



# Lead FROM THE Start

How to Succeed as the  
New Principal of Your School

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*Reproducible pages are in italics.*

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# Introduction

Being a school principal is hard work. We know. We've done it. We've caught ourselves wondering, "Who in their right minds would want to take on such an endless task? Why subject ourselves to so much stress?" The answer to those questions is easy. Leadership matters. If we think back to what first called us into leadership roles, many of us can say that we went into the field of education with dreams of becoming life-changing teachers like those portrayed in *Stand and Deliver* (Musca & Menéndez, 1988) and *Dead Poets Society* (Haft, Witt, Thomas, & Weir, 1989). After a few years of magical teaching moments that made us feel like masters of the classroom, we wanted to expand our sphere of influence and sought leadership roles that would allow us to have a greater impact on student success. After all, success in the classroom should be replicable to the larger scale of a school, right?

Of course, we quickly learned that the transition to a building leadership role is not quite that simple. We could succeed if only we could get teachers to cooperate and emulate what we had done in our classrooms. If only parents and community members and district administrators would just give us a little time and space to figure out this leadership thing. Unfortunately, the pressures of standardized test scores and state-assigned school ratings don't allow for much grace or time for trial and error. The stakes are higher than ever before in education, and there is no silver bullet for creating and leading the perfect school model. But after more than four decades of combined experience in teaching and school administration, we can tell you there is a focused, strategic pathway for accelerated success that will put you on a trajectory to truly lead from the start.

We can't overstate the importance of effective leadership in education, and the issue is magnified even more considering what's at stake: the lives of our youth. School leadership matters so much that, in summarizing the results of a six-year study, researchers Karen Seashore Louis, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla Wahlstrom, and Stephen Anderson (2010) state, "We have not found a single case of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership" (p. 9). Amplifying

this, *Empirical Economics* highlights a 2017 study saying “a single school looking to improve student academic achievement could simply hire a high-quality principal, or at the very least avoid low-quality principals” (Dhuey & Smith, 2017, p. 852).

Because of leaders’ critical influence on learning, consistency and longevity in school leadership are matters of national concern. Many new administrators leave the profession within their first five years at the helm. In fact, in the United States alone, twenty-five thousand principals (a quarter of all principals in the country) leave their schools each year, and 50 percent quit during their third year in the role (School Leaders Network, 2014). With more than a decade of this continual revolving-door exit pattern compounding the problem in the United States, an astounding 60 percent of current school principals have been at their schools less than three years (Taie & Goldring, 2017).

This problem persists globally as well. In addition to world educational rankings that can drive regular calls for change, work-related stress and local politics seem to play universal roles in school-leader turnover. Rotations of boards, municipalities, and political parties often contribute to a destabilization of the school leadership position. In Brazil, for example, “When a new party takes office, there is a sharp increase in the share of schools with a new headmaster the following year” (Akhtari, Moreira, & Trucco, 2017, p. 18). In an attempt to better understand the lack of persistence of quality school leadership in Japan, a 2019 study (Nitta, Deguchi, Iwasaki, Kanchika, & Inoue, 2019) connects high depression and occupational stress in principals and vice principals, citing workload and role ambiguity as major contributors to depression. In the United Kingdom, the 2015 NAHT survey of school recruitment showed that 72 percent of schools struggled to find a suitable head teacher, with 22 percent failing to recruit. These recruitment deficits often force more new leaders into the position rather than relying on the traditional deputy-head matriculation.

With schools annually losing an increasing number of experienced leaders, their replacements are “being thrown into the deep end of the pool without adequate support, impacting schools, teachers, students, and our country” (School Leaders Network, 2014, p. 2). Not only does the principal churn (or continual leader turnover) phenomenon have deep financial implications for schools and their communities, but the academic setbacks from continual changes in leadership have extensive damaging effects on students in the short and long terms:

As a result of principal churn, students achieve less in both math and reading during the first year after leader turnover, and schools that experience principal churn year-after-year realize serious

cumulative negative effects on students—a condition that is exacerbated for schools serving underprivileged students. (School Leaders Network, 2014, p. 3)

Despite—or perhaps because of—the critical nature of effective, consistent school leadership, being a principal is an extremely difficult job, especially in the first year or two at a school.

## The Challenges of Becoming a Principal

To illustrate some common experiences new principals face, we take you on two brief journeys with Maggie Trendel and Trenton Wallace (not their real names), whose stories are emblematic of the challenges of school leadership.

### Mighty Maggie

Maggie Trendel was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas. Both of her parents were teachers, and she eagerly followed in their footsteps, landing in an urban school district in the heart of South San Antonio. As her aptitude for education grew and her potential became more apparent, her administrative team urged her to pursue leadership. After two and a half years, she had earned her master's degree in educational leadership along with her principal's license. She was excited—all the great lessons she had learned in the classroom would soon take root in her leadership of other educators and, indirectly, in students. Life was full of opportunity, and she couldn't wait for the next chapter in her career.

After a year of waiting for a position to open in her district, Maggie began to realize that promotion from within might take too long. She was ready *now*. She was licensed and had all but closed the door on teaching in the classroom. So she began broadening her search, applying to jobs in multiple states and to positions in rural schools, community schools, and charter schools, eager to get in the game. Soon the phone began to ring, and three months later, she was the principal of a school two states away. The district's administrative committee had hired her via videoconference, and she could tell the school needed her help. The pay was fantastic, and the opportunity for growth seemed boundless.

When she first walked into her new building, Maggie was humbled. It was a sixty-thousand-square-foot, brown brick structure built in the 1950s, weather worn, and pockmarked with graffiti. The open windows and giant vents seemed to make strange frowning faces to passersby. An hour later,