

JEN SCHWANKE



Strategies and Solutions for  
New School Leaders



YOU'RE THE

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# PRINCIPAL!

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## *Now What?*

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# Meeting Your Staff, Students, and Parents

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## Scenario 1: The Staff Meeting

*You have been working as a literacy coach in a large elementary school, in which most of your work has been with 4th and 5th grade teachers. When the principal of your school retires, you decide to apply for the job. Many interviews later, you are named as principal. As you think about your new role, you come to a realization: While the teachers with whom you worked closely know you well, most others know you by name only. How should you present yourself so the school is ready—and able—to accept you as their new leader?*

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## Scenario 2: The Individual Teacher Meeting

*You have just gone through a rigorous interview process for a job as the principal of a middle school. There were interviews with a human resources director; a committee composed of parents, students, and staff; a group of other principals in the district; and, finally, the superintendent. Late on Friday afternoon, you receive a call from the superintendent notifying you that the job is yours. Your first principal job! “Well, you’ve got your work cut out for you,” the superintendent says. “This is a tricky building.” Excitement quickly turns to anxiety: What does that mean? And where do you begin?*

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## Scenario 3: The Aggressive Parent

*After taking over a large high school, you have begun the long process of getting to know the students and their parents. You have just finished your welcoming remarks at the school’s annual Open House. You told the*

*attendees a little bit about your experience, your goals as their new principal, and how eager you are to be part of their community. Immediately after you conclude, a parent in the front row seems to bolt toward you. She asks if you have a few moments to talk . . . now. You can tell by her body language that she is an aggressive parent—one with whom you probably need to build a good relationship. What are the wisest first steps?*

When you are hired as a new principal, the buzz throughout the school community will be palpable. Everyone will want to know who you are, what you value, what experience you have, and—above all—what *changes* you will bring to the school. As with most situations, your initial interaction with your staff and community will set the tone for the future. A positive start will create momentum that will carry you through the year.

The strategies and solutions in this chapter are divided into two parts: those focused on managing initial meetings with your staff and those focused on handling initial interactions with parents and students.

## **Strategies and Solutions for Meeting Your Staff**

It's difficult to know who will be more nervous when you first meet your staff—you or them! In my experience, a tiered, two-step approach is the best bet for introductions. The first step is to meet your entire staff as a group and tell them a bit about yourself as a person and as a leader. The second step is to have short meetings with individual staff members. In an extremely large school, this may be difficult, and you may find it more efficient and effective to meet with departments or teams. Regardless, your goal is to get to know a little bit about each of the teachers in your building.

## Step 1: Conduct a Whole-Group Meeting

Once you have been officially named principal of your school, you will need to determine the best time to meet your new staff. It's never a neat process, because there isn't a standard time line in administrator hiring practices. For example, if you are hired in the spring for the upcoming school year, it may not be appropriate to meet your whole staff until months later when they report to start the new school year; similarly, if you are hired in the summer, it may be hard to get your staff together before the start of the year. On the other hand, if you are hired to be a principal in the same building where you are teaching, or for a building within your current district, it may be possible to meet the staff within a few weeks of your official hire date. Consulting with the superintendent may help you determine the best course of action.

In my first year as a principal of an elementary school, it was particularly important that my initial interaction with the staff be a good one. The situation was unconventional: midway through the school year, the current principal had unexpectedly retired, and the superintendent needed someone to step up and fill in for the remainder of the year. He pulled me from the role I held as an assistant principal in a middle school and named me interim principal. He said he hoped I would eventually be named the official principal, but he made it clear that I would have to earn it: "We are still going to post the position, and you will interview like everyone else. The hiring committee will decide who will be the official principal for next year."

He went on to tell me about the staff. "They are in a difficult position," he explained. "Their current principal was often unkind and handled the teachers in a punitive manner. There is very little

trust between him and the staff. Worse, there is a culture in which a small group was 'in' with the principal, while the others felt undervalued and mistreated." He summed it up with his trademark frankness: "The school culture is awful."

With an opening like that, I was quite anxious the day I first met the staff. I walked in with the superintendent, and we headed into the library where the staff had been called to assemble. After a brief introduction, the superintendent turned to me. "Why don't you tell them a bit about yourself?" Sixty pairs of eyes stared at me, wary and suspicious. I tried to relax.

I began by telling them about my qualifications and experience. I told them a bit about my family, my leadership experiences, and my hopes and goals for my future as a leader. I even talked about my weaknesses. "I'll be learning from you," I told them. "It's no secret that I have no elementary experience, so I'll be asking a lot of questions. But I hope you'll find that I am a good listener and a quick learner." I finished by assuring them, "I am here to lead you, not micromanage or make any big unnecessary changes. I want *my* work to support *your* work. With that approach, I think we can make this school into a pretty special place."

Although I am sure the staff was still a bit cautious, I felt a sense of calm settle over the room. The message that I didn't intend to make sweeping, reckless changes was what they needed to hear in order to step back a little and give me a chance.

From the perspective of a school staff, the first exposure to a new principal is a reasonable occasion for anxiety and worry, even when there is not an existing culture of doubt or distrust. Members of a staff want to know what their future holds—and they know your leadership will affect the future environment of their school. There are several things you can do to make the first interaction a success.