

# **PART I**

## **The Principal's Many Roles**

# 1

## Leader as Learner

*Just when I'm ready to retire, I'm beginning to learn what this job is all about.*

—A principal's voice<sup>1</sup> (after 33 years of service)

### ■ PRINCIPAL AS LIFELONG LEARNER

There is no setting in which the concept of the lifelong learner is more important than a school. In fact, many professionals now conceptualize the school as a Professional Learning Community (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) not only for students but also for administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents. This is a powerful notion that can impact student success. As Barth (2001b) notes, “more than anything else, it is the culture of the school that determines the achievement of teacher and student alike” (p. 33).

Bennis and Nanus (1985) remind us that successful leaders take responsibility for their own development and are *perpetual learners*. Schlechty (2001) stresses that “if the principal is to help teachers improve what they do, the principal must continuously be learning to improve what he or she is doing” (p. 145). Senge (1990) suggests that a characteristic of the successful leader is the ability to instill in others the desire to learn what is necessary to help the organization reach its mission. And George (2007) reflects that “authentic leadership is empowering others on their journeys. This shift is the transformation from ‘I’ to ‘We.’ It is the most important process learners go through in becoming authentic” (p. 44). Applying this notion to the principal of a school, the leader can model for everyone in the workplace what lifelong learning means. For modeling to be effective, though, it should be sincere, consistent, purposeful, and empowering. There are several ways to do this.

### ■ LEARNING IN MANY CONTEXTS

One way the principal can model lifelong learning is by continuing to participate in the development and demonstration of effective teaching practices. For example, a principal collaborating with teacher leaders can help create faculty meetings in which conversations about teaching, learning, and assessment become institutionalized through various activities. During these conversations, principals should purposefully support the remarks of both new and veteran

teachers to model a high regard for the contributions of all faculty. Another context in which the principal can function as learner is during the supervision process. The following scenario demonstrates how the leader-as-learner theme is played out in two ways: learning about not only behaviors and activities that facilitate student and teacher learning but also behaviors and strategies that enhance the principal's effectiveness in the supervisory process.

An effective and common supervisory technique includes a preobservation conference in which the principal and a teacher, through a questioning process, work together to “unpack” the teacher's thinking about the lesson to be taught. Together they discuss planned teaching behaviors and expected student outcomes. They solve potential problems and fine-tune the lesson plan. The teacher identifies the focus for the observation, and collaboratively the teacher and the principal decide on the best method for data collection. During the observation, the principal, steered primarily by the teacher's request for information, collects data. Collectively, teacher and principal learn about curricular, instructional, and assessment practices that produce desired student outcomes. In addition, both professionals identify the types of data collection that capture the essence of the desired supervisory focus.

In the postobservation conference, the principal and the teacher often examine student work and ask questions that foster reflection on and analysis of the lesson. Together they discuss what worked to facilitate student learning. At the conclusion of these reflections, they analyze what would be done the same and what would be done differently if the lesson were to be taught again.

Additionally, the principal asks, “Thinking about this conferencing process, what strategies and techniques did I use that facilitated your thinking as a teacher?” The principal might also ask, “What might I have done differently?” Thus the principal and the teacher collaboratively analyze the conferencing practices that enhance or hinder teacher thinking and learning about curriculum and instruction. Together they find ways to make the conferencing experience worthwhile for both.

Principal-as-student experiences can be an innovative way to provide a new perspective and important insights about a school. The principal can spend time in classrooms taking on the student role as a participant in a discussion, a team member in a cooperative group, or a reader or teacher. A particularly successful principal-as-student strategy is “Principal for the Day.” One high school principal that we know of holds an essay contest each year that results in a student exchanging roles with the principal for one day. The principal takes on the class schedule of the student selected as principal and completes the student's homework assignments, attends classes, and takes examinations. This is a wonderful way to celebrate learning, remain visible, attend classes, and build relationships with students. It also increases the principal's awareness of the quality of classroom learning. These experiences can be shared on a schoolwide basis, in faculty meetings, or with the school's parent teacher organization. Students and teachers appreciate the interest in them and enjoy the novelty of the situation. If a principal has not functioned in these roles before, it is critical to let teachers know ahead of time “what you're up to.”

The principal can teach demonstration lessons, possibly on technology, and digitally record the lessons to use at a faculty meeting. This provides an opportunity to apply new ideas and practices. Then the principal can talk with staff about experiences in teaching and learning associated with presenting lessons. If the principal's lesson is only fair, and the “rough edges are showing,” this can be comforting to staff. It is nice to know that leaders are not flawless. This builds trust because teachers realize that the principal has walked in their shoes, is willing to accept feedback from the faculty, and has an understanding of classroom conditions.

The principal can also function as a learner by reading and sharing research with teachers and parents. By writing or speaking about new learnings, the principal can pass on knowledge of recent research while modeling a love of learning.

Still another way that the principal functions in the learner role is by participating in professional development sessions. Too often principals introduce speakers and run off to another meeting.

Principal participation emphasizes the importance of these professional development opportunities and validates the teachers' time spent in these sessions.

When the principal attends a conference, there are frequently opportunities to purchase CDs, DVDs, or podcasts of sessions. Teachers should be encouraged to do the same. Try picking out the best sessions, purchasing recordings of them, and starting a collection in the staff room, teachers' center, or library. These resources can be borrowed by staff or parents. The principal can also send a follow-up report on the conference via e-mail or hard copy or sponsor a volunteer brown-bag lunch on key conference ideas to the staff. If there is sufficient interest in a topic, blogs can be initiated to engage in a discussion forum on a school district Web site.

Principals can help encourage Action Research projects by individuals or groups of teachers on educational ideas of interest to the staff. To illustrate, in one school district several elementary and high school teachers engaged in an Action Research project exploring the use of student portfolios. The teachers met periodically to discuss their experiences and student reactions, and the principal facilitated the process by helping to gather articles on portfolios, keeping a record of the project, and helping to develop an Action Research report with the staff. Staff who were planning to pursue the project during the following school year used several recommendations from this report:

- continuing the project on a voluntary basis
- developing portfolio partners among the faculty to compare notes every couple of weeks during the year
- having students in one class share portfolios with other classes
- collecting more nuts-and-bolts ideas on portfolios
- finding a quiet area to digitally record student work
- refining ways to help students reflect on and evaluate their progress through self-assessment and use of rubrics
- helping teachers fine-tune their conferencing skills with students
- providing strategies to help teachers structure classes to engage in frequent conversations with individual students
- considering strategies to present portfolios to parents during an evening or afternoon of student-led conferences

These suggestions by teachers assisted both the principal and the teachers in their quest to continually learn. By allowing teachers to use the resources of a principal's office, including secretarial services, and maintaining a database on portfolio progress, principals send a clear message of support for professional development and can be a great help to teachers engaged in learning activities designed to enhance students' classroom experiences.

Another strategy to support learning includes organizing book study groups or clubs among teachers and parents. (See Chapter 17 for a detailed explanation of such a group.) When principals are involved in these groups as facilitators or participants, the leader-as-learner role is strengthened and modeled. In one high school a successful book study group read *A Tribe Apart*, by Patricia Hersch (1998), and *Reviving Ophelia*, by Mary Pipher (1994).

Principals who solicit comments about their job performance from staff members at the end of the year send a strong message that they seek and appreciate staff input as another resource to promote learning. Furthermore, asking for staff feedback models a stance of openness and a commitment to ongoing learning. The following form has been used for several years by one of the authors to gain faculty input on a principal's performance:

Dear Faculty,

Over the years I have asked each faculty member with whom I have worked to give me helpful hints to improve my job performance. I know that you are all very busy, but I would appreciate it if you could take a few minutes to answer the questions below and help me evaluate my performance so I can do a better job next year. Obviously, your comments will remain confidential. If you would like to remain anonymous, please word process your comments. Please put your comments in the "Harvey" envelope on Prema's desk. I would appreciate your comments by the last faculty day, May 27.

Thanks, Harvey

1. What are some of the things that I am currently doing that you would like to see me continue?
2. What am I currently doing that you would like to see me discontinue next year?
3. What suggestions do you have to help me improve my job performance (e.g., Is there a particular area that I should pursue for additional training? Is there a book or article that you suggest I read?)?
4. Do you have any additional comments?

This procedure is simple to execute and often yields constructive feedback and helpful ideas. It also provides an opportunity for the principal to assess the perceptions of staff in relation to his or her self-perception. Feedback can be enhanced when the perspectives of students, classified staff, parents, assistant principals, and community members are solicited. This type of feedback, often referred to as *360-degree feedback*, can offer multiple perspectives for consideration.

Principals who keep reflective journals often share insights derived from this activity with staff, which sometimes encourages staff members to become reflective about their own craft experiences and practices. Supporting the notion of leader as learner, Barth (1990) emphasizes principals' tremendous capacity to release energy in a school by becoming sustained, visible learners. Barth also describes the phenomenon of an "at-risk" principal as any educator who leaves school at the end of the day with little possibility of continuing learning about the work that he or she does (cited in Sparks, 1993, p. 19). Rolf P. Lynton of the World Health Organization has also offered some powerful insights about reflection by noting that we all go through events on a daily basis. What distinguishes an *event* from an *experience* is that an event only becomes an experience after you have time to reflect.<sup>2</sup> Each experience offers an opportunity to learn. When teachers, students, and parents see a principal's desire to learn and share ideas, norms and expectations that celebrate learning can develop within a school. Moreover, the leader-as-learner model transfers to the classroom, where teachers demonstrate for students that they, too, are both leaders and learners.

## THE SCHOOL AS A POWERFUL CONTEXT FOR LEARNING ■

Finding time for such reflective endeavors is a challenge, yet doing so is critical. "We must also find imaginative ways of separating adults from youngsters at times during the school day for

conversation, brainstorming, reflection and replenishment” (Sparks, 1993, p. 20) so that the learning and the growth process continue. Barth (1990) believes that “the schoolhouse itself is the most powerful context for the continuing education of educators” (p. 20). Creating a learning community in some cultures is so valued that a considerable amount of time within the work day is allocated to this endeavor. For instance, in some Japanese schools, 40 percent of the work day is devoted to teacher planning, often in a collaborative context. Reflecting on the conceptualization of leader as learner, one can see that there are numerous ways to learn while on the job. Once time is identified, learning experiences can come from workshops, class visitations, demonstration lessons, Action Research projects, analyses of student data, reflective journal writing, books, educational journals, conferences, and discussions with and visits to other principals.

## ■ A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

A leader’s commitment to promoting lifetime learning throughout an organization is simply a smart strategy and an ethically wise decision when contemplating the world from a global perspective. In his influential book *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman (2005) discusses the fact that successful corporations are cross-training their workers to develop multiple skills because future employment will depend on a worker’s ability to be flexible and mobile: “The whole mindset of a flat world is one in which the individual worker is going to become more and more responsible for managing his or her own career, risks, and economic security” (p. 284). Based on his observations of India and China as well as the instrumental role that technology and initiative play, Friedman stresses that, in recent years, “the global competitive playing field was being leveled. The world was being flattened” (p. 8). Not surprisingly, he says that schools need to support math and science education as well as technology and critical thinking for both women and men.

School leaders who seek to understand the demographic changes in their own schools gain a greater perspective on the changes, and engage in lifetime learning, by recognizing the world as a dynamic, interdependent global community in which the “distance” between cultures and world issues is shrinking. In the United States today, there are more and more students who are nonnative English speakers from multicultural, immigrant, or migrant backgrounds. These students and their families have left their native countries to be a part of the U.S. historical narrative, the story of a nation of immigrants that has succeeded because of the ingenuity and hard work of its people.

School principals, as active and influential citizens, have a moral obligation to promote the success of each child in the school, regardless of race, class, ethnicity, gender, or country of origin. At the local school level, this commitment to the success of each child can be realized through the promotion of heterogeneous classes from prekindergarten through Grade 12. That local act sends a powerful message with global implications.

## ■ WHEN OLD AND NEW IDEAS CONVERGE

### The Value of Repertoire

As principals’ knowledge and experience increase, they are often faced with new ideas that appear to conflict with previous learning. Educators are expected to make either/or decisions regarding innovations that affect instructional practices and, consequently, students. To illustrate, suppose a district commits to a professional development focus on brain-based learning. Does this mean that the previous insights and learning from Madeline Hunter’s direct instruction model are no longer valid? Certainly not. Rather, the strengths from both instructional approaches should be celebrated. Too often we are encouraged to discard one idea for another. However, leaders as learners

should develop the ability to take the best from each new idea and synthesize information into an eclectic model. Doing so enables principals to diagnose a situation and draw from a repertoire of strategies to meet particular needs.

A critical learning for leadership is acknowledging that there will always be a need to learn more. Some of the most essential behaviors a principal can model is a devotion to lifelong learning and a willingness to dialogue with members of the learning organization about how new learning can reshape existing knowledge. To demonstrate this ongoing pursuit of knowledge, one principal we know regularly hangs a sign on the doorknob of her office that reads “Out Learning.” This reminds all members of the learning organization about the importance and power of learning about learning.

## From ESEA to NCLB: Implications for the Future

When studying the history of education in the United States, it is clear that the federal government initially had little intent of playing a major role in statewide education decisions. Remember, education is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution. However, by the middle of the 20th century the federal position had permanently changed because of three major acts. First, President Eisenhower decided to use National Guard troops in Little Rock, Arkansas, to enforce the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Second, in response to the Russian launch of Sputnik in 1957, U.S. leaders decided that this country was falling behind in math and science education, so in 1958 they passed the National Defense Education Act to upgrade schooling in the scientific fields. Third, passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, as part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty, directly involved the federal government in compensatory programs, from Title I to Head Start, to lift up the poor and help them succeed in schools. It is helpful to conceive of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), signed into law in January 2002 by President Bush, as part of the federal government’s continued intervention in schools.

Although there are as many critics as supporters of NCLB, important components of the NCLB movement have impacted schools significantly and will likely remain important educational objectives and trends regardless of which party controls the White House or Congress. School principals will need to address the following components to meet legislative and public expectations (Alvy & Robbins, 2008; Armstrong, Henson, & Savage, 2009; Koch, 2009):

- Each student, regardless of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, or exceptionalism, is entitled to a high-quality education.
- Schools and teachers must be accountable for student learning.
- The achievement gap among different groups must be closed.
- High averages on statewide tests will no longer be acceptable if students from minority, impoverished, or other selected groups perform below standard. Disaggregating test scores will remain critical to ensure that the needs of each group are addressed.
- High-stakes statewide tests will remain an important measure of state, district, school, and individual student success. However, school leaders will continue to fight for multiple measures of student progress (e.g., both traditional and alternative assessments, including portfolios, culminating projects, and interim formative testing) to gain a more accurate portrait of student success. Value-added data will likely be a component of the testing equation to assess student progress over time.
- School leaders will continue to struggle with not only the pressure to provide one-size-fits-all testing results to meet the public’s desire for accountability and transparency but also educators’ desire to address individual student needs based on teacher voice and authentic assessments.

- Because the federal government has mandated that standards and assessments should be developed by individual states, there will continue to be a controversy concerning the variety of content and testing expectations demanded across the nation. Inconsistency in standards and testing expectations will likely contribute to confusion about whether all students in the country are meeting equally high expectations.
- High-quality curriculum standards, guided primarily by the national professional associations (e.g., National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, National Council of Teachers of English), will continue to be developed and used in each state. Teachers and administrators will work to ensure that tests are aligned with these curriculum standards and do not simply assess minimum competencies, but rather critical thinking skills as well.
- The alignment of statewide tests with curriculum standards will remain a topic of controversy as teachers and other school leaders struggle with issues such as “teaching to the test”; “covering the curriculum”; determining whether a test actually is aligned with standards; and dealing with a possible reduction of problem solving, higher-level thinking, and project-based work.
- Decisions related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, and classroom management primarily should be made based on Best Practice research.
- Hiring highly qualified teachers in each core subject area regardless of the economic base of the local school district will remain an important social justice objective. Statistically, less qualified teachers, based on certification status and college majors, have been hired disproportionately in schools with greater poverty (Peske & Haycock, 2006, cited in Morrison, 2009).
- States, districts, and individual schools must provide data to parents and the community, a report card that indicates how schools are doing in several categories, including test scores. Schools that do not achieve Adequate Yearly Progress will be expected to take corrective action. Parents will play a greater role in determining their children’s educational setting within the realm of school choice.
- Districts and schools will continue to struggle with determining the best ways to assess exceptional students, including English Language Learners, students with disabilities, and all students with special talents. This has become an important ethical issue for schools. As one elementary school principal responding to the consequences of poor test scores under NCLB stated, “I think it is immoral in fact to require students who are disabled to take a test that is way beyond their ability” (quoted in Smith, 2005).
- The alarming number of high school dropouts and underprepared graduates, especially in urban areas, must remain a focus of states. The movement toward smaller schools that press for academic rigor and high expectations, supported by major educational organizations (e.g., National Association of Secondary School Principals) and public and private funding (e.g., Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation), will continue to address the dropout issue by promoting meaningful school options that personalize learning.
- Although the standards and assessment movement has emphasized success in core academic subject areas, the neglect of the visual and performing arts, social and emotional learning, physical education, and health-related schooling responsibilities must be addressed.

A final but important note: Learning leaders armed with essential understanding of how the old and new converge will find themselves equipped with the wisdom to effectively and confidently guide the school into the future.

## NOTES

1. Authentic principal voices from interviews, workshops, writings, and informal conversations will be heard throughout the book.
2. We thank Dr. Steve Atwood of UNICEF for introducing us to Dr. Lynton's ideas.

## REFLECTIONS

This space provides a place for you to write down ideas that have been generated by this chapter, things you want to try, or adaptations of ideas presented here.

1. What are some things you might do to model leader as learner?
2. What might be some observable indicators or artifacts of a school that is functioning as a Professional Learning Community?
3. How can principals facilitate a learning environment for adults within a school?
4. What questions should principals or assistant principals ask to gain helpful feedback on their performance?
5. In what ways do federal legislation and state mandates impact the role of the principal?
6. Why did you become a school principal, or why would you like to become a principal?
7. What insights or new questions do you have as a result of reflecting on the ideas presented in this chapter?