

THE PRINCIPAL'S LEADERSHIP SOURCEBOOK

Practices, Tools, and Strategies for
Building a Thriving School Community

EVAN ROBB

Foreword by Jim Burke



New York • Toronto • London • Auckland • Sydney
Mexico City • New Delhi • Hong Kong • Buenos Aires

Dedication

**For my mother, with love and thanks for
believing I had a message to share.**

**For my wife, Cookie, for all her support and faith in me.
For Eleanor Smalley, superintendent of Clarke County Schools,
for allowing me to lead.**

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The events of that morning can happen in elementary, middle, or high school. The athletic issue would probably not crop up in elementary school, but another one could be substituted easily, such as parents' insisting their child be in the top reading group. It's important to view these events in a realistic time frame. What occurred from the time I walked into the school to the point I asked that the first parent be ushered into my office took about ten minutes. Including the presentation to the school board, my school day didn't end until after nine that evening.

The principal's job will challenge you, both physically and mentally. It's a job that starts on July 1 (unless you're in a year-round school) and requires communication and decision-making skills that you'll acquire from on-the-job experience. No graduate class can replace experience. Although no two years are alike, your primary goal each year should be to make decisions that are in the best interest of your students. Such decision-making starts in the summer, before students and staff enter the building, and continues throughout the year. Taking the time to build positive relationships with all the members of your school and the surrounding community *before school opens* becomes the firm foundation that enables you to lead effectively. You will have cultivated the support and understanding of your staff and parents, and they will support you throughout the year.

Fifteen Items to Complete Between July 1 and Mid-September

By mid-September, I try to have these 15 items in place. I keep a list of them, and as each initiative is begun, I check it off. Revisiting the list twice a month allows me to make sure that I'm following up with various groups to ask for feedback, to monitor their progress with a project, and to write thank-you e-mails. Thanking people in writing shows that you value their contributions to school life and honors the extra work and commitment they've made to support teachers and students.

1. Forge bonds with staff who work during the summer.

When you are the new principal, people will make judgments about you based on first impressions and their perceptions of why you were hired. As a principal, it's important to learn to accept the fact that you have little control over the assumptions that people make

about you. You do have complete control over how you present yourself to your staff day in and day out.

A new principal should begin to get to know her staff immediately. Since most teaching staff is not at school in July, this is the ideal time to get to know other staff members who are equally important: secretaries, additional office staff who may be present for part of the summer, custodians, guidance counselors, and your assistant principals. Building relationships takes time and should not be forced; open communication and a friendly demeanor help the process.

If you don't know your assistant principals, begin to interact with them quickly. I like to eat lunch with them off campus on the first day. Leaving school is a good way to get to know each other and to find out about their job responsibilities. First, there are no telephone calls or other interruptions so your lunch can proceed smoothly. Second, meeting and dining off campus is more relaxing, and conversations tend to be candid because you have privacy.

Keep in mind that an assistant principal may have applied for the principal's position, or he may have been on the interview committee and wanted another candidate. Do not put time into finding out if that is the case. Focus on connecting, clarifying job responsibilities, and communicating your style and hopes. If assistants have worked in the school before, find out what their key job responsibilities were. Did they enjoy them? Do they want more challenges? If so, what kinds of challenges do they seek?

Over time, working together with your staff will build a positive and meaningful relationship. One way for you to foster this is by being yourself.

2: Take extra time to form solid relationships with secretaries.

I suggest meeting individually with secretaries on July 1 or your first day on the job. At this first meeting, I usually tell stories about my family and myself. Sometimes this personal sharing is reciprocated, but sometimes it's not; accept the level of sharing your secretaries offer.

The following questions can help you involve your secretary in decisions about her position:

- What have been your main responsibilities?
- Are there any new responsibilities that you'd like?
- What would you like to see done differently this year?

- Has meeting the needs of students, staff, and parents been the primary focus at the school? If so, how has this been accomplished?

These questions can give a new principal a great deal of information. Since it's important that this meeting not feel like a job interview to your secretary, begin with only one or two questions.

3: Circulate and meet staff in the first two weeks of July.

Even if your office is piled high with boxes and you feel compelled to rummage through them to organize files or read e-mail, set aside these urges and make yourself visible and available to everyone at school during the first two weeks of July. By making the rounds and chatting with staff, you send the powerful message that they are far more important to you than administrative detail work. This means that you might have to remain at school after staff leaves to organize your office. Do it.

The three suggestions below have helped me during the first two weeks of the new school year.

Be friendly, upbeat, and positive with everyone you meet. On your first day, several staff members will come by to meet you shortly after you arrive. Make time to say hello and chat with each one. If you appear to be too busy, your staff may assume that you won't be available the rest of the year either. When you converse with staff, keep the conversation light— inquire about their summer and their families.

Avoid answering school-related questions during the first few days, for you don't want to give a misinformed answer. Say something like *That's a great topic for our first faculty meeting* or *Let's bring that up when your department meets* or *I'll need more time to think about that suggestion*. Note and date every suggestion so you can follow up on it. Saying you'll follow up and not doing so can start negative talk among your staff.

Remember that staff members have their own agendas for a first-day visit to the new or experienced principal. As principal you have no control over that; however, you do have control over presenting an interested and upbeat impression.

Do your best to remember names. All staff members will know you and expect you to know them. This is a challenge; do your best. Walk around and speak with people. I find that chatting and gathering stories about people helps me remember their names. People in the school will want to meet the new principal and see what you're about. New staff and parents

new to the community will want to meet you, too. Remember, when a new principal comes to the job, people may feel happy, sad, nervous, or anxious—especially if they’ve respected and loved the former principal. Their first impressions of you will either confirm or remove their anxiety.

Make sure that you dress appropriately. During July and August, your clothing should not be a suit or a blazer and tie. I dress casually during my first days on the job as I’m usually carrying boxes from my car to my office or rearranging things in my office after everyone leaves.

4: Use a checklist to evaluate your readiness.

By the middle of July, I review a checklist like the one shown below to make sure that I’ve addressed each statement. This list becomes my memory, which is far safer than rummaging through my mind to recall details. It also ensures that I won’t forget a key point.

<i>Statements</i>	<i>Status</i>	
1. I have a filing system in place.	Yes	No
2. My computer is set up with a log-in.	Yes	No
3. I have moved necessary personal items into my office.	Yes	No
4. I am familiar with the school’s layout.	Yes	No
5. I have inspected all classrooms.	Yes	No
6. The school is fully staffed.	Yes	No
7. The central office has all my paperwork.	Yes	No
8. I am presenting myself professionally and with confidence.	Yes	No
9. I am getting to know staff and parents.	Yes	No
10. I am starting to plan ahead.	Yes	No
11. I have a calendar system in place.	Yes	No
12. I have reviewed files that were left in my office.	Yes	No
13. I have had casual discussions with my assistant.	Yes	No
14. I have met with office staff.	Yes	No

It’s difficult to have all of these items marked yes by mid-July, but the list can guide you in prioritizing. During July, you’re meeting staff and parents. In addition, several staff members are working with you on summer initiatives. Remember that everyone you work with

draws conclusions about you and communicates their perceptions to other staff. This is the ideal time to be a good listener and a hard worker and to show empathy when teachers and parents raise issues and concerns.

5: Compose and mail welcome letters to parents and staff.

When parents receive a letter from you inviting them to drop by and spend time with you, it sends the message that you are available and looking forward to meeting and working with them. Be wary, however, of committing to something in the letter that you cannot accomplish.

Dear Parents,

I am excited to be starting my new job as school principal. My first week on the job has been a busy one. I have met many students, staff members, and parents. All of this leads me to believe that I will thoroughly enjoy my new position. I will have a newsletter out shortly to let you know key dates, such as the following: registration, our Back to School Night, and athletic tryouts.

Please feel free to come by the school to meet with me. I will do my best to answer any questions that you might have.

*Sincerely,
Evan Robb
School Principal*

Sending a letter to your staff is equally important. Some staff will have met you during your first two weeks; others may not have the opportunity to come to the school until opening meetings. A welcome letter gives everyone the chance to meet you.

Dear Staff,

I hope that you have been enjoying your summer break. I'm sure all of us are amazed at how quickly the summer is going by. Soon we'll be back in school, beginning what I am sure will be an excellent year. Many of you have visited me already, and I appreciate how welcoming you've been. Often, when new leadership comes to a school, it can be a time of anxiety and nervousness. This goes both ways. I can assure you that I'll do my best to make the transition a smooth one for all of us.

I look forward to working with all of you to make an already excellent school even better! There are only two types of schools in America: those that are improving and those that are declining. There is no middle ground. Given that choice, our path is an obvious one—to improve our school by working together. Improvement is a never-ending journey. Focusing on improvement assures us that each year we move closer to our common goals.

*Kind regards,
Evan Robb
School Principal*

Both letters can and should be adjusted to meet your needs. I suggest mailing the parent letter and the staff letter by the middle of July.