

1 What You Do Is Special

If you're lost, the Principal shows you the way.

Unidentified primary student

Some readers won't believe a word of this chapter. A few of these naysayers may even be principals or superintendents. But if you are one of them, run—don't walk—to the nearest career counselor. You're in the wrong job!

Never belittle your position as a school leader. There is no such thing as “just” a principal or superintendent. What you do is special!

We hear a lot about leaders in other fields (e. g., CEOs, generals, and elected officials) being important and influential role models. But school administrators aren't exactly “chopped liver” themselves.

In fact, not many—if any—positions of leadership are as important to the future of the community and the nation as the school principalship or superintendency. (And by the way, the elementary principalship just may be the best leadership job in the country.)

Never underestimate the significance of your role. If you do, so will everyone else. When you devalue your position you demean the entire profession.

When I think of school leaders, I'm often reminded of an off-hand comment my college roommate made years ago. While telling me about working on a summer construction job with a group of administrators who were moonlighting from their school-year assignments, my roommate remarked, “I had forgotten how special school principals are.”

That observation stuck with me. It still rings true. Throughout a lifelong career in education, it has been reinforced countless times.

I also recall another conversation years later when a brash, ambitious, and talented young teacher at Topeka (Kansas) West High School confronted his principal, Dr. Owen Henson, saying, “I can go to work with a major insurance company and, in 3 years, I'll make more money than you do.”

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Henson simply replied, “That’s probably true, but we will both still know who has the most important job.”

Henson was right. And incidentally, the young teacher later became a successful principal in his own right.

Naturally, it’s no great revelation that school administrators don’t make as much money as leaders in many other fields. But in our heart of hearts, most of us know that income isn’t the primary measure of importance. Jesus, Gandhi, Schweitzer, and Mother Teresa weren’t big moneymakers either. Yet no one questions their impact or the lasting significance of their contributions.

Maybe the following vignette makes the point best:

First CEO: “I make a six-figure salary.”

Second CEO: “I make a six-figure salary plus stock options and bonuses.”

School Principal: “I make a difference.”

If you need something even more objective to establish the special status of school leaders, try looking up the definition of your job title. My dog-eared copy of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Houghton Mifflin, Third Edition) lists these definitions:

Principal: 1. First, highest or foremost in importance, rank, worth, or degree; chief—One who holds a position of presiding rank.

Superintendent: 1. A person with the authority to supervise and direct.

Wow! Would the dictionary lie?

What principals and superintendents do is undeniably distinctive and exceptional because—

- School leaders perform both leadership and management functions.
- School leaders are accountable to many “bosses.”
- School leaders function in a “fishbowl” and make daily decisions in full view of all of the stakeholders involved.
- School leaders exercise a wide span of control, play to diverse audiences, and serve a broad range of intergenerational constituencies.
- School leaders make choices and decisions that affect many segments of the community.
- School leaders deal daily with the community’s most precious resource.
- School leaders directly help shape the future and leave a lasting legacy.

No other category of leadership can make these statements. What all school leaders do is special. Point made. Case closed.

That's why it is important that administrators resist taking their role for granted. School leadership isn't just another job. It matters more than most other executive positions.

Serving as a principal or superintendent is a unique opportunity to influence the lives of individual children and the fortunes of the entire community at the same time. Overstated? I don't think so. And neither should you. Being a school leader may not be a sacred calling. But it comes close.

The best way to begin each day is simply to remember the reasons for what you do. They are what set you apart from ordinary managers and supervisors. Good leaders are always purpose-driven. Don't forget yours. Never allow yourself to miss the point of being an educator.

If you lose sight of the extraordinary nature of what you do and why you do it, or trivialize the significance of your work, or allow yourself to be intimidated or feel inferior in the company of other leaders, you risk losing your edge and diminishing your passion for the job.

That's unacceptable. Your students, your employers, and your community deserve better. If you can't respect what you do, it's time to do something else.

Whenever your faith or passion begin to waiver, just look in the face of a kindergartener on the first day of school, observe the love at work in a special education class, or attend a commencement ceremony (especially a GED graduation) and see the pride in the eyes of every student—and every parent.

These are everyday experiences for educators. But they are also surefire faith restorers. They work every time. And they cannot be duplicated in any other position or profession.

After all, you have the job most CEOs would be afraid to touch. Not just anyone can do it. Not even every successful teacher can become an effective principal or superintendent. So instead of soft-pedaling your role, you should do everything possible to articulate and exemplify the importance of effective school leaders.

As a case in point, years ago when I first earned a doctorate in education, I insisted on using the title, "Doctor," not because of any self-serving delusions of grandeur, but because the public needed to appreciate that public schools require and are entitled to leaders as well-educated and well-qualified as those in any other essential public institution. The job is too important to be left to just any retrofitted teacher who has become tired of the classroom.

By now, that point has pretty much been made. Titles are no longer an issue. Today, there are more and better ways to honor and validate the importance of school leaders. The following seventeen suggestions illustrate how

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you can become a better leader of your particular school while enhancing the image of all professional educational leaders at the same time:

1. Refuse to engage in self-promotion, petty politics, or any other questionable practices. Model integrity, honesty, and dignity on and off the job. School leaders are often held to a higher standard (perhaps because theirs is a higher calling). Don't fret it or sweat it. Just clear the bar every time. People will notice.
2. Stop whining. Educators are notorious complainers. It doesn't help (although there's a lot to gripe about). Bellyaching is never an effective leadership technique in any field. You want respect, not pity. The way to get it is to deal with adversity, solve tough problems, prove you can do more with less and still deliver on your commitments.
3. Delegate routine and mundane activities to subordinates. Assign record keeping and paper shuffling to others. Spend your time on issues, ideas, and ideals that truly make a difference. If you spend your days on menial tasks, people will think you have a menial job. It's a mistake many administrators make. It's always easy (and comfortable) to fill your time with details, trifles, and minutia. But busyness isn't leadership.
4. Let people in on what you do and deal with every day. Make public the issues and problems facing you. And the solutions. Hold neighborhood "town meetings" and on-site coffee klatches for parents. Start a Dad's Club in your school to get more fathers involved. If possible, initiate a weekly call-in radio show or a community access TV program. When people ask, "What do you do all summer?" have an answer. Community members need to know that school leaders don't just preside over glorified baby-sitting services or manage warehouses for kids. It's your job to teach them. Society can't appreciate, respect, or support what it doesn't know about.
5. Initiate "shadow" or "principal-for-a-day" programs. Let staff and community members see first-hand what it really takes to run a school or a school district. In Minnesota, even Governor Tim Pawlenty has been known to "walk in the shoes" of a school principal for a day. It can't hurt to have government officials gain appreciation for the successes and challenges principals face every day.
6. Tap local CEOs and other business leaders as mentors for principals. The business community can help principals learn new leadership

and decision-making skills while gaining greater insight into the real-world challenges of school leadership. It's not uncommon for mentors to learn more than they teach.

7. Recruit top talent to the profession. Right now, there is a dearth of qualified leadership coming through the pipeline. That's scary. The principalship and superintendency are exceptional jobs—but only if filled by exceptional men and women. Mediocre administrators give the profession a bad name and shortchange the future. We can do better. We have to.
8. Urge the school board to publicly showcase and recognize outstanding administrators on a regular basis.
9. Work to eliminate the employment of part-time principals or the assignment of one administrator to serve more than one school in your district or any other school system.
10. Better yet, lobby for legislation requiring a qualified leader (principal) in every school. Minnesota state law used to mandate a full-time principal in every school of a certain size. Unfortunately, the legislative standard was changed from mandatory to permissive. It's amazing how much difference changing the word *shall* to *may* can make. This wasn't perfect legislation; but it was a pretty good model. Now, it's just wishful thinking.
11. If your state has a statutory ceiling cap on superintendents' salaries, work to eliminate it. My home state has experimented with limiting the pay of all public employees (including school leaders) to no more than 95% of the governor's salary. It doesn't work. The state hasn't attracted any better governors and has lost a number of excellent school administrators in the process. As it turns out, leadership (even school leadership) is a competitive business too. You pretty much get what you pay for.
12. Likewise, never apologize for how much you make. Effective leadership costs money. It's worth it. The sooner society accepts this fact the better.
13. Support professional organizations, such as NAESP, NASSP, and ASCD, that recognize, support and are advocates for school leaders.
14. Challenge the common media depiction of school administrators as stuffy, stupid, ineffectual, or worse. (Remember *Ferris Buehler's Day Off*?)

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15. Become visible in community activities. Join a civic or service club. Coach Little League. Get involved in church and charity activities. It helps for everyone in the community—not just parents—to know who their school leaders are.
16. Make yourself known to power brokers (e.g., media representatives, city officials, and legislators). Networking shouldn't be limited exclusively to other educators. Having important contacts is never a liability.
17. Be aggressive in telling your school's story. When influential people think of good schools, you want them to think of you and your school first.

Of course, the best way to underscore the special nature and value of school leadership is to be the best principal or superintendent you can be.

Do real work. Talk about real issues. Face facts. Do what's right, not just what's safe. Be the all-time, number one champion of putting children first.

Be the voice for kids that won't shut up or go away. When you do, people see your job in a whole different light—and that's a good thing. The point is that whatever you do to boost the image and understanding of your special role in your school and community also enhances the perception of all school leaders.

Curriculums come and go. So do teaching materials. But one thing remains fixed—the critical need for effective school leadership.

Schools can only be as strong as the leaders who guide them. Good leaders make good teaching and learning possible. You may have a bad school with a good leader; but you can't have a good school with a bad leader.

If the public schools fail, it won't be because of lack of funding or public support. It will be because of a lack of leadership. How scary is that? And how uniquely important does that make your job?

The next time you question your career choice, remember what makes what you do unique. Here are a few final reminders:

- You get to feed off the energy of youth every day. (Who can get old on a job like that?)
- You hear more laughter in a day than most leaders do in a week. (Kids laugh an average of 150 times a day; adults only 15 times.)
- You witness firsthand the thrill and excitement of learning and participate in miracles on a daily basis.
- You play an important role in shaping tomorrow's leaders (and followers).

- You get to play a vital part in the largest youth-serving organization in the nation and to lead the most important public institution in your community.
- More important, you get to be there when young people find out who they are and who they can be.

It doesn't get any more special than that! And that's one thing that will never change.