A Letter to 1st Year Principals!

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Superintendent Insight

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By David Fonseca in LinkedIn

Dear Dream Builder,

Congratulations on your recent appointment as the new principal of your school. Has it hit you yet that you are now the person in charge? It didn’t take long, did it? For the majority of you, your recent appointment by your Board of Education signifies a culmination of a long process of applications and interviews. For a very small number of you, your appointment came as a promotion or uncontested appointment. By whatever road you took to become a principal the end result is the same – you are now the principal of your school and thus you are now the person in charge! If that doesn’t scare you to death – let me help you with that!

You are entering the principalship at a time where instant communication, access to news and information, and social media dominate our parents and teachers’ time. By now, some parents at your new school have paid a small fee to do an online background check using one of the hundreds of internet search engines out there to see if your HR department “missed” something about you. By now, your teachers (well – their children) have looked you up online, they have looked at all existing social media sites, twitter and any internet media outlets looking for any and all information they can get their hands on about you. By now, someone has paid a service to crack your Facebook account – why, not because they want to get to know you better – no. They want to find something about you so that they can be the first to report it out to the world.

By now, your superintendent or supervisor has received at least two or three ‘anonymous’ emails or letters from ‘concerned citizens’ about you. They have told your superintendent something
about you, something you did your first year as AP, or something you did when you were a teacher or coach. The letter reads something like this, “…my children are all grown now and they did fine, but I’m just worried about other children…”

By now, you have received emails from your future staff with ‘reminders’ about when they take vacation, or about programs they want to drop. They want to give you a heads-up or share generic FYI’s that, “…they are ok with,” but thought you’d want to know. By now, you have also received a “request to meet” from at least one teacher, concerned or dissatisfied with the grade level placement for next year that the last principal did – hoping that you’d reverse that decision – don’t do it – there are reasons for those changes!

By now, you have also received emails from parents (and sometimes teachers) who don’t want their children with a specific teacher or teachers in your building. They want you to know, that they know what you need to know, and that it would be in your best interest to let them do what they do as they feel like (in some cases) they ‘got rid of the last principal’ before you. I hope that is not the situation at your school – but it happens. If you are approached with anything remotely related to a group of parents or teachers ‘claiming’ responsibility for the previous principal not being at your school any more – inform your superintendent quickly!

The role of the principal has changed. Navigating the political waters of working with your staff and the public is only a part of the job. But remember that managing the day-to-day operations of your building is the smaller part of your job – it is! Leading and inspiring your students, being a dream builder, being the instructional leader of your school, understanding EVAAS and other data pertinent to your Reg. Ed., AIG, EC, and ESL students, understanding the socio-emotional development of your students, understanding the curriculum of your school’s grade level (elementary/middle/high) - that is the job!

The sooner you understand that the following does not happen by chance – lesson plans that include intentional higher order thinking questions, differentiation, co-teaching, checks for understanding, multiple examples – the sooner you will understand the importance of your role as the instructional leader of your school. Attend planning with your teachers from week one. Block the time on your calendar – that’s the job!

But then again the principalship is not really a job – as Larry Putnam, Superintendent of Burke County says, the principalship “is a lifestyle!” Your life is about to change in ways you cannot yet predict or envision. I know you’ve heard that before, but it is true. The time with your family is also about to change. Make sure to take care of your home, and by that I mean your spouse and children, your support group, and those who depend on you. If you do this right you’ll have many long days and nights ahead of you. If you do this right, as Tim Markley, Superintendent of New Hanover County said to me once, “…you won’t remember the color of your house,” since it
will be dark when you leave and dark when you get back. But none of this is to say that you don’t know what it is to be a school administrator, not at all.

The purpose of this letter is to welcome you to a different world, to a different circle of trust, to a new level with definitely new devils! The purpose of this letter is to wish you luck and to encourage you to reach out to others. The purpose of this letter is to remind you to be appreciative of those who have recommended you for your new position (send the persons on your reference list a thank you card). The purpose of this letter is to remind you to not to surrender your power by confiding in someone at your school who can’t remain confidential (information is power). Remember that your closest confidant at your school will have his/her closest confidant, and in turn they will have their closest confidant, and so on and so forth! The rule is, “if you want something to be repeated, ...say it.” So, avoid giving your power away by sharing information that you should not share at all, or by making rash decisions or not making decision at all, by not giving crucial feedback, or by playing favorites (your teachers, parents, and students will be watching you). The purpose of this letter is to remind you that everyone will need you all of a sudden - 24/7 – and while it feels great to be wanted and needed – do not cross any lines of impropriety!

Finally, remember that this is your first year! Thus, it is ok not to know, but it's not ok not to ask! The days of “don’t rock the boat” are gone – you need to communicate up and communicate often! Your superintendent does not like surprises – neither should you!

Thank you for choosing to lead a school! As another of my former superintendents, Mr. Barger used to say, “…thank you for being a dream builder” to your students. Thank you for continuing to read and learn, and thank you for all you will do for the girls and boys, teachers and staff, parents and community of your new school!

All the best to you, first year principal!

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