

# New Principals: 5 Big Fears

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On March 4, 1933, during the peak of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave an inaugural speech which was radio broadcasted to millions of Americans. While addressing the nation in what were to become known as his “fireside chats,” he shared his belief that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” (Roosevelt, 1933). These words continue to maintain popularity as can be seen on plaques, posters and other home or office décor 90 years later. As university professors working with a new cohort of principal candidates in the summer of 2023, we were reminded of this belief as related to school leadership. New principals experience job-related fears that impact both leader-

ship and personal well-being. Cazary (2023) found that the complex job of the principalship brings with it fears related to being criticized, being able to do the job and organizational maintenance. Further, Cazary found that fear and stress impact personal well-being. Being aware of new principal concerns can help to ease and displace them, regardless of whether you officially mentor a new principal, are a collegial guide to a new principal colleague, or are a new principal.

Additionally, the global pandemic brought attention to mental health and personal well-being for students and teachers, but principals were also impacted, particularly because the nature of leading change brings instability, which is balanced against the fear principals feel as it relates to their own well-being (Cazary, 2023). The National Center for Emotional Wellness (2023) defines emotional wellness as “an awareness, understanding, and acceptance of our feelings and our ability to manage effectively through challenges and change.” Principals lead through challenges and work to bring about change, so the very nature of the job evokes some stress and disruption to emotional wellness.

Throughout our class discussions with aspiring principals, we kept hearing five recurring themes of concern about leading schools. This article will identify those five “big” questions asked by aspiring principals. The importance of identifying apprehensive feelings and strategies to overpower them is part of success for new school leaders and their mentors.

## Am I Enough?

The imposter syndrome is a concern for new principals.

Self-doubt and questions may infiltrate our minds due to past negative experiences. We may be uncertain of our skills to complete honest teacher evaluations of friends and colleagues or discipline student behavior effectively and support teachers while doing so. Jones and Blake (2018) suggest leaders step out of comfort zones, work to fullest potential and focus on building trust to strengthen collegiality. Effective school principals have clarity about who they are, what they do and how others perceive them. They also understand that people, not programs, determine the quality of the school (Whittaker, 2020). Recognize strengths, improve upon areas of possible weakness and build your teams to strength work capacity and combat loneliness.

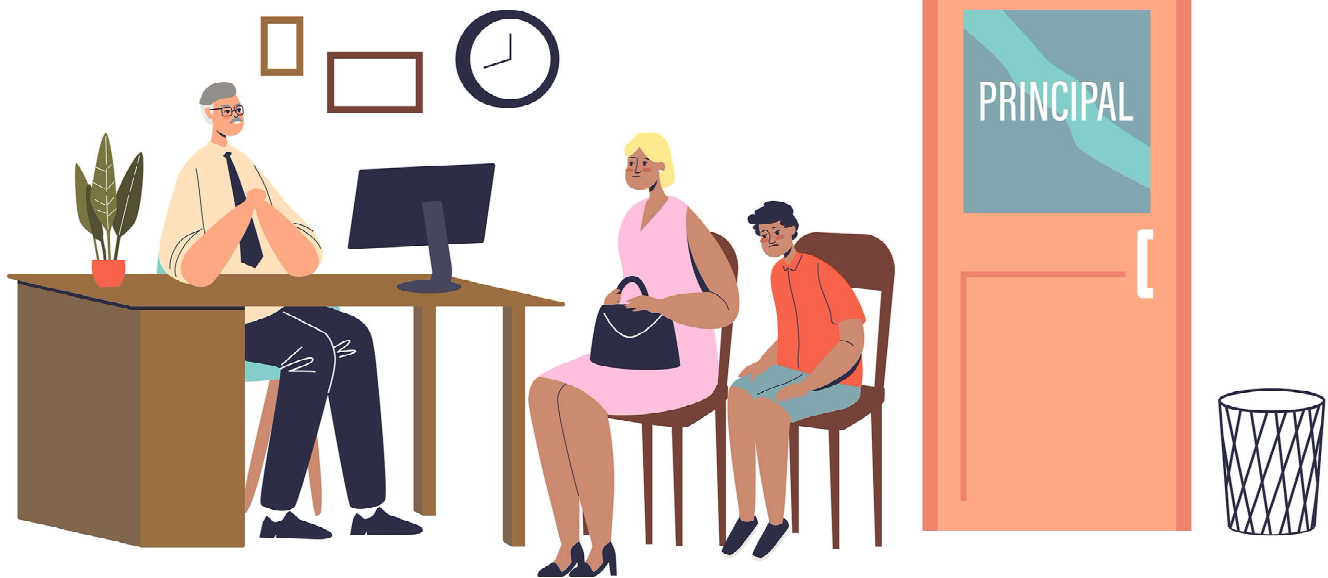
To build self-confidence, continue to gain knowledge of major areas of effective governance in the overarching standards required of school leaders:

- 1) Mission, Vision and Improvement;
- 2) Ethics and Professional Norms;
- 3) Equity, Inclusiveness and Cultural Responsiveness;
- 4) Learning and Instruction;
- 5) Community and External Leadership;
- 6) Operations and Management; and
- 7) Building Professional Capacity (NELP, 2023).

Also review the Pennsylvania Core and Corollary Standards, as described by the PA Inspired Leadership Initiative (2023), and align your work with both sets of standards. Keep the focus on the standards and identify stakeholders capable and willing to help you implement projects and ideas to achieve school goals.

## How will I do it all?

The answer to this question is clear. No one can do it all. But keep in the forefront of your mind some key leadership behaviors. First, treat people with respect every day, all of the time (Whitaker, 2020). Through that philosophy, professional relationships are built, and a team is developed to work alongside the principal. Second, focus on creating or maintaining a positive and equitable school climate – one where students, teachers, staff, administrators and community members – feel valued and their voices heard. Stakeholders who feel valued by the leader will be more inclined to collaborate toward a shared vision (Dewitt, 2018). Lastly, remember that a school’s vision and mission should be known and supported by school community stakeholders so that all constituents can enjoy a healthy learning environment. Using one’s knowledge about the school community’s social, cultural and political dynamics is important in developing a healthy school climate (Stronge & Xu, 2021).



### What if I make a mistake?

Perhaps this question, “What if I make a mistake?” should be reconsidered as “What happens when I make a mistake?” Mistakes *will* be made; they just happen sometimes. Reeves (2021) states that “progress and learning are impossible without errors and, most importantly, the prompt and candid admission of those errors” (p. 103). Principals do their best with the information they have at the time. Base decisions on data and consider others’ perspectives. Principals are the faces of their schools, and the way in which they inform and engage with all stakeholders is important. Others may be more understanding of the few mistakes that may be made along the way if they believe the principal is acting in the best interests of all stakeholders based on data or other information collected and analyzed.

When it comes to documentation and the fear of using incorrect language in written correspondence, request assistance from a trusted colleague who writes well. If speaking publicly is a fear, practice speaking aloud in front of a mirror or video record yourself. Communication is a critical role of the principal. This role, however, can always be improved upon with practice. Know that with practice and experience, confidence will develop. With confidence, success is in reach.

When it comes to legal issues, litigation is often identified as being a frightening and mysterious issue. Yes, the current demands of principals are great. Principals must be knowledgeable of policies and procedures to provide a safe learning environment for children, youth and employees. Principals should have readily access to the current edition of *The Pennsylvania School Law Handbook* (Fitz-Patrick, 2018). The book’s question-and-answer format of the legal issues Pennsylvania principals encounter will serve as a handy reference for dealing with daily issues as that arise. Further, keeping abreast of current issues, such as artificial intelligence, cyberbullying, vaping, special education laws and transgender issues, is also crucial now that resources and information abound.

### What if I miss my classroom or students?

Many aspiring principals are classroom teachers, counselors or coaches who have a genuine fear of losing or missing their students and the many personal and professional connections they have established while teaching, counseling or coaching. Teaching is an art and the thought of not being able to complete one’s art can cause feelings of uncertainty.

First, consider the fact that the need for teachers is great, and principals who so desire can seek other positions if they find that the principalship is not a match to their professional goals. More importantly, consider the impact a principal can make on an entire school community. Principals support children of all ages and can maintain relationships with students and families through doing things such as occasionally serving as a substitute teacher, cafeteria monitor, door greeter or local education agency representative. Further, principals spend time in classrooms of all grade levels through walk-throughs, lengthier lessons and teacher observations. This work requirement and privilege will only increase personal understanding of teaching effectiveness and allows principals to interact with many more students and families.

### How will I balance my work and personal lives?

Balancing work and personal roles can be challenging, regardless of school employment position. Recently, a colleague shared the idea of work and life integration, viewing work and life as not two ends of a spectrum where balance is required but rather two ideas that flow in, through and around each other. Principals have great responsibility for many people, and it is paramount to fulfill those expectations through a balance of varied responsibilities. Identifying boundaries and working within those parameters can lead to professional and personal success. In both work and home life, it is important to be able to identify needs, communicate effectively, manage time, show flexibility and be visible.

## Conclusion

Ninety years ago, President Roosevelt challenged a nation with the words, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” (Roosevelt, 1933). When accepting a principalship, new principals and their mentors should first acknowledge affirmatively that they are “enough.” With the support of many constituents, principals can effectively manage complex and complicated leadership tasks while maintaining personal well-being. Principals will make mistakes along the way, but acknowledging those mistakes and learning from them is part of successful leadership. Leaving the classroom means positively impacting a greater number of students.

Like all professionals, principals gain familiarity over months and years on the job to balance personal and professional obligations, as has been done before by other

great leaders. Principals are like master keys, opening many doors of opportunity to students, teachers, staff, administrators and community members. Principals should do the same for themselves, opening the door and walking through it, consciously avoiding fear of the unknown. Awareness of fears and making plans to overcome them are the first steps to principal success which directly leads to success of the school. Our children and youth deserve high-quality schools with effective leaders at the helm, and principal influence related to student achievement is second only to teachers (Leithwood, Harris & Hopkins, 2008). Instilling confidence in emerging leaders is crucial as it allows them to overcome their fear and concentrate on their crucial role in educating the next generation.

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