

# Executive Director's Notepad . . .

## What We Look For In A Principal

*First in a series of articles on the Job Skills and Personality Traits of Successful Principals*



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While every student, parent, school board member, superintendent and taxpayer knows exactly, in their own minds, what a good principal should be -- it is amazing the range of answers one gets when asked to describe the perfect principal. Even more alarming is the general lack of understanding of what a school administrator does in his/her daily job and what it takes to get the job done successfully.

As a former superintendent and building administrator for 38 years, I have worked with all these groups when searching for a school principal, and I think I have a handle on the attributes everyone is seeking. We want:

- A strong, self-confident, aggressive leader who is not afraid to confront difficult teachers, students and parents; while working collaboratively with the school community to create a blissful, dreamlike school climate in which peace and harmony flourish and mutual respect and trust thrive.
- A decisive, self-directed, independent thinker, who keeps the central office appraised of every move and follows directions to a "T."
- An individual who has a cordial, collegial relationship with staff; yet keeps a respectful distance from establishing any real friendships.
- A strong disciplinarian who runs a tight ship; while showing empathy and compassion for staff and students alike.
- An individual that will treat everyone equally (fairly) by enforcing a predetermined set of rules and punish-

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ments; as well as someone who sees the unique needs, talents, motivations and characteristics of each student and staff member and responds appropriately.

- A family-oriented person, who spends quality time with his/her family, and participates in community organizations; yet is certain to be at school an hour before staff, leave an hour after staff, attend 110 night meetings a year and not take all his/her vacation time.
- A magician who is able magically to produce more direct instruction to students with less staff and less resources.
- An experienced administrator with expertise in curriculum, instruction, school leadership, teacher observation, student pedagogy, etc. who has a willingness to devote time to these areas while checking in supplies, scheduling all staff and students, building and directing a million dollar budget and maintaining an open-door policy for all.
- A person with John Wayne's swagger and prejudice for action when dealing with others, and who also has Jimmy Stewart's sensitivity and thoughtfulness when dealing with us.

I could go on, but I think you get the point. In a sentence, *"We are seeking Achilles without that troublesome heel of his."*

The truth is no person possesses the entire set of qualities we seek. No one can be all things to all people. Great principals are those individuals who know their strengths

and weaknesses and who build on the strengths while using others to supplement the weaknesses.

My advice to those seeking principals is simple. First, **define clearly what you want to happen** at the school. Second, **think about the type of leadership** that might best accomplish this. Don't limit yourself to one stereotype. Third, **screen your candidates** on paper and through references. Past experience means nothing unless it is past *successful* experience. Candidates should be able to tell you success stories about their past jobs and from this you can better ascertain their style. Fourth, hire the candidate, set and articulate long-term goals for them

and **then get out of their way**. Fifth, **monitor their performance** over sufficiently long periods of time to allow their style to take hold. *Assess their success at achieving your original goal for the school, not their day-to-day individual interactions.* Principals may have 1,000 interactions a day -- give them some space to use their strengths.

*(Editor's Note: This series will continue with future columns that illustrate what principals actually do and the types of things community members, teachers and supervisors can do to help a principal make your school a success.)*