



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's focus is on the different kind of work principals have to do during the summer months.

Summertime...and the Livin' Is Easy...Or Is It?



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

For many of you, the school year has ended or will soon end. The end of the year is filled with transitions, graduations, awards assemblies, speeches, retirements, transfers, final exams, proms, the last day of school, final report cards, and lots of stress. As the year draws to a close, there are thank you's, tears, farewells, and often the belief that next year, when we will begin anew all of the problems we faced this year may disappear. It is one of the benefits of being a professional educator; we can always look forward to a new beginning.

I was always fortunate as a principal that the final days of the school year were generally filled with lots of kind words from parents. As I reflect on those interactions with parents, I have to smile since the inevitable comment from parents was, "I hope you enjoy the next few months of vacation." When I explained to them that I worked throughout the summer months, they often looked perplexed and asked, "What do you do all summer without the kids and teachers?" I did not know where to start since the summer months are when many decisions are made that impact the school year to come.

As I reflected on my past summers as a principal, I thought of the myriad of important tasks that had to be accomplished during June, July, and August. Below are some of the many jobs that must be tackled in the summer and how the principal's involvement in these tasks is an extremely important responsibility.

Interview and Fill Staff Vacancies

The most important summer responsibility is the hiring of new staff members. As a principal, I could not focus on other responsibilities until I had all teaching vacancies filled. I cannot underestimate the importance of hiring the right teachers since these decisions will have huge positive or negative impacts throughout the school year. Researcher William Sanders has concluded that students who have effective teachers for several years in a row will make significant gains in academic achievement. Conversely, students who have two consecutive ineffective teachers will lose important academic ground from which many

students never fully recover. Sanders found that the discrepancy in achievement based on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the teacher was even more pronounced for poor children.

Early in my administrative career, I asked many of the typical interview questions focusing on knowledge of curriculum, classroom management, planning and assessment, and human relations skills. In the course of hundreds of interviews, I encountered many personalities, skill levels, and a wide spectrum of “nerves.” I soon realized that I was never going to see the “real person” I was interviewing until he or she relaxed. In order to help them relax, I threw in questions for which there was no complex answer such as the last book the person read or last movie they saw, a favorite vacation spot, interesting travel experiences, or childhood memories of a favorite teacher. Allowing them to talk about a topic for which there was no right or wrong answer often allowed me to see a different person. With the stress level reduced, I found that the quality of the educationally related responses from the candidate improved greatly.

Typically, I asked potential hires to tell me how they would use the time in a teaching period or block. Their answers often showed their knowledge of good teaching practices including;

- the focus on the standards students must learn
- the creation of clear, specific summative assessments at the beginning of the planning process
- the importance of determining what students already knew about the topic (pre-assessment)
- the inclusion of student processing and checks for student understanding
- the incorporation of active learning strategies as a matter of course in all lessons
- the intention of helping students make real life connections to the standards being taught
- the need to have students summarize what they had learned during a period or block.

What often separated outstanding candidates from good candidates, however, was a knowledge of differentiation of instruction. Without exception, a good teacher in 2005 must know how to meet the needs of diverse learners whether they are struggling or gifted. When an applicant could speak with specificity about how to plan to meet the needs of all students, I often found myself getting excited because I knew that I had found an excellent candidate.

At the end of the interview, I asked the applicant if he or she had any questions for me. My professional experiences have taught me that it is important for the potential teacher to feel comfortable in their new school and to know as much about the school and its community as possible. I also concluded that the questions that the interviewee asked often told me just as much as they questions I had asked.

I have always been amazed at the number of administrators who do not check the references of the people they hire. I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of talking to people who have previously worked with the teaching applicant. In addition to the typical questions that one might ask a reference, I have often concluded many phone conversations by asking if there was anything that the former supervisor could tell me that I did not ask. This simple inquiry has often given me very important information about the candidate’s past performance.

Oversee the Master Schedule

In addition to hiring the right personnel to fill teaching vacancies, the next most important summer responsibility of the principal is the successful completion of the master schedule. Developing a schedule that encompasses all the complex needs of students and teachers is often a daunting task. It is not a process that should be rushed or taken lightly. Once the master schedule is completed and in place, it will impact the

entire school year. Important questions which must be addressed as the master schedule is being built include:

- deciding which teachers will teach which subjects and grade levels
- determining how the needs of special education students and students for whom English is a second language will be addressed
- considering how teachers will have time during their work day for professional collaboration or on the job staff development
- making sure to devise a schedule that will address the needs of both new and veteran teachers
- developing a schedule that will make instruction the top priority but also incorporate the specific, unique needs of the teaching staff

In many schools, the principal delegates the responsibility for completing the schedule to another administrator. That is appropriate for the nuts and bolts development of the schedule. A good leader is a good delegator but the final schedule should always be the responsibility of the principal, and the final decision for what the master schedule will look like must rest with the principal.

Read

How often I have heard fellow principals say that they simply cannot keep up with the volume of professional literature they encounter. Books are shelved, stacks of periodicals pile up, and articles are placed in folders. The summer months allow principals the time to delve into the written material that has amassed while he or she was dealing with the everyday events in the school. As a principal, I deliberately set aside time when I could read during the summer months. The quieter environment gave me time to absorb ideas, reflect on their importance, and to determine if the ideas applied to my school and its mission. I often took notes or saved specific articles that I wanted to share with teachers when they returned to school.

Meet New Parents and Students

Throughout the summer months, new parents and students often visit the school to register or to ask questions. I found that personally greeting new parents and students had a huge impact on how they viewed the school. The personality of the principal is often representative of the type of school in which students are enrolling. Showing kindness to people new to the community, reassuring them that the school is a good place for students to learn, and answering any questions that they have can leave parents and students with a positive impression of the school they are entering. Over and over in my career, I have been reminded by parents of how their first impression of our school was solidified because they had the chance to meet the principal during the summer months.

Select Mentors for New Teachers

The principal should devote time to making sure that each new staff member has a mentor. Once again, this is a responsibility that should not be completed in a cursory manner. The principal should carefully select mentors who are enthusiastic about teaching, who represent the vision of the school, who have a solid grounding in good pedagogy, and who will support new teachers not simply during the early weeks of school but throughout the entire school year. How a principal approaches current staff members to serve as a mentor is an important role since it will impact the kind of year a teacher new to the school will ultimately have. It sends a strong message about the mentor role when the principal is involved in the process.

Take Care of Yourself

Throughout my career, I often heard district leaders or outside consultants talk about the importance of taking care of oneself. I was usually left with mixed feelings because as much as I wanted to take time for

myself, there was always an enormous work load placed on the shoulders of building principals. The longer I served as a principal, the more seriously I began to heed the advice about the importance of remembering one's mental and physical well being. Although there are jobs in the school to do during the summer, rest and relaxation should be at the top of a principal's summer "to do" list. I have become a true believer in the impact that stress can have on a person's health. There is no doubt that the job of principal is filled with stress, but, at the same time, there is no such thing as too much good health.

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