read the *Times Union* online and the SED website daily."

"If you're somewhat removed from an issue," Cassese agreed, "you can get lost in the details, and lose sight of the big picture."

Cassese learned the concept "MISKIF" (make it simple, keep it fun) early on. But he learned the greatest lesson as an administrator from his board president, the local milkman for the school district.

"He told me: If it's good for kids, we do it. If it's not we don't," said Cassese. "We make it more difficult, but it doesn't have to be more complicated than that." ♦

Editor's note: Amy E. Tucker is a freelance writer from Clifton Park, NY, covering education and sports for the past decade.



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