

Foreword

Roland S. Barth

When the superintendent and the school board have appointed the new principal you can almost hear the sigh of relief. The decision has been made and the problem solved.

Well, for them maybe. But not for the beginning principal! One parent-teacher selection committee drew up the following list of characteristics of their sought after new principal. It conveys a sense of the incredible—and impossible—expectations that the beginning school leader must now confront:

- Ability to see another's point of view
- Trust in teachers' judgments
- Supportive
- Relaxed and flexible
- Knowledgeable about curriculum areas
- Experienced in school administration
- Decisive
- Strength in one's convictions
- Self-confident
- Ability to distinguish the important from the unimportant
- Sense of security
- Ability to set goals
- Ability to provide guidance for teacher growth
- Ability to promote staff communication
- Personal warmth
- Understanding of human differences
- Ability to deal with pressure groups
- Offers strong leadership

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Add to these the expectations from the central office, the state department of education . . . and No Child Left Behind. And then add the myriad duties the principal will soon be responsible for. Among them:

The safe passage of students from their homes to school

Ensuring that the sidewalks are plowed of snow

The physical condition of the plant

The security of its occupants

Health education

Sex education

Moral education

Teaching children to evacuate school buses

Teaching them to ride their bikes safely

Lunch programs and then breakfast programs

Students' achievement of high standards at each grade level

Children with special needs

Those who are gifted and for those who are neither

Administering tests and ensuring that all children score above average

None of these responsibilities is backbreaking in itself, but taken collectively they present an enormous burden few are capable of assuming let alone sustaining.

Small wonder that many experienced principals are dropping out. And small wonder that the line forming to replace them is getting shorter and shorter. And that so many beginning principals flounder or wash out. I know. I have never felt as vulnerable, so much at risk, so clueless, and as innocent as I did that first year as principal . . . after which I was fired! And things in the principal's office are much tougher now than then.

One would suppose that fellow principals would come to the aid of their new brethren. Alas, there seems to be a taboo in our profession against both disclosing our problems to others and giving assistance to others who have problems. Too often one is, as one school leader put it, "forbidden not to know." And competition with others leads to a situation where "the worse you look the better I look; the better you look, the worse I look."

This leaves the beginning principal to suffer under impossible expectations with little help from within the schoolhouse or without.

Susan Villani also served as principal for many years. It is her belief that novice principals need not rely solely upon the school of hard knocks to educate them. The good news is that in this volume her heart and her head go out to those who are taking on this critical work. This is her gift to her colleagues . . . and her legacy to the profession.

And a valuable and generous gift it is. I see in these pages an astonishing resource for those in universities, school systems, and state departments of education who would assist beginning principals. This is a book about making wise and pervasive use of one of the most powerful means possible for

promoting the learning of the novice leader . . . alignment with a mentor who has “successfully been there and done that.”

I also see here a “self-help” book. For the names, locations, and detailed descriptions of scores of principal mentoring programs is now available for any practitioner to see and make use of as well.

Mentoring is a very difficult and sophisticated art form to perform well. To be done successfully, many conditions must be in place for mentor and the mentored alike. It’s all here.

The purpose of school and of schooling is to promote profound levels of human learning. I believe the real gift that effective mentoring can provide is only in part providing a resource system for the new kid on the block. The more enduring gift mentoring gives the new principal is an immediate opportunity, to reveal him- or herself to the school community as an insatiable learner. The *head learner!* To the extent principals, through their mentoring activities, will make their learning known and visible to students, teachers, and parents they will model and exemplify the most important business of the schoolhouse . . . learning. And they will thereby telegraph the message that “learning is for important people.” There is no more powerful and more desperately needed message they can convey.

The first year on the job will always be tough. So will the second and third. But thanks to Susan Villani’s words you are about to read I am confident that the next generation of principals will never have to “go it alone.”