
Leader as Learner

It's a new experience every day.

—A principal's voice¹

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, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008) that nurtures a culture of learning 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, “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, “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. Thus modeling authentic and empowering leadership begins with the

character of the leader—and character is destiny. Zenger and Folkman, in their research based on ratings of 25,000 leaders, remind us, “Everything about great leadership radiates from character” (2002, p. ix). It is no surprise that the 2013 National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) report, *Leadership Matters*, notes, “Great schools do not exist apart from great leaders” (NAESP & NASSP, 2013, p. 1). There are several ways to model effectively.

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 behaviors and activities that facilitate student and teacher learning, and 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 learning objectives, planned teaching behaviors, student activities, evidence of student learning, and data the principal will be collecting. They discuss potential problems and fine-tune the lesson plan. 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 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 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 critical thinking skills stressed with the English Language Arts (ELA) Common Core State Standards (CCSS), and 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 DVDs, podcasts, or download sessions. Teachers should be encouraged to do the same, possibly even watching a live streaming video during the conference or on demand at a later date. Try picking out the best sessions and starting a digital collection in the staff room, teachers’ center, or library. These resources should be available for staff or parents. The principal can also send a follow-up report on the conference to staff or sponsor a volunteer brown-bag lunch on key conference ideas. If there is sufficient interest in a topic, wikis or blogs can be initiated to engage in a discussion forum on the 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
- Recording oral readings or presentations of 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 or cooperative groups of students promoting higher level questions based on close reading of nonfictional texts
- 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 encouraging teachers to network and 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. When principals are involved in these groups as facilitators or participants, the learning leader role is strengthened and modeled. In one high school a successful book study group read *Focus*, by Mike Schmoker (2011b), and *Drive*, by Daniel Pink (2009).

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 trust building, a stance of openness, and a commitment to ongoing learning. The following form was 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.² 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 *learning leader* model transfers to the classroom, where teachers demonstrate for students that they, too, are both leaders and learners.

THE EXPANDING ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

Researchers with The Wallace Foundation (2013), after conducting several studies on student achievement and school leadership, reflected, “Ten years ago, school leadership was noticeably absent from most school reform agendas, and even the people who saw leadership as important to turning around failing schools expressed uncertainty about how to proceed. What a difference a decade makes” (p. 5). With the advent of President Bush’s initiative, No Child Left Behind in 2001, and President Obama’s Race to the Top grant program, operating since 2009, researchers and school leaders have been looking for a formula to achieve student success. Not surprisingly, the research consensus is that teachers have the greatest impact on students, while the principal’s impact is indirect. “Principal’s work through other leaders in schools to influence what goes on inside of classrooms” (Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010, p. 47) and, through their leadership work, “have the potential to unleash latent capacities in organizations” (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010, p. 6).

How can principals influence others? The fundamental leadership responsibilities are as important as ever and remain the same: principals are expected to help create and strengthen the mission and vision, shape the culture, take responsibility for instructional leadership, keep the school safe and orderly, work with faculty and the community, act with integrity, and respond to contextual influences outside of the school (Educational Leadership Policy Standards, 2008). But the principalship has expanded.

Today principals are expected to

- advocate for all students advantaged and disadvantaged, including those facing challenges because of racial, ethnic, religious, economic, exceptionality, gender, LGBT, or homeless issues (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Johnson, 2013);
- facilitate the use of data-based decision making schoolwide and in individual classrooms;
- support small nested and schoolwide professional learning communities to expand and celebrate teacher leadership (NAESP, 2008);
- lead the effort to implement the CCSS aligned with coherent and specific curriculum plans, instructional strategies, assessment measures, and focused staff development initiatives (Jenkins & Pfeifer, 2012);
- recognize that workplace factors, such as building trust, are critical to new and veteran teacher success and desire to stay at a specific school (Johnson, 2012);
- seize the advantages of communicating through advanced social networking technologies, yet respecting the importance of traditional personal interaction with students, teachers, families, and the community (Smith, 2013); and

- recognize that success as an instructional leader depends on management skills to coordinate human and material resources focused on the school mission. Management skills are particularly vital during this tough fiscal period with limited resources (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

A leader's commitment to promoting lifelong 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 mind-set 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 supports emphasizing math and science education as well as technology and critical thinking for both women and men. Yet at the same time, Friedman stresses the importance of generalists, those who specialize in integrating subject areas and have "a renaissance view of the world" (Friedman, 2008, p. 2). Friedman, interviewed by Daniel Pink, maintains that school leaders need to recognize "why the liberal arts are more important than ever. It's not that I don't think math and science are important. They still are. But more than ever our secret sauce comes from our ability to integrate art, science, music and literature with the hard sciences. That's what produces an iPod revolution or a Google" (pp. 1–2).

School leaders who seek to understand the demographic changes in their own schools gain a greater perspective on the changes, and engage in lifelong 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 and Celebrating the “Genius of the AND”

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, in some quarters the CCSS are perceived as a total break from previous educational initiatives. However, an examination of the standards reveals goals that effective teachers and curriculum specialists have always considered when developing outcomes. To illustrate, McTighe and Wiggins (2012) connect their contemporary concept of backward design and framed curriculum “in terms of worthy *outputs*” (p. 7) to the classical work of Ralph Tyler in *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* (1949) and today’s *Mathematical Standards* (National Governors Association, 2010). The first question that Tyler suggested more than 60 years ago was, “What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?” (p. 1). Most discussions of today’s CCSS begin with a similar output question: What curriculum and instructional practices should be implemented so students are college and career ready? McTighe and Wiggins also note that Tyler emphasized the importance of content and skills, just as the *Mathematics Standards* stress “the need to connect the mathematical practices to mathematical content” (p. 8 in the Standards as cited in McTighe & Wiggins, 2012).

The mandate to teach content **and** skills is an important issue for learning leaders working to support both curriculum goals with faculty and students. Some educators lean toward the “more content camp,” suggesting that teachers often ignore facts for frills, while “21st century proponents” maintain that students can quickly get their facts from the Internet while learning and leveraging their skills. Andrew Rotherham (2008) squarely addresses the issue:

Schools, the 21st century skills argument goes, focus too much on teaching content at the expense of essential new skills such as communication and collaboration, critical thinking and problem solving, and concepts like media literacy and global awareness. . . . This view threatens to reopen a debate in American education that is not new either: content pitted against critical thinking rather than the two complementing each other. (pp. 1–2)

An effective strategy to manage this issue and countless other either/or challenges is to embrace the vision of Collins and Porras (2002) to celebrate the “Genius of the AND” while rejecting the limited “Tyranny of the OR” vision.

Instead of being oppressed by the “Tyranny of the OR,” highly visionary companies liberate themselves with the “Genius of the

AND”—the ability to embrace both extremes of a number of dimensions at the same time. Instead of choosing between A OR B, they figure out a way to have both A AND B. (p. 44)

As school leaders, we can easily fall into the either/or trap when working on contentious issues related to teaching, learning, and assessment. Often we are encouraged to discard one idea for another. The “Genius of the AND” reminds us to compromise, seek, and celebrate good ideas—and good people—across the spectrum. We will return to this strategy throughout the book.

From the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act to Race to the Top (RTTT): Slow but Steady Progress

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 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 President Reagan’s A Nation At Risk initiative (1983), President Bush’s NCLB Act (2002), and President Obama’s RTTT Program (2009) of competitive federal grants as part of the government’s continued intervention in schools. Although many educators expected President Obama to replace NCLB with a new law, the gridlock in Washington has narrowed the President’s action to RTTT grants and waivers related to aspects of NCLB.

NCLB and RTTT have both critics and supporters. Both initiatives have helped keep education a front-burner issue, not only for educators, students, and their parents or guardians, but for all stakeholders who believe that the future success of the United States depends on the quality of its schools. Educators will need to address the following components to meet legislative and public expectations (Alvy & Robbins, 2008; Boykin & Noguera, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; National Governors Association, 2010; Noguera, 2011, 2012; Zhao, 2009):

- Each student, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, gender, sexual orientation, homeless status or exceptionality, is entitled to a high-quality education. This commitment includes meeting the needs of traditionally voiceless underserved populations.

- Schools and teachers must be accountable for student learning.
- The achievement and opportunity gaps among different groups must be closed.
- As the CCSS are implemented, school principals must advocate for alignment of curriculum, instructional plans, teacher professional development, and individual state or consortium assessments (e.g., Smarter Balance and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers).
- High averages on statewide or CCSS consortium assessment tests will no longer be acceptable if students from minority, impoverished, or other underserved groups perform below standard. Disaggregating test scores will remain a critical first step to ensure that the needs of each group are addressed.
- Regardless of statewide or consortium assessments, school leaders will continue to fight for multiple measures of student progress (e.g., teacher observations and both traditional and alternative assessments, including portfolios, culminating projects, and formative tests) to gain a more accurate portrait of student success. Value-added data, although controversial, will likely be a component of the testing equation to assess student progress over time.
- School leaders will continue to struggle with the public's desire for testing accountability and transparency, with the educators' desire to personalize learning and address individual student needs, student voice, and authentic assessments.
- Although the pressure for successful assessment scores is considerable, it is obviously unethical to alter test results to comply with expectations. Principals must stand strong and set a personal example for district leaders and teachers to ensure this does not occur under their leadership.
- The commitment to students must include the teaching of both 21st century skills (e.g., problem solving, media literacy, global awareness, collaborative work) and meaningful content. This commitment must hold for traditionally disadvantaged students and schools where higher-level thinking skills are often neglected in lieu of "teaching to the test" and learning the "facts."
- Decisions related to curriculum, instruction, assessment, classroom management, and professional development should be grounded in evidence-based and 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.
- Supervisors charged with implementing the teacher and principal evaluation systems will need to confront the challenge of fairly weighing student test scores as part of the evaluation process (required by

RTTT) with other performance expectations and professional growth goals so talented individuals are retained and ineffective individuals are not.

- States, districts, and individual schools must provide transparent 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 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. Response to Intervention (RTI) will be implemented as an important schoolwide early intervention strategy to help all students succeed and reduce the number recommended for special education.
- The alarming number of high school dropouts and underprepared graduates, especially in disadvantaged poor and urban areas, must remain a national focus. The combination of academic rigor and social support, especially related to personalization and trusting teacher student relationships (Boykin & Noguera, 2011, p. 70), is a promising strategy that should be pursued.
- Although the standards and assessment movement is presently emphasizing success in ELA and mathematics with increased interest in STEM subjects, the neglect of other core academic areas, and the visual and performing arts, social and emotional learning, physical education, and health-related schooling responsibilities is of great concern if we are committed to the needs of the whole child.
- Maintaining safe schools continues to be the top priority of all educators and interested stakeholders. Horrific school shootings; tragic weather-related incidents; and bullying, harassment, and intimidation events demand vigilance, better crisis management, and prevention strategies.

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. How do you think the CCSS and RTTT teacher and principal evaluation mandates will impact your role?
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?