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# Introduction

Any principal can fill a bookshelf with books about educational leadership. Any principal can study lists of guidelines, standards, principles, and theories. The best administrators and the worst administrators can ace exams in their graduate classes. The difference between more effective principals and their less effective colleagues is not what they know. It is what they do.

This book is about what great principals do to set themselves apart. Clarifying what the best leaders do, and then practicing it ourselves, can move us into their ranks.

The book flows from three different perspectives. I have participated in many research studies, each grounded in visits to schools with effective principals and schools with less effective leaders. This approach allowed me to determine what great principals do that other principals do not. Also, every year I work with more than fifty schools as a consultant. By observing in these schools and visiting with principals, faculty, students, and staff, I have gained insight into the practices that lead to success. The third perspective is very personal: I write about the core beliefs that have guided my own work as a principal.

This book is not meant to prescribe a narrow set of instructions. Instead, it frames the landscape of school from the perspective of great principals. What do they see when they view their schools and the people in them? Where do they focus their attention? How do they spend their time and energy? What guides their decisions? How can we gain the same advantages? There is no one answer; if there were, surely we'd all have it by now. Education is extremely complex, and so is school leadership. But we can work toward understanding what the best

principals do. We can gain insight into how effective we are as leaders. Most of all, we can continue to refine our skills. All of us have this in common with the best principals: No matter how good we are, we still want to be better.

The format of this book is straightforward. Chapter 1 provides context on the importance of learning from the most effective principals. Chapter 20 asks us to center on our own core beliefs. And in between are eighteen chapters, each one dedicated to something that sets great principals apart. Each of us can do everything described in this book—everything the best principals do.

## **Introduction to the Second Edition**

Publicly sharing a belief system with others can put a person in a vulnerable spot. However, sharing our ideas also makes it possible to refine and polish those beliefs. The reaction to the first edition of *What Great Principals Do Differently* took me by surprise. The feedback, reflective thoughts, and kind words were beyond anything I could have imagined. It was a very satisfying journey.

At the same time, it gave me additional opportunities to work with thousands of school leaders around the world, and to continue studying the specific habits of the best principals (Fleck, 2003; Jay, 2011; Raisor, 2011; Sudsberry, 2008). These valuable experiences made me want to revisit the first edition of this book and expand on its message. Meanwhile, sweeping changes are affecting education. What impact do charter schools, limited funding, and exploding technology have on the principal's role? Do any of these highlight differences between the best leaders and the rest of the leaders? I explore that topic in this edition. The second edition also addresses three new areas: the principal's sense of self, understanding the change dynamic, and dealing with ineffective and negative staff members.

There are clear differences between how accurately effective and less effective leaders perceive themselves. Everyone thinks they are good at what they do. The challenge leaders face is determining whether or not their self-perception is accurate, and then learning how to compensate if it is askew. Change now

seems to be a constant in education and thus in educational leadership. Though all principals face it and attempt to navigate and cultivate it, some do it differently than others. I explore these differences in this edition.

The final area is working with ineffective and negative staff members. The first book I ever wrote was *Dealing with Difficult Teachers* (2002), because I thought it was the single greatest challenge principals face. Since then, the challenge has only grown. With the rapidly shifting landscape in education, resistant teachers continually seem to surface. The best principals address these individuals very differently than most of the others do.

People sometimes comment that some characteristics of great principals resemble those of great teachers. My response is always the same: "I hope so!" In my work, I have discovered that leading a school calls for the same skill set as leading a classroom. The major difference is that principals are mentoring adults rather than teaching students. I recognize that great principals may have different thoughts and belief systems. As in the first edition, I find that what sets the best principals apart is what they *do* every day.

# Why Look at Great?

We often hear that we can learn from anyone. From effective people, we learn what to do; from ineffective people, we learn what not to do. Though this advice contains a grain of truth, think about it: How much can we really learn from our ineffective colleagues about being an effective teacher or principal? We already know plenty about what not to do. Good teachers already know not to use sarcasm, not to yell at kids, not to argue with teens in front of their friends. Most principals already know that sitting in the office does little to improve instruction in the classroom or student behavior in the hallways. We don't need to visit an ineffective principal's school to learn this. But we can always reap good ideas from successful educators.

Look at it another way: If school leadership were a true/false test, we could raise our scores by looking over the shoulder of an unsuccessful principal and choosing the opposite answer to each question. However, working with people is never as simple as yes-or-no, bad-or-good, true-or-false. Leadership is more like an open-ended essay exam. It won't help much to copy from the least-prepared student; we already know that doodling in the margins or writing "Kevin + Vicky 4 Ever" won't earn us points. On the other hand, although we might not agree with everything in the best student's essay, we can still learn from it. At the very least, we would probably see some new ideas that we could build on. As school leaders, we face

a myriad of choices. Simply eliminating the inappropriate options doesn't move us forward.

Here's one more example: Imagine that you have decided to build a rocket and fly to the moon. Now imagine that you have two places you can visit and learn how to do this: You can either go to NASA, or you can come to my house on a Sunday afternoon. Well, if you choose the second option, even the most diligent observation is unlikely to advance your lunar mission. Take all the notes you want: Leaning back in the recliner doesn't inspire engine design; none of the buttons on the TV remote leads to liftoff; lemonade in the shade is not rocket fuel. (Does any of this come as a surprise?)

On the other hand, if you decide to visit NASA, how will that help? You might observe that the rockets they build are bigger than your garage. Their budget looks enormous, and they have more engineers. Nevertheless, you can probably learn a good deal about the processes and technology that go into a successful launch.

These examples are simplistic, but the lesson is clear. Educators who want to promote good leadership find value in examining what effective principals do that other school leaders do not.

## **Studying Effective Principals**

I have had the good fortune to conduct or participate in many different studies examining effective principals (Fiore, 1999; Fleck, 2003; Jay, 2011; Raisor, 2011; Roeschlein, 2002; Sudsberry, 2008; Turner, 2002; Whitaker, 1993; Whitaker, 1997). In each study, researchers visited a variety of schools, some with outstanding principals and others with less-than-stellar leaders. Though these studies yielded many insights, their greatest contribution to this book was to focus on the question, "What do the most effective principals do differently?" Without visiting less effective sites, we may not have been able to determine the variables that distinguished the effective principals.

For example, if four outstanding principals hang the same banner in the cafeteria—"All students can learn!"—I might conclude that one key to effective leadership is an inspiring banner

in the lunchroom. However, if two of the less effective leaders display the same banner, I would reconsider my conclusion. The banner alone does not guarantee success. Of course, this doesn't mean that you should take your own banner down. Nor does it mean that you must mimic every behavior of a very effective principal. Simply keep in mind that the practices of great principals do not get in the way of their success, and you can learn from them.

In addition to the studies described above, my many school visits my observations of hundreds of principals have affirmed that effective principals do many things that other principals do not. The purpose of this book is to identify some of the specific practices that set apart the outstanding principals. More importantly, the goal is to help all school leaders adopt the best practices of their most effective colleagues.

I recently participated in a forum that brought together a wide variety of educators to consider the future of the principalship. One of the questions was, "What skills will principals need to be effective in this century?" I was amazed at the responses. The long list of esoteric (and seemingly unattainable) proficiencies included a computer coordinator's understanding of technology, a lawyer's grasp of special education mandates, the wisdom to lift every student to mastery of impossibly high and ever-changing state and national standards, and the best teaching skills in the school. Whew! I had knots in my stomach just listening. No wonder principals feel so much stress.

Then I realized that we were way off course. What we really need is for all principals to be like the best principals. The best principals probably do not have a barrister's background, nor can they assemble a laptop out of an old soda can. But they do lead people to accomplish the important work of schools. Like the best teachers, they adapt to change without losing sight of what really matters. Think of it this way: If every teacher in your school were like your best teachers, would you have a great school? Of course you would. And if all schools had leaders like the best principals, the students who walk through their doors each day would face every school year with confidence.