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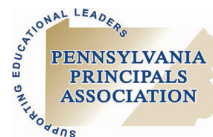
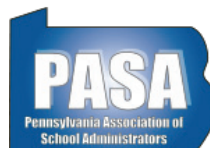


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EDITOR'S NOTE



As the hectic school year concludes, the hallways grow quieter and the classrooms empty, marking the start of summer break. After months of supporting teachers and students, managing countless events and handling unexpected challenges, the end of the year offers principals and school leaders a chance to reflect on accomplishments and growth.

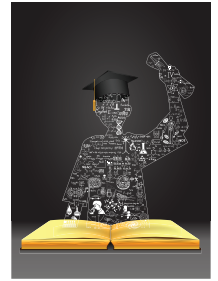
But with summer comes a well-deserved opportunity to pause. While some planning for the year ahead predictably begins, the summer also offers school leaders a chance to recharge, spend time with family and return with renewed energy and vision. We hope our professional development opportunities are part of your summer refresh. The PA Principals Association has announced its second cohort for the **Leader of Leaders Collaborative** beginning in July. *See page 5 for details and registration information.* And don't forget to register for **SUMMIT25** and the pre-conference sessions coming in August. *Refer to page 10 for more information.*

This issue holds many articles that provide new ideas and resources to take back to your schools in the fall. Check out the *Executive Director's Notepad (Learning by Doing)* on page 4, a new *READERS FOR LEADERS'* book review on page 26 and *Legal Corner (Mandatory Reporting for Principals)* on page 41.

If you are interested in submitting an article for our fall theme edition, please refer to the article below for details. The deadline for articles is Aug. 8, 2025. ■

Enjoy this issue!

Sheri Thompson, Editor



Dates to Remember...

July 2025

11-13 UNITED - The National Conference on School Leadership (NAESP & NASSP)
Seattle, Washington

29-31 LEADER OF LEADERS COLLABORATIVE KICK-OFF
Marriott International
Bethesda, Maryland

AUGUST 2025

3-5 SUMMIT25 - For PA Educational Leaders
Nittany Lion Inn & State College Area High School
State College, Pennsylvania

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Letter to the Editor

To submit a *Letter to the Editor* for an upcoming edition of *The Pennsylvania Administrator*, please send it to Sheri Thompson, Editor, at sherit@papprincipals.org.

The deadline for the Fall issue is August 8, 2025.

YOUR CHANCE TO BE PUBLISHED!

Submit an Article for The Pennsylvania Administrator Fall 2025 Theme Edition

Articles for *The Pennsylvania Administrator* magazine's **Fall 2025 theme edition** are being accepted by the Pennsylvania Principals Association. **The theme for this issue is: "Pressing Issues Facing Our Schools: 2025."**

Pennsylvania schools are currently grappling with several pressing issues, including a significant teacher shortage, funding disparities and student and staff mental health concerns.

To submit an article, please send it to sherit@papprincipals.org by **August 8, 2025**.

For more information about the theme, including a **bulleted topic list** and other article specifications, visit:

<https://tinyurl.com/2kr8td3v>.

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Articles printed in the publication may be divergent in the point of view or controversial, but the Pennsylvania Principals Association feels that members can best be served through discussion and debate of issues. The articles published in *The Pennsylvania Administrator* represent the ideas and/or beliefs of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the ideas and views of the Pennsylvania Principals Association unless so stated. Paid advertisements printed in the publication do not denote endorsement by the association.

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is printed with the understanding that the association is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting or other professional services through the publication. If legal or other professional services are required, Pennsylvania Principals Association members should contact the state office or the services of other competent professionals. Printed in the U.S.A. *Postmaster*: Send address changes to Pennsylvania Administrator, 122 Valley Road, Enola, PA 17025. Copyright 2006 by the Pennsylvania Principals Association.

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Learning by Doing: Why Experiential Learning Matters for Us as Principals

By Dr. Eric C. Eshbach, PA Principals Association Executive Director



Over the years, I have come to believe that some of the most powerful lessons we learn as school leaders don't come from textbooks or webinars, they come from stepping outside our buildings and into real-world experiences. As principals, we are often immersed in the daily hustle of running a school that we rarely get the chance to pause, reflect and see leadership in action from a different vantage point. That is why I'm so passionate about experiential learning, especially when it comes to how it shapes us as leaders of leaders.

I've had the chance to tour local businesses and visit other schools, and each time I've walked away with something unexpected — whether it was a new approach to customer service, a way of boosting team morale or simply a reminder of what purposeful leadership looks like in practice. I remember a visit to a dairy farm where the farmer stepped away from traditional farming practices to implement sustainable farming technologies in order to ensure that the product he provided was of the highest quality and that the animals he raised were treated with kindness and compassion. While it may have been a bit of a stretch to compare a dairy farm with an elementary school, it truly made me reflect deeply on how we could modernize a very traditional entity without losing sight of the care we provide to students.

This is exactly the kind of learning that the *Leader of Leaders Collaborative* (LLC) makes possible. Through the Pennsylvania Principals Association's partnership

with the Schlechty Center, the LLC provides principals with the opportunity to engage in thought-provoking experiences designed to stretch our thinking. Using site visits to nationally recognized locations like Marriott International and the U.S. Naval Academy, these sessions are rooted in reflective leadership questions that challenge us to ask: *What can I learn from this experience that will make me a stronger leader in my school?* It's not theoretical — it's practical, personal and deeply meaningful.

What I love most about this approach is how it reignites our passion for the "work." We sometimes get stuck in autopilot when it comes to handling discipline, chasing data and checking boxes. However, we are reminded of the bigger picture when we are a part of something like the LLC. It helps us see how other leaders inspire teams, manage change and create cultures where people thrive. When we take that learning back to our schools, it doesn't just benefit us — it ripples out to our students, staff and communities.

If you're looking for a way to grow as a leader, I highly recommend you join this year's *Leader of Leaders Collaborative*. It will stretch you, challenge you and cause you to reflect on how you can reignite your passion for the work you do. Programs like the *Leader of Leaders Collaborative* don't merely offer hours, they offer perspective. And in this profession, a fresh perspective might be the most valuable thing we can bring back to our school communities.

For more information about the LLC and to register for this year's cohort, please see the following page. ■

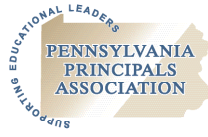
This is what your colleagues had to say about Leader of Leaders ...

"Attending the Leader of Leaders Conference hosted by the Pennsylvania Principals Association and Schlechty was an incredibly valuable experience. The sessions provided insightful strategies and experiences that I can apply to foster engagement and promote high-level learning."

- Donna Ryan, Glenn Acres Elementary School, West Chester A.S.D.

"The Leader of Leaders Collaborative has been a boon in multiple ways. We get so entrenched in the day-to-day grind and the way we do business: At times, we get stagnant. The LLC has reignited my focus on engaging students and staff, while providing resources, facilities and programs that lend themselves to that focus."

- David Dietrich, Spring Grove Area High School, Spring Grove A.S.D.



SECOND YEAR LEADER OF LEADERS COLLABORATIVE

“An effective principal’s impact is stronger and broader than previously thought, making it “difficult to envision” a higher return on investment in K-12 education than the cultivation of high-quality school leadership.”

*Wallace Foundation,
“How Principals Affect Students and Schools:
A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of
Research,” 2021*



School leadership, principal leadership and assistant principal leadership matter. Now, the Wallace Foundation clearly states there is no higher return on investment than high-quality leadership. **To support this claim, the Pennsylvania Principals Association, in partnership with the Schlechty Center, is proud to announce the second cohort of the *Leader of Leaders Collaborative*.**

The *Leader of Leaders Collaborative* is designed using the frameworks the Schlechty Center makes available to educators to use in the design of engaging work for both students and adults. We will start each new experience with a guiding question: *What can school leaders learn from this experience to help them be better leaders in their schools?* When field trips are involved, we ask another question: *What can school leaders learn from how this organization does its business?*

Principals who choose to participate and make a commitment to join this collaborative will attend three, three-day in-person sessions and will earn **90 Act 45 hours**. Four one-hour virtual check-in sessions will be held throughout the year. They will receive the Schlechty Center’s *Redefining the Role of Principals as Leaders of Leaders* leadership tool designed for principals to assess their capacity to support continuous innovation and systemic change. **The Kickoff/In-Person Session is July 29-31, 2025, at the Marriott International, Bethesda, Maryland.**

REGISTRATION

Scan the QR Code below to register!



Earn 90 Act 45 Hours!

COST

The cost for the year-long experience is \$3,250.

This includes:

- Hotel accommodations – Six nights
- Meals for the three trips
- Collaborative materials
- Entrance fees where applicable

Costs not included:

- Travel to three onsite visits (Marriott International, Bethesda, MD; Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD; and June 2026 Location TBD).

If you have additional questions, please contact ...

Michael Snell, Deputy Executive Director, Pennsylvania Principals Association, at msnell@paprincipals.org or (717) 732-4999. Scan the QR code for the session dates/details.



NATIONAL DISTINGUISHED PRINCIPAL

Dr. Matt Miller Named Pennsylvania's 2025 National Distinguished Principal



Matt Miller, Ed.D., principal of Roundtown Elementary School (K-3) in the Central York School District, has been named Pennsylvania's 2025 National Distinguished Principal (NDP) by the Pennsylvania Principals Association. As a state winner in the National Association of Elementary

School Principals' (NAESP) National Distinguished Principal (NDP) Program, Dr. Miller will be recognized by NAESP at a special award ceremony later this year. He was honored by the PA Principals Association at a dinner held in his honor on May 23 in York.

An educator for 27 years and an administrator for 20 years, Dr. Miller has worked in the Central York School District for his entire education career. He has been in his current role as principal of Roundtown Elementary School, serving approximately 465-635 learners, since August 2009. Previously, he was the assistant principal at Hayshire Elementary School from 2006-2009; assistant to the elementary principals from 2005-2006; and a second grade teacher at Roundtown Elementary School from 1998-2005.

"As a principal and educator at the same school and school district for nearly 30 years, I hope my biggest legacy would be the district, school, family and community relationships I have built and sustained throughout my career. I cherish these relationships and will take them with me forever. Seeing former students bring me their own five-year-olds to kindergarten registration to begin the learning cycle all over again continues to bring me a level of satisfaction that fills my heart," Dr. Miller shared.

During Dr. Miller's 16-year tenure at Roundtown, he was instrumental in promoting and maintaining a healthy school environment for ALL students. He has led the charge in his school to implement and adhere to the principles of the Responsive Classroom Philosophy. He shared, "This philosophy suggests that students' emotional and social learning is as important as the academic learning that occurs in schools. I have provided at least some level of professional development in this arena for each of my 16 years as principal."

Dr. Miller still feels enormous pride when thinking about a student whom he helped develop and initiate the concept of a "buddy bench" on their school playground, which turned into an international

movement with more than 30,000 benches in all 50 states and in more than 20 countries. Most recently, he was proud to represent his school and district by traveling to Liberia, Africa, in 2024 as a Liberia Project Ambassador to distribute materials, clothing and school supplies to the public schools and children. One of the most significant elements of this mission trip was helping to provide professional development opportunities and training for principals and teachers.

In addition to the Pennsylvania Principals Association and NAESP, Dr. Miller holds memberships in the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and Phi Delta Kappa. In 2004, he received the Pennsylvania Keystone Technology Integrator Award, and in 2008 and 2013, he was honored with the Central York CTC Spirit of Youth Award.

Dr. Miller earned a Bachelor of Science in Elementary and Kindergarten Education from The Pennsylvania State University (Main Campus, State College); a Master of Education in Teaching and Curriculum from The Pennsylvania State University (York); and his Principal Certification from The Pennsylvania State University (Harrisburg). He received a Doctor of Education and his Superintendent's Letter of Eligibility from Immaculata University.

Dr. Miller attributes much of his success to his two greatest friends, supporters and champions — his mom and dad. Throughout his entire life and educational career, they have both been there every step of the way to listen, laugh with and encourage him to lead with his heart. Both of Dr. Miller's parents were diagnosed with cancer in 2024 and subsequently battled through surgery and treatments and are doing well. This is an award that he shares with his mom and dad, looking toward a happier and healthier 2025! ■

"I can think of no one more deserving of this honor than Dr. Miller. He may very well be one of the best administrators I have ever worked with. He is the consummate professional ... and he has a deep-seated passion to see ALL kids thrive and succeed. We are so fortunate Dr. Miller is on our team — he makes all of us Proud to be a Panther!"

Dr. Peter Aiken
Superintendent
Central York School District

SECONDARY PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR

Laura S. Tobias Named Pennsylvania's 2025 Principal of the Year



Laura S. Tobias, principal of State College Area High School in the State College Area School District, has been named Pennsylvania's 2025 Principal of the Year by the Pennsylvania Principals Association. As a state winner in the National Association of Secondary School Principals' (NASSP)

Principal of the Year Program, Mrs. Tobias is a candidate for the National Secondary Principal of the Year. She will be recognized for this achievement by both the PA Principals Association and NASSP.

An educator for 32 years and an administrator for 12 years, Mrs. Tobias joined State College Area High School as an assistant principal in 2016. She has been in her current position since 2021. She began her career as a history teacher at Hammondsport High School, Hammondsport, New York. In addition, she taught at Smethport Elementary School and served as an instructional coach, history teacher and assistant principal at Penns Valley Area High School.

"I am honored and humbled to receive the Pennsylvania Principal of the Year award. This recognition belongs to the fantastic team of students, faculty, staff and the entire State College community I'm lucky to work with daily. To the incredible faculty, staff and students at State High, this award is as much yours as it is mine. And, of course, a heartfelt thank you to my family for always being there for me. Every leader is backed by a strong network of love and encouragement, and I couldn't do this without you."

Under her exemplary leadership, Mrs. Tobias was instrumental in developing and implementing numerous programs and initiatives in her school, including the Safety Ambassadors Program to empower students with knowledge and skills in safety and security. This program trains students in safety protocols and situational awareness, equipping them with skills to assist during security drills and

crises. She shared, "Working closely with our School Resource Officer, these ambassadors contribute to the school's security measures. By fostering leadership and collaboration, this program enhances our school's culture of safety and responsibility."

In addition, Mrs. Tobias and her team created Learning Centers — both Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and Humanities — for students to access academic assistance throughout the school day. "These centers serve dual purposes: Tier I Intervention, where students can drop in for extra help or review, and Tier II Intervention, in which students with failing grades in multiple classes are assigned to the centers for targeted support," she explained.

Mrs. Tobias is most proud of being the leader of a student-centered school where the implementation of a Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework has significantly transformed their building culture. They hold school-wide celebrations and recognize students through their mantras: Represent SC Yourself & Our Community: Respect It, Own It and Advocate for It. She said,

"Every day, I am on the announcements to remind our students, 'We love you, State High!'"

Mrs. Tobias earned a Bachelor of Arts in Public Policy and Administration from the University of Buffalo (NY), and a Master of Science in Education in Advanced Teacher Education from St. Bonaventure University.

In 2011, while at Penns Valley School District, she was a Pennsylvania Teacher of the Year nominee, and in 2024, State College Area High School was one of 84 schools in the nation to be recognized as a Jostens Renaissance Platinum School of Distinction.

Mrs. Tobias and her husband, Martin, reside in Centre Hall. They have four sons, Cameron and daughter-in-law, Anna Baran Tobias, Andrew, Matthew and Aaron. ■

"We are extremely proud and excited to celebrate this well-deserved recognition of her leadership and dedication to our school community. Laura's unwavering commitment to excellence in education, her ability to inspire both students and staff and her passion for creating a positive learning environment make her an exemplary leader."

Curtis Johnson
Superintendent
State College Area School District

Soak Up the Summer and Learn Something New: A Refreshing Approach for School Leaders

By Dr. Michael S. Snell, PA Principals Association Deputy Executive Director



As the final bell rings and the halls quiet down, school leaders finally have a moment to catch their breath. The frantic pace of the school year slows, and with that comes a golden opportunity — summer. While it's certainly a time for rest and reflection, it's also the perfect window to learn something new. Yes, even principals and administrators should take a break from spreadsheets and schedules to dive into new knowledge, not just for professional growth, but also for personal joy.

Here's a friendly nudge to make space for two kinds of learning this summer: one to sharpen your leadership edge and one purely for fun. While reflection is essential, intentional personal and professional development can set the tone for a more inspired and fulfilling year.

Reflect, Recharge and Reach Forward

Summer is naturally reflective. Whether it's sitting on a porch with a cold drink or taking a morning walk without the rush of meetings, it's the season for looking back and planning forward. Take stock of what worked, what didn't, and what you'd like to change in the coming year. This moment of pause offers clarity — but it also provides a launchpad. And that's where learning comes in.

Think of summer as your personal professional development retreat. You don't need to attend every webinar or overcommit to heavy courses. Instead, choose one meaningful work-related area you want to grow in and pair it with something light and joyful that brings out the “you” beyond the job.

Learn One Thing That Will Level Up Your Leadership

School leadership is constantly evolving, and staying ahead of the curve is both an art and a responsibility. But growth doesn't have to be overwhelming. This summer, choose one work-related topic that excites you or addresses a challenge you faced this past year.

Maybe you've been curious about AI in education and how tools like ChatGPT can streamline communication, spark classroom engagement or support teacher planning. Or perhaps you want to dig into trauma-

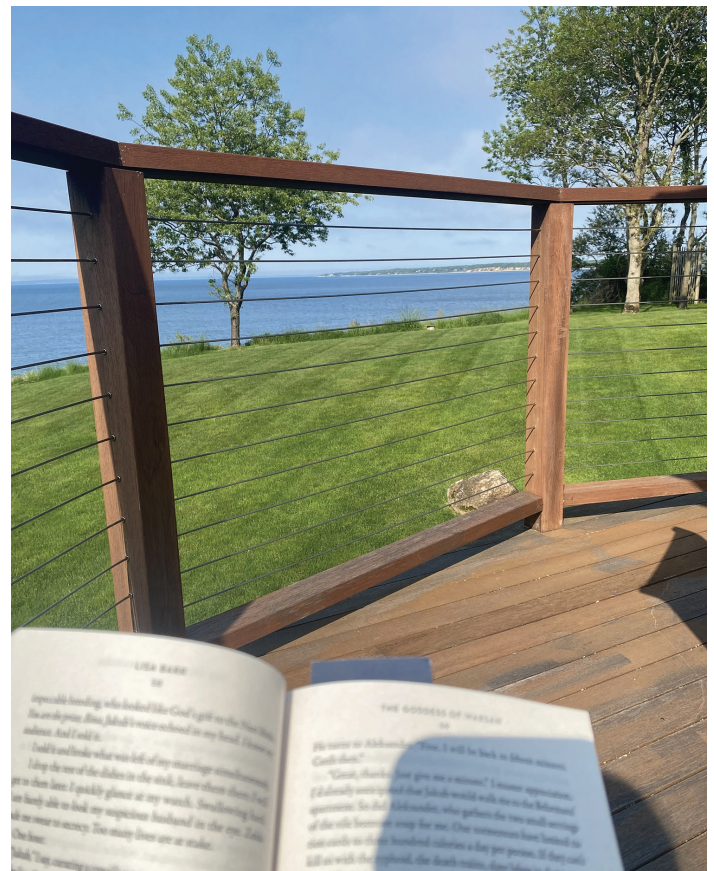
informed practices, equity in leadership or systems thinking to strengthen your school culture. Find a book, an online course or even a podcast series that dives deep and gets your gears turning.

The beauty of summer learning is you can take it at your own pace — on the deck, on a plane or even by the pool. By choosing just one focused area, you can return to school recharged with not only new ideas but also renewed energy.

Rediscover a Personal Passion or Try Something Totally New

Now, here's where things get fun. Remember when you used to paint? Garden? Learn guitar? Or maybe you've always wanted to try paddleboarding, baking sourdough or writing a short story. Summer is your moment to rediscover that joy.

Learning something purely for yourself isn't frivolous; it's freeing. It can reawaken creativity, reduce stress and remind you of the full, vibrant person you are outside your leadership role. And here's the bonus: When



school starts back up, you'll find that this personal growth indirectly boosts your professional life, too. You'll return to work more centered, more balanced and more connected to your own humanity, which makes you a stronger, more empathetic leader.

A Simple Challenge to Close

So, here's the gentle challenge: Choose one area of professional growth and one area of personal curiosity. Schedule them as self-care appointments on your summer calendar. Make a small plan, nothing too rigid,

and let yourself enjoy the process. Read, experiment, play, reflect.

Although school leadership is demanding, you can also enjoy life and try novel experiences. This summer, give yourself the gift of learning — not because you have to, but because you can. It's one of the best ways to grow, refocus and prepare to lead your school community with an even greater purpose next year. ■



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- ✓ Participants will learn facilitation skills that promote participation, ensure equity and build trust.
- ✓ Participants will engage in four protocols, plan for implementation in their school/district and be provided protocol outlines, graphic organizers and other materials for their use.



The cost for each workshop is \$300 per individual with a minimum of 15 participants. You can coordinate with a neighboring district, too.

For more information or to schedule a workshop in your district, contact Dr. Michael Snell, PA Principals Deputy Executive Director, at (717) 732-4999 or msnell@papprincipals.org

Interested in an Interim Principal Position?

From time to time, we receive requests for interim principals from school districts across Pennsylvania. If you are retired, retiring or otherwise available, you may want to consider serving as an **Interim Principal**.

If you are interested in serving in this capacity, please use the link below to complete the brief form and we will be in touch with you if there is an appropriate placement. Please complete this form (type into browser): <https://forms.office.com/r/wCjcVqiBmd>.

Contact Dr. Eric Eshbach at eshbach@papprincipals.org with any questions.



PENNSYLVANIA SUMMIT 25

FOR EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

August 3-5, 2025 State College, PA

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Featuring Our Keynote Speakers



Dr. Samuel Mormando

Founder and Executive Director, Edvative Learning

**Monday, August 4, 2025
9:00-10:00 a.m.
“Leveraging AI to Empower
Tomorrow’s Leaders & Learners”**



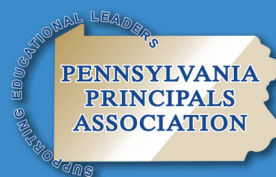
Dr. Scott Seaman

Executive Director, Association of Washington School Principals

**Tuesday, August 5, 2025
8:30-9:30 a.m.
“Measuring Hope:
The School Leader Paradigm”**



Register today!





IT MADE ME A BETTER LEADER

THE BENEFIT OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This is a column for members by members who have participated in Professional Development offerings provided by the PA Principals Association. The Professional Development opportunities afforded to members are invaluable and make a difference!

Not Just One More Thing: Professional Learning for School Leaders

By Mariah L. Rackley, Ed.D., Director of Curriculum & Instruction, Cornwall-Lebanon School District



Being a school administrator is hard. It's a lifestyle with constant demands and high expectations. It is so easy to fall into the trap of putting professional learning in the "one more thing" box. Taking care of our own professional learning and growth often gets put on the back burner in the churn of our professional lives as administrators. We convince ourselves that we're doing OK and holding our own, but we don't even realize that we are creating another space where we feel behind and overwhelmed.

The PA Principals Association has started offering book studies for Act 45 credit. I have found that these sessions fill three buckets for me — I get to read relevant and meaningful professional literature, collaborate with colleagues across the commonwealth experiencing many of the same things and check a few more hours off my Act 45 clock.

My favorite part of all these PA Principal courses is working with and talking to other administrators. Leadership is lonely, and the opportunity to learn with other colleagues is refreshing. Collaborating with

colleagues who are administrators and live through the same daily "forest fires" that pop up in schools is a necessary and valuable experience. I appreciate the connections, the networking and the discussions. I really like being able to share experiences in our breakout rooms. I think idea sharing is so important — but undervalued — in our world. Not undervalued because it's not recognized as important but undervalued because not enough time is dedicated to this aspect of our profession. It is nice to have intentional time to be in a shared space with like-minded people who share similar experiences and can commiserate in the same world.

I also appreciate that the facilitators at PA Principals understand the importance of the work, the strain of the time and the pressure to "get it all done." These Act 45 courses are realistic in expectations, purposeful and focused on our mission of serving the students and families in our school communities. Sessions like the ones offered by PA Principals recharge my batteries, challenge my thinking and encourage me to keep learning and growing.

Dr. Rackley can be reached at mrackley@clsd.k12.pa.us. ■

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RSS ROUNDUP

RSS ROUNDUP is written by your Regional Service Specialists (RSS): Peg Foster, Dr. Carl McBreen and Dr. Matthew Walsh, East Region; Tammie Burnaford, Susan Martin and Darren McLaurin, Central Region; and Yvonne Best-Proctor, Michael Allison and Dr. Carol Sprinker, West Region.

A Look at Preparing to Supervise Special Education

By Susan Martin, Central II Regional Service Specialist (RSS), and Janelle Chamberlin, M.Ed.



SUSAN MARTIN



JANELLE CHAMBERLIN

You know you are in trouble when your child starts a conversation with “How do you know so much about ...?” Janelle Chamberlin, the co-author, posed this question to me several weeks ago and concluded with “special education.” She proceeded to explain a graduate class project in which she needed to address the special education requirements in administrative preparation programs. She asked me how well my principal’s program had equipped me to supervise the special education staff and manage the program in my school. Granted,

I completed my principal preparation program many years ago, but I found myself reflecting intensely on what I had learned about special education. I could not produce much beyond a few school law case reviews from a school law class and some coursework related to staff supervision.

This topic was intriguing based on the statement, “It is imperative public-school principals demonstrate a thorough understanding of IEP creation and implementation ...” (Rineer-Hershey & Mild, 2019). Imperative and thorough are the words that make this statement noteworthy. Based on this statement and the responses of those interviewed, we set out to determine how administrative certification students are prepared to lead special education staff and programs.

The principal preparation programs of five colleges/universities in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania were examined. These five schools (three are referred to as schools A-C for the purpose of this article) were chosen because friends and colleagues who completed their administrator certification through these universities were available for interviews. The five schools represent both private and public universities and are located in various regions of our state. We examined the course requirements listed on the websites of the schools to learn more about their administrative certification programs.

The commonalities observed in the comparison of these programs were courses on school law, supervision

and curriculum/instruction. All programs embedded the state-required supervision hours into their course loads. These schools include a technology course, which is vital in the world we live in today.

One difference was that School A’s program also includes credit requirements for a Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction Certification. Another noted difference was that School B’s program offers a three-course elective sequence for STEAM. STEAM is becoming such a vital part of our world. It is good to see a program including STEAM in their coursework.

School C is the only program to offer a special education class, special education law. It does specify that special education law is the standard elective for the program, and any student wishing to take a different elective must have pre-approval from the department.

Interviews with a number of colleagues and friends who have completed these administrative preparation programs within the past five years were conducted. When asked if they had any special education courses, most of them said that they did not remember having a specific course, or if they did have special education lectures or coursework, they did not remember what topics were covered. They were asked if they felt confident/prepared to lead a building that includes special education teams. According to everyone



interviewed, they don't feel confident or prepared to lead special education teams.

As we know, special education staff and programs consume much of our administrative time, from scheduling to Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings. There is a plethora of school case law to abide by, as well as regulations from the state to follow. How does one finish an administrative certification and feel prepared to lead the special education program and team in their respective building?

Below are some ideas the authors discussed that could be implemented into an administrative preparation program.

- The state Department of Education and certification programs can ensure that their principalship candidates are prepared to lead special education programs and staff by requiring a set amount of supervision hours with a special education supervisor. By requiring candidates to work directly with a special education supervisor, they will be able to see many aspects of supervising the special education staff and program.
- The administrative candidate completes an interview with a current special education teacher. Throughout our undergraduate and graduate programs, we are often assigned to interview different members of the school faculty, principals, special education supervisors and even superintendents. It would be beneficial for an administrative certification student to interview a special education teacher. They could be required to ask questions such as: What do you find most difficult about your work? What is the amount of time you spend on paperwork? What steps are involved in making a caseload schedule? How do you oversee the tracking of your progress? For your students, what does differentiation entail? Do you work with general education teachers to modify or adapt assignments for your students?
- The administrative candidate completes a variety of projects. One project could be to create an IEP based on a redacted Evaluation Report (ER). Creating IEPs is one of the first major

assignments that undergraduate special education students complete. By creating their own IEPs, the administrative certification students would be able to see and experience a multitude of things, such as how to read an ER, how long it takes to write an IEP, how individualized each IEP is, and frankly just how much brainpower is involved (just because there is a template doesn't make it "easier"!).

- The university provides coursework that includes a specific focus on supervising the special education program in the school. Realizing that many of the administrative programs are 18 credits, this coursework could be embedded in a class that looks at supervision issues that occur when managing a school.

A 25-year veteran school counselor had one of the best answers to the question regarding preparation to lead special education teams: "I feel 50% prepared to lead special education teams right now, but that is because I've learned so much from others." This statement embodies the foundation of the School Leader Paradigm — "Becoming while Doing." It has been stated that as principals we become successful by leading with actionable strategies (Snell, 2025). We learn from our colleagues how to lead special education programs. However, administrators need to begin with a foundation to build from as they develop strategies to become successful. Colleges and universities can help to build this foundation by addressing the administrative candidate's basic knowledge of special education services.

In case you are wondering how I answered Janelle's question, "How do you know so much about special education?" My answer was simply, I learned from others and paid attention to what others were experiencing. I found that I "Became while Doing" without even knowing it. ■

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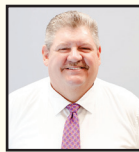
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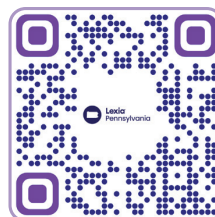
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Building Balanced Kindergarten Class Cohorts: A New Approach

By Dr. Jennifer Bloom



As an elementary school principal in the New Hope-Solebury School District for the past seven years, one of my most critical responsibilities is constructing balanced class cohorts for the upcoming school year. This task involves collaboration with current classroom

teachers, the special education team, my reading and math interventionist, my school counselor and social worker and my English language development teacher. Together, we intentionally create next year's class cohorts to reflect the benefits of a balanced classroom, which allows for mixed-ability groups socially, academically and emotionally, as well as a mix of genders. Research shows that balanced classrooms maximize the instructional time teachers spend with their students, resulting in larger academic and social/emotional gains throughout the year (Ylimaki & Brunderman, 2014).

The Challenge of Kindergarten Placement

As a K-2 principal, I am responsible for building next year's class cohorts for incoming kindergarten, first, second and third grade students. Building class cohorts for students in first, second and third grade is a complicated but straightforward task. Teachers complete a virtual placement spreadsheet for students. This spreadsheet reflects a student's performance in math, reading, writing, work habits, extrinsic behaviors and special considerations such as whether a child has an Individualized Education Program (IEP), 504 Plan or medical issue. Together with my school-based team, we ensure the classes are balanced based on gender, academics, behaviors and exceptionalities. This data-driven process has proven successful over the years.

The one grade level that has always posed an issue is kindergarten. When students register for kindergarten, they do not come with uniform data in academics, behaviors or exceptionalities, as they attend different daycare or pre-school programs, which are usually privately owned and operated. Additionally, there is a percentage of incoming kindergarten students each year who do not attend any school preparation program prior to registering. Therefore, it is challenging, if not impossible, to build balanced kindergarten cohorts due to inconsistent data among the students. As a school, we request that kindergarten preparation programs send us the data they do collect. We also have a parent input form, but this data is often from May or

June and each independent program varies in the data collected throughout the year. Early childhood learners grow and develop rapidly, and any academic or social/emotional data collected in May or June may look drastically different come September. Furthermore, the data collected by kindergarten preparation programs is often in an ideal setting: one-to-one or small groups. Students may perform academically and behaviorally very differently in a large class cohort compared to a small group (Anderson et al., 2003).

A New Approach for Kindergarten Placement

During the 2021-22 school year, I decided to change the kindergarten placement process to create more balanced classrooms, maximizing the instructional time teachers can spend with each child. The first step I took was researching how other districts built balanced kindergarten cohorts. I found that some used traditional kindergarten screenings to collect more timely and consistent data. This typically involved bringing students in during the registration process (held from May to August) for one-to-one or small group assessments in reading and math. Research supports this model, as it allows schools to assess a child's academic readiness for kindergarten (Rock, 2024). However, it does not address the timeliness issue, as these assessments can be conducted up to five months before a child starts school. Moreover, these assessments are often done in an ideal setting (similar to the kindergarten preparation programs: one-to-one or small group), meaning children may not show the full range of their personality in such a short period. Extrinsic behaviors in children are on the rise, especially post-pandemic, as children work to regulate their emotions throughout the day (Desautels, 2020). While I liked the idea of gathering consistent data on incoming kindergarten students to aid in creating balanced cohorts, I needed to find a way to also collect timely and authentic behavioral information.

Upon consulting with other districts in Bucks County, I identified a unique opportunity to develop a forward-thinking approach to forming kindergarten cohorts. Many districts relied on either a traditional kindergarten screening process conducted over the summer in ideal settings or on data from kindergarten preparation programs, leading to a significant gap in timely information. The principals I spoke with highlighted that relying on preparation program data often meant lacking information on a substantial



percentage of students, leaving them to depend solely on parent-provided information. This observation prompted me to propose an innovative kindergarten placement process to my superintendent. This new approach aims to collect academic and behavioral data in an authentic, timely manner through a collaborative team effort.

The Implementation of the New Process

The aim of this process is to establish a structure where the growth of relationships, curiosity and achievement is not overshadowed by classroom demands. The greatest challenge, particularly for parents, was that kindergarten teachers would not be assigned on the first day of school. Instead, students would undergo a placement process where they would be grouped, mixed and shared amongst all kindergarten teachers for the first several days. During this period, initial data would be collected by our kindergarten and special area teachers (anecdotal behavioral information), our math and reading interventionists (Acadience math and reading universal screeners) and our counselors (anecdotal behavioral screeners). At the conclusion of our cohort mixing, our team would collaborate to analyze the data collected (in timely and authentic settings) and create balanced kindergarten cohorts, ultimately maximizing instructional time for both teachers and students.

The Three-Year Plan

Upon reviewing the academic and social-emotional data over the past several years (pre-pandemic) it became evident that our original placement process would not lend itself to creating balanced cohorts. The initial universal screeners we used, given during the first two weeks of school for kindergarten students, indicated a fairly large percentage of students scoring below or well below average in reading, as well as math. Having never seen the new kindergarten students in our setting, we also did not have any timely data on their social/emotional wellness, aside from what was provided by parents and kindergarten preparation programs. While this would give us a start, it is challenging to use only this information to truly

understand what behaviors would present themselves as our youngest learners transitioned to school-age learning. In our original placement process, many of these students could have been grouped into a single cohort, which could pose challenges for the classroom teacher and have an impact on instructional time.

Using this data as a foundation, I crafted a proposal to present to my leadership team, the community, and the School Board, introducing the new kindergarten placement process as a pilot program for the 2021-22 school year. The new process maintained our staggered start for incoming kindergarten students, allowing one-third of the grade to start each day over the first three days, so there were smaller class sizes to ease their transition into school. On the fourth day of school, all students reported and began rotating through all our kindergarten teachers, ensuring each teacher had the chance to meet each new child. Those rotations continued for an additional three days. Students also switched cohorts twice during the day, allowing them to meet and work with a variety of children. This allowed our kindergarten teachers to take anecdotal notes on which children worked well together and which thrived separately. Our math and reading interventionists conducted their beginning-of-the-year assessments, during this time, as well, to ensure we had timely and consistent data. We then met as a full team and finalized student placements, building balanced cohorts with the academic and social/emotional data we had collected over the first seven days.

We collected parent feedback at the conclusion of our pilot year (and subsequent years) adjusting our process based on positives and drawbacks identified. In the 2023-24 school year, we eliminated the staggered start, as it caused school anxiety for those who came to school on the first day of the staggered start and then did not return to school again for several days. Our teachers also felt they had an accurate picture of students' behaviors within three full days and did not require the fourth. Parents were also eager to begin with their permanent teacher, so the shortened process was a win for everyone.

Finalizing the Process

Our proposal for the 2024-25 school year will maintain this shortened placement process timeline, which was well-received by the community and teachers alike. It also showed the addition of a temporary homeroom during the placement process, so parents had a contact until the final homeroom teacher was determined.

Our academic and behavioral end-of-the-year data has shown improvements since adopting this new placement process. Our scores in math and reading

are higher than they have ever been in kindergarten, supporting the idea that when teachers have a balanced cohort, they can maximize each child's instructional time, and, in turn, their growth and success. Confident in the impact of our new process, we are entering our fourth year creating balanced kindergarten cohorts with the support of our school district community.

For further information, please contact Dr. Bloom at jbloom@pennridge.org.

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Beyond the SAIC: A Call for Collaborative Truancy Reform

By Veronica Will, Ph.D. (c)



Policy vs. Practice: The Unkept Promise of Act 138

Since the passage of Act 138 of 2016, Pennsylvania has taken meaningful steps toward addressing school truancy through early intervention. The legislation introduced a framework

intended to promote proactive engagement and reduce reliance on punitive responses. However, good policy on paper doesn't always translate into real change on the ground. For many school leaders, chronic absenteeism remains a frustrating and recurring challenge, especially for students and families facing compounded barriers.

School Attendance Improvement Conferences (SAICs) are intended to uncover the root causes of absenteeism and offer families support before legal consequences are triggered. In theory, they provide a structured, compassionate response to early warning signs. In practice, they often miss the families who need them most. Many parents don't attend SAICs. Those who do often reveal little new information, especially in cases where the school already knows the barriers: anxiety, illness, housing instability or family disruption. For disengaged families, or those who mistrust institutions, even a well-run SAIC can feel inaccessible or irrelevant.

This disconnect reflects a broader systemic issue. As Kearney et al. (2022) note, school absenteeism is not just a student problem, it is a multifaceted phenomenon requiring both systemic reforms and interagency alignment. Isolated efforts within schools will continue to fall short without a networked, collaborative response from courts, social services and the broader community.

The Court: An Accountability Gap

When cases escalate to the legal system, the challenges continue. In my personal experience in Erie County, more than 75% of parents fail to appear for truancy hearings. Without consequences or follow-up, the legal process becomes symbolic at best. Truancy citations, potentially filed after six unexcused absences, carry little weight when hearings are skipped and cases dropped. The missed opportunity for early accountability allows chronic absenteeism to spiral. Research by Keppens and Spruyt (2018) highlights the particular harm of unexcused absenteeism, which correlates with behavioral disengagement, peer conflict and academic underachievement. Without

accountability, the underlying issues are left unresolved, and students, already behind, fall further through the cracks.

Child Welfare Involvement: Too Late to Matter

Another key barrier is the delayed involvement of child welfare agencies. In Erie County, and across much of the state, the Office of Children and Youth (OCY) does not intervene until 15 unexcused absences have accrued. Yet schools are legally permitted to cite families at just six unexcused days. Why the discrepancy? Timing matters. A recent study by Keppens and Spruyt (2018) shows that unexcused absences at the beginning of the school year are particularly detrimental, they disrupt critical relationship-building with teachers and peers and can solidify disengagement patterns that last the entire year. Aligning agency thresholds with school triggers would create timelier, coordinated responses. Act 138 created a strong starting point, but its effectiveness hinges on implementation. Reform must go beyond compliance and become truly collaborative. Schools cannot, and should not, be expected to shoulder this burden alone.

Truancy Around the World: A Shared Challenge with Diverse Approaches

Truancy is far from a uniquely American challenge. Around the world, education systems grapple with similar attendance issues, although their responses vary significantly depending on social norms, school structure and governmental priorities. In New Zealand, truancy, often referred to as "wagging," is perceived by



students as a complex behavioral response to negative school experiences. Students report skipping school due to perceived disrespect in classrooms, a desire to spend time with friends, or simply as a habitual act. Notably, some students view truancy as less severe until legal consequences or parental prosecution become imminent (Baskerville & Loveridge, 2023). This highlights the importance of student voice in understanding and addressing non-attendance patterns.

Meanwhile, European countries present a more systemic lens. Using data from 24 nations, Keppens and Spruyt (2018) argue that the structure of a country's educational system, particularly the use of academic tracking and grade retention, can significantly influence truancy rates. For example, countries with early academic tracking tend to see higher truancy rates, especially among students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Conversely, well-balanced vocational education systems and longer periods of compulsory education are associated with lower dropout rates and more consistent attendance (Keppens & Spruyt, 2018). Global studies also emphasize the absence of a universal truancy definition, complicating international comparisons. In the U.S. alone, definitions vary widely between states and districts, with some classifying truancy as any unexcused absence and others requiring a specific threshold of missed days. This definitional ambiguity not only affects policy enforcement but also undermines coordinated efforts to address root causes (Gentle-Genitty et al., 2015). These global insights reinforce a central theme: Truancy must be understood as a relational and structural issue, not merely a behavioral one.

Reframing Truancy: Equity, Not Just Enforcement

Truancy is not just a school compliance issue, it's a mirror reflecting broader systemic inequities. While school attendance is strongly associated with academic and developmental success (Kearney et al., 2022; Keppens & Spruyt, 2018), vulnerable populations face compounded challenges that cannot be addressed in isolation. The shift we need is one of mindset. We must reframe attendance as engagement, not enforcement. Punitive models, especially for low-income or marginalized families, risk further alienating those who need support the most. A collaborative, equity-centered response offers a path forward.

At the district level, Iroquois School District has taken intentional, multifaceted steps to address truancy through robust community partnerships and data-informed interventions. A cornerstone of these efforts is the district's collaboration with Bethesda Lutheran Services, a countywide grant-funded agency that provides a dedicated truancy monitor at no cost. This partnership has significantly expanded the district's ability to proactively engage with students and families through increased home visits, truancy court assistance and parent-centered SAICs. Bethesda's involvement has also allowed the district to implement targeted incentive programs that encourage consistent school attendance, making attendance support both preventative and responsive.

In addition, Iroquois School District has forged a unique and impactful partnership with the local district magistrate, bringing truancy hearings directly into the high-school building. This localized approach reduces transportation barriers for families, increases student accountability and reinforces the importance of school attendance in a

setting that is both familiar and accessible to students and caregivers. Holding hearings on-site strengthens the connection between judicial and educational systems, promoting restorative practices and community-based problem-solving.

At the elementary level, the district has embraced the Community Schools model through its partnership with the United Way of Erie County. One notable initiative is the quarterly "Family Game Night" attendance reward program, which celebrates students with strong attendance records. Recipients receive a board game and a gift card to a local restaurant, promoting not only student engagement, but also whole-family participation in celebrating educational consistency. By making attendance a family-centered achievement, this program strengthens the home-school connection and encourages sustained, collective support for student success. But these efforts, while meaningful, are not enough. Reform must extend beyond the boundaries of public schools because truancy is not simply an educational issue, it intersects with housing instability, mental health access, poverty and systemic inequities that schools alone cannot resolve. Lasting change demands broader coordination across child welfare agencies, judicial systems, health providers and policymakers. Without

“Truancy is not just a school compliance issue, it's a mirror reflecting broader systemic inequities.”



ONE MEMBER'S VOICE

One Member's Voice is YOUR column — a place to voice your opinion and your concerns regarding timely education- or school-related topics. It is also a forum to share your views or provide feedback on issues that are impacting your job, your school, your district or public education in general.

That Phone in Your Hand: What Are You Really Teaching?

By Dr. Gerry Weinhardt



While walking down the hallway, a school leader shifts their gaze away from their phone just in time to address a student breaking the school's new no-phone policy. The student walks away with more than one lesson from this encounter! We all recognize

the disruption technology has unleashed upon our educational world. This piece aims to empower you to question your school's smart device expectations. Our role as educational leaders is crucial in shaping the future of education, and that begins with how we model it.

The best leaders are intentional. They ask nothing of others that they wouldn't do themselves. Great leaders recognize that every action is noticed and shapes how others perceive them. Consider the leader who walks past trash in the hallway or checks emails while walking to lunch duty. How is that perceived? Productive? Detached? Distracted? Our behaviors, especially in shared spaces, are constantly communicating. Never underestimate the power of those small moments in shaping your school's culture.

It's no secret that digital distractions increasingly affect our schools. In response, many schools are implementing plans to counter this digital deluge. A 2024 Pew Research study found that roughly 95% of teens own a smartphone, and nearly half reported being online "almost constantly" (Vogels & Anderson,

2024). For decades, educators have taught what Lounsbury (2014) called the "hidden curriculum": those implicit "lessons" we teach daily. Today, helping students become digitally disciplined citizens may be one of the most relevant updates to that curriculum.

Regardless of your school's approach to technology, it's critical to consider how all stakeholders receive the rollout. Vogels & Anderson (2024) explored how teens navigate screen time, and the study concluded that nearly half of teens said their parent was sometimes distracted by their phone when together. This is a pattern easily extended into schools.

Before becoming a middle school administrator, I spent 10 amazing years as a fifth-grade teacher. I remember the bewildered looks of elementary students when teachers corrected them for talking in hallways while the teacher had just been conversing with another adult. If students are forced to grapple with device restrictions, how do they interpret a school leader on their device? Students are always watching. Always inferring.

As we conclude this school year, I offer three questions for reflection:

Question One: Revisit how the building perceives the leader who uses their phone while walking through the halls. Now, imagine your school has adopted expectations that limit student smartphone use.

Does the staff's view of that leader shift?



Question Two: As you create expectations for device usage, does school-wide truly mean school-wide? Yes, adults juggle responsibilities that may require using a phone. But our students are jugglers too and often leverage their devices as pressure release valves. If rules apply only to students, reflect on the message your digital behavior sends.

Question Three: What specific agreements could your leadership team and staff make about modeling digital

discipline? Consider co-created commitments about device-free zones or times that apply to everyone.

The most powerful policy implementation does not come from handbooks or announcements. It comes from leadership that embodies the principles it promotes. As we guide our schools through the digital age, let's ensure our actions align with our messaging. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. Gerry Weinhardt has been one of the assistant principals at Garnet Valley Middle School in Delaware County since 2018. He is a learner and educator who began his career teaching fifth grade at Garnet Valley Elementary School. Dr. Weinhardt earned his Doctor of Education from West Chester University of Pennsylvania and brings over 16 years of experience working with students, teachers and families.

When he's not at school, you'll likely find Dr. Weinhardt outdoors with his partner and their two toddlers or simply relishing in awe at his two-year-old's ability to grasp the power of being in the world. He is passionate about empowering student voice, engaging in authentic dialogue regarding navigating grounded and digital citizenship and believes deeply in the power of connection and growth. Dr. Weinhardt can be reached at weinhag@garnetvalley.org.

Beyond the SAIC: A Call for Collaborative Truancy Reform

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

systemic alignment and shared accountability, even the most well-designed school-level interventions risk falling short. Truancy is not just a school problem, it's a community challenge that requires a united, community-wide response.

We have the framework. We have the research. What we need now is willpower and partnership. If we want to see real change, we must work together: schools,

courts, child welfare, probation and local organizations, each playing a part in keeping students connected and learning. Let's close the gaps. Let's build the bridges. Let's make sure no student slips through unnoticed. Let's act together.

For additional information, please contact the author at vwill@iroquoissd.org. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Veronica Will, Ph.D. (c), is the Assistant Principal at Iroquois Elementary School in the Iroquois School District, where she is passionate about creating a supportive and engaging learning environment for all students. Mrs. Will is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Liberty University, focusing her research on educational policy. In addition to her role at Iroquois, she serves as the West I Elementary State Director for the Pennsylvania Principals Association, where she advocates for school leaders and works to shape statewide education initiatives.

When she's not immersed in school life or doctoral work, Mrs. Will enjoys reading, spending quality time with her family, singing loudly (and proudly) in the car and hitting the pavement for a good run.

The Classroom Experience: The Principal Perspective

By Dr. David M. Wiedlich



As the principal of Radnor Middle School in the Radnor Township School District, the daily demands of meetings, observations and administrative tasks often take up the majority of the school day. In the midst of these responsibilities, it is easy to lose touch

with the classroom experience and the direct impact of teaching on students. Recently, I had the opportunity to step back into the classroom and teach two lessons to eighth grade Accelerated Social Studies classes. This experience was both invigorating and humbling, reminding me of the profound influence educators have on shaping young minds.

The lessons focused on the Compromise of 1790 and the pivotal roles of Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison in shaping our nation's early history. Preparing for these lessons required a deep dive into historical content, as well as thoughtful consideration of how to engage and differentiate for all learners. I had to think about energizing the students with engaging activities, developing supplemental readings that charged them to recall information, thinking critically, analyzing scenarios and applying knowledge to a hypothetical budget that Hamilton had to deal with at that time. The process of designing activities to ignite interest and foster meaningful conversations in the classroom was a refreshing challenge.

One of the most rewarding aspects of returning to the classroom was witnessing firsthand the curiosity and enthusiasm of students. Their questions and insights brought the historical figures and events to life, creating a dynamic learning environment. Adjusting the lesson in real time to address their needs and interests reminded me of the adaptability and responsiveness required in effective teaching.

I loved being back in the classroom. The energy, the engagement and the direct interaction with students were invigorating. It reminded me of why I became an educator in the first place — the joy of stimulating curiosity and facilitating learning. This experience reaffirmed my passion for teaching and reinforced the importance of staying connected to the classroom.

Research supports the notion that principals should engage in teaching periodically. Instructional leadership practices, including direct involvement in teaching, have been shown to positively impact principals' self-efficacy and school improvement efforts (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). A seminal study by Hallinger and Murphy

(1985) highlighted instructional leadership as a core responsibility of principals that significantly influences student learning. Additionally, the International Successful School Principals' Project (ISSPP) emphasized the importance of principals maintaining a strong connection to the classroom to foster a collaborative and effective school environment (Day & Leithwood, 2007).

Recent studies further underscore the benefits of principals teaching occasionally. A report by Vanderbilt University and The Wallace Foundation found that principals who engage in teaching significantly improve student achievement (Goldring et al., 2025). Another study published in the *Journal of New Approaches in Educational Research* highlights the role of principals in schools as learning communities, emphasizing the positive impact of dialogic leadership on school improvement (Redondo-Sama et al., 2025).

Emily Morikawa, the teacher for the Accelerated Social Studies class and the content-area building leader, also appreciated the experience. She stated, "I was honored to have Dr. Wiedlich visit my classroom. As a fellow social studies teacher, it was exciting to see him take off his 'principal hat' and connect with students. Watching him interact with my students was inspiring, and the kids were totally engaged. There was such great energy in the room, and it made the day feel extra special. It meant a lot to all of us and was a great reminder of the power of leaders modeling strong instruction."



Eighth graders respond to the question, "Was Hamilton successful in his role as Secretary of the Treasury."

Ms. Morikawa asked her students how they felt about having me in the classroom. One student told her, "Aside from being the principal, it was great to see him in a different role where he was able to engage the whole class with entertaining aspects about history." Another student added, "I loved learning about this



Dr. Wiedlich engages students in a discussion about the “Dinner Table Bargain.”

time in history from him. I found it cool that he was able to come in and teach us.” Lastly, this student expressed, “It was a refreshing reminder that our principal is actually an experienced teacher.”

This experience also highlighted for me how important it is to stay connected to the classroom as an administrator. It is essential to understand the challenges and triumphs that teachers face daily and to appreciate the nuances of student engagement and learning.

By immersing myself in the teaching process, I can better support our educators and create a more cohesive and collaborative school community. This boots-on-the-ground experience, albeit short, really helped me to appreciate and honor the curriculum work that teachers have done to ensure proper alignment. It also helped me make more informed

decisions when it comes to instruction. Supporting that notion, a report by RAND Corporation found that principals who engage in instructional activities, including teaching, are better equipped to provide effective guidance and support to their teachers (Kaufman et al., 2025).

Prior to becoming an administrator in 2014, I was a social studies teacher at Lionville Middle School in the Downingtown Area School District. This background in teaching has always been a cornerstone of my approach to leadership, and returning to the classroom reaffirmed its importance. I have a deep appreciation for the role of teachers and the incredible influence and impact they have on our students. Their dedication, creativity and passion are the driving forces behind student success and growth.

In conclusion, my journey back to the classroom was a powerful reminder of the joys and complexities of teaching. It reinforced how crucial it is to maintain a balance between administrative duties and direct involvement in education. As principals, we must strive to stay connected to the classroom — not only to support our teachers but also to reignite our passion for education and its transformative impact on our students. Get out, get into classrooms, throw yourself into planning and preparing some lessons for your students and showcase your instructional talents that helped lead you to your administrative role.

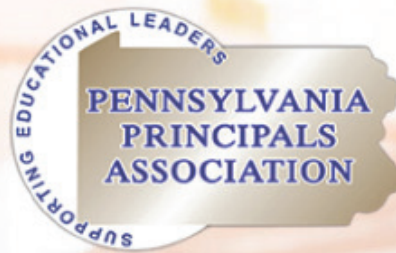
For further information, please contact Dr. Wiedlich at david.wiedlich@rtsd.org. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Dr. David M. Wiedlich joined Radnor Middle School in the Radnor Township School District as Principal in July 2019. Dr. Wiedlich began his teaching career in The School District of Philadelphia at John Welsh Elementary (K-8). In 2003, he transitioned to the Downingtown Area School District, where he served as an English and social studies teacher. In 2014, Dr. Wiedlich took on the role of assistant principal at Lionville Middle School in the Downingtown Area School District.

Dr. Wiedlich’s leadership and dedication to education have been recognized through his service on the Pennsylvania Association of Student Councils Board of Directors and the Editorial Review Board for The Pennsylvania Administrator. He holds a bachelor’s degree in Elementary Education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, a master’s degree in Curriculum and Instruction from The Pennsylvania State University and a Graduate Certificate in Peer Coaching and Collaboration from The Pennsylvania State University. He earned his Doctorate in Educational Leadership from Neumann University, where he also obtained his Superintendent’s Letter of Eligibility. Currently, Dr. Wiedlich is furthering his expertise by enrolling in a Certificate of Advanced Educational Leadership program at Harvard University.



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BOOK REVIEW

“Reset: How to Change What’s Not Working”

By Susan M. Sibert, Ed.D.

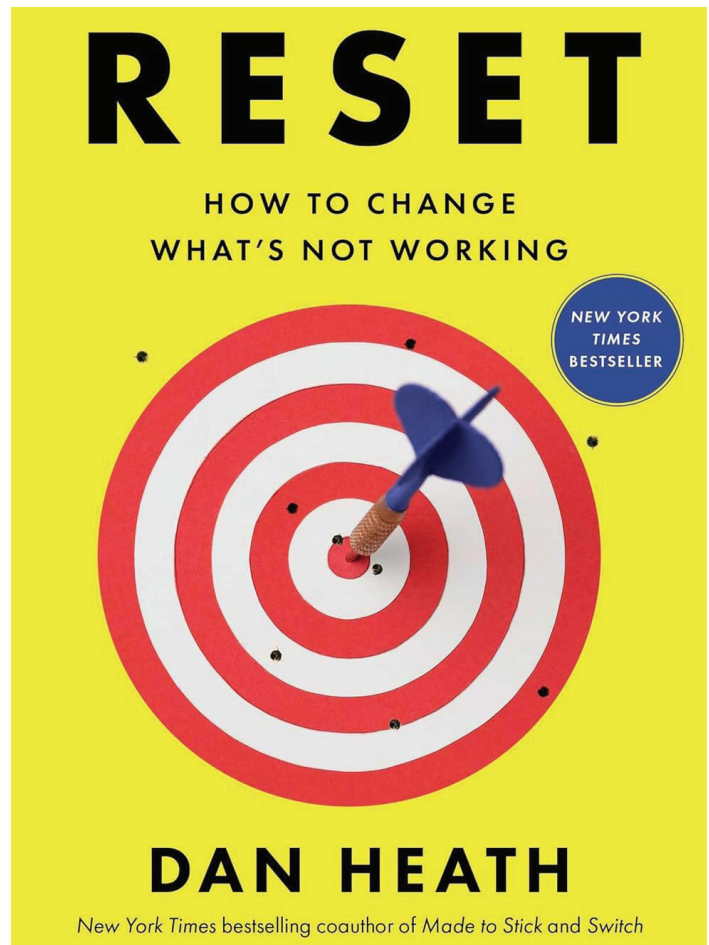


When I was an elementary principal, more and more parents started picking up their children at dismissal time. The school district was rural, and all students traveled by bus or were driven by parents. Due to the arrangement and size of the parking

lot, there was limited space to park, and parents competed with the many school buses awaiting the dismissal of hundreds of children each day. Due to late automobile arrivals, parents speaking with other parents, younger children getting settled in booster seats and the time it took for kids to get into their own cars, the parent vehicles sometimes caused dismissal to be delayed. Some of the problems were young children running enthusiastically to automobiles or getting frustrated when they couldn’t see cars adequately in the parking lot’s heavy rain or snow. The problematic issues associated with the end-of-day dismissal were complicated by a marked increase in the number of parent pick-ups, and the pattern of inefficient dismissal procedures continued day after day, week after week, year after year. Students who were used to being picked up and occasionally rode a bus often struggled with behavior expectations, and bus drivers were challenged by occasionally transporting students they did not know well or whose presence substantially changed drop-off times. Drivers were greeted by angry parents at stops wondering why the bus stop arrival times were different on some days.

We came to the realization that a change was desperately needed one day during a pre-holiday dismissal when parent cars created yet another traffic jam in the pick-up location. Thus, making it impossible for the school buses to fit in the parking lot and forcing them to wait for lot entry along the highway.

After a thorough and long-needed study of the situation, we realized that school bus loading was a priority, and students who rode the school buses would be dismissed first. Once buses departed, then parent cars were invited to pick up children. It was that simple. One example of what author Dan Heath refers to as



“targeting constraints” in his 2025 book “Reset: How to Change What’s Not Working” is allowing the buses to line up first and having parent cars wait in a side parking lot.

Allowing buses to load and exit the parking lot was not a popular decision with parents at first because they wanted to beat the buses out of the parking lot and avoid getting stuck behind buses making multiple stops. Complaints ensued, but eventually the change settled in, and more and more students rode the bus, which led to more routine bus run times. Why did it take so long to reconcile the bus dismissal issue? We were stuck in a cycle of repeating the same inefficiencies over and over, doing things the way they had always been done. Even though we wanted to

change the situation, lack of time and concrete ideas to make the change prohibited improvements. Closely studying the situation and dismissal process, putting student safety first and being open to any and all suggestions allowed the change.

Every organization has similar situations that remain stymied for whatever reason. In *Reset*, Heath offers ideas to get what he calls “unstuck.” Although the 251-page book, published by Avid Reader Press, offers solutions for any kind of organization, the first chapter begins with a school scenario where a high school assistant principal is trying to better support students and decides to spend an entire day shadowing a freshman student. When the administrator evaluated the student’s experience through her own eyes during the exercise, which was featured on a PBS news segment, she discovered that student engagement and active learning differed greatly from what she originally thought.

Heath’s book is divided into two major sections: *Find Leverage Points*, with five chapters, and *Restack Resources*, with six chapters. The assistant principal’s experiment was part of the first chapter, “Go and See the Work,” in which Heath encourages leaders to experience and study the issue firsthand before formulating any changes.

Other chapters in the first section provide readers with ways to best study issues and problems. For instance, chapter 4, “Target the Constraint,” one of several ways Heath offers to identify leverage points, focuses on how Chick-fil-A’s drive-through line order takers improved efficiency and speed of ordering as well as improving the entire drive-through experience. Customers who know the menu expedite the ordering process, as opposed to customers trying to locate items on an ever-increasing and constantly changing menu. To find ways to “close the gaps” (p. 65) in the ordering process, the company deployed a drone to observe and evaluate the drive-through procedure from the point of entry into the queue to the point of exit from the parking lot. This encouraged automobiles in line to keep moving forward so that more cars could join the line. In addition, each chapter ends with a “Whirlwind Review,” which is a short list of the major points of the chapter.

The book also features a number of simple drawings and photographs to illustrate key points. For instance, in chapter 7, “Tap Motivation,” Heath uses a simple Venn diagram to show a thinking process to determine what is required in a given situation, as well as what is desired. The intersection of what is required and what is desired provides the motivation wherein the solution lies. At the end of the book, there is a one-page visual depiction of the entire book and a website to download a larger version, along with other resources.

I could envision principals or other administrators at any grade level using this book to address a variety of problems that need to be resolved in order to improve operational or academic sticking points. This comprehensive approach not only equips educators with practical tools but also fosters a collaborative environment where innovative solutions can thrive. By utilizing the resources provided, administrators can effectively engage their teams in meaningful discussions that lead to lasting improvements in their institutions. Ideas from the book could allow administrators to lead the change process with other school constituents, such as teachers, school staff and parents. Heath’s *Reset* is just that: ideas about how to move past blockages and *reset* thinking to solve problems and improve outcomes.

School administrators are so busy they may find themselves accepting occurrences like congested dismissal procedures, going over and over the same ground without change or resolution and wanting to make changes but unable to do so. “Reset: How to Change What’s Not Working” is a book about how leaders can facilitate change and find efficiencies. I absolutely recommend this book as Heath provides readers with the tools and ideas necessary to facilitate positive change to solve problems, improve performance, engage stakeholders in improvement processes and unstick problematic and cumbersome issues to enjoy a *reset*. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: *Susan M. Sibert, Ed.D.*, is the coordinator of the Administration and Leadership Studies Doctoral Program and the Superintendent Letter of Eligibility Program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where she supervises principal interns and teaches in the Principal Certification Program. She can be reached at smsibert@iup.edu.

Welcome NEW Elementary Members

11/1/2024 - 2/28/2025

NAME	DISTRICT	NAME	DISTRICT
Gizell Aydin	Allentown City SD	Katelynn Bailey	North East SD
Nicholas Rolland	Allentown City SD	Kathryn Slavinski	Northern Tioga SD
Stephanie Hull	Ambridge Area SD	Krista Keys	Northwestern Lehigh SD
Kayla Hrabczuk	Armstrong SD	Jamie Schuler	Palmerton Area SD
Allison Mattern	Bangor Area SD	Nicholas DiCarolis	Penn Hills SD
Dr. Danielle Curzi	Bermudian Springs SD	Madison Carty	Penns Valley Area SD
Jonell Egan	Big Beaver Falls Area SD	Colleen Berezo	Pine-Richland SD
Sharon Lepri	Canon-McMillan SD	Emily Dunker	Pine-Richland SD
Heather Jacobson	Central Bucks SD	Michael Rose	Pine-Richland SD
Anastasia Andronas	Chartiers-Houston SD	Lauryn Bencker	Pleasant Valley SD
Nicole Redlinger	Chartiers-Houston SD	Melissa Petrilak	Pocono Mountain SD
Natalie Anderson	Clarion Area SD	Steven Appleby	Red Lion Area SD
Michelle Salvaggio-LaRose	Conemaugh Valley SD	Dr. Lorie DeHoff	Red Lion Area SD
Robyn Spear	Downingtown Area SD	Dr. Jessica Sapsara	Ringgold SD
Megan Hollern	Erie City SD	Marc Berry	Ringgold SD
Daniel Nielsen	Erie City SD	Ashley Kline	Saint Marys Area SD
Kerry Roach	Erie City SD	Ivan Aranha	Seneca Valley SD
Asia Dickerson	Erie City SD	Traci Valentino	Sharon City SD
Nicholas Galich	Erie City SD	Lisa Williams	Southern Tioga SD
Nicole Potosnak	Erie City SD	Ashlie Rittle	Spring Grove Area SD
Brianna Trott	Erie City SD	Gregg Wilson	State College Area SD
Dr. Jennifer Cameron	Exeter Township SD	Heather Johnston	Sto-Rox SD
Christine Jenkins	Hatboro-Horsham SD	Anthony Selvenis	Tunkhannock Area SD
Jennifer Menaker	Haverford Township SD	Cameron Bush	Upper Darby SD
Kaitlyn McMullan	Lower Moreland Township SD	Alaina Hofer Irvin	Waynesboro Area SD
Jocelyn Sabruno	McKeesport Area SD	Jacqueline Pavlo	West Chester Area SD
Julie Lohr	Milton Area SD	Kate England	West Shore SD
Anna Hare	Mount Pleasant Area SD	Jessica Schuhart	West York Area SD
Anthony Ovia	New Castle Area SD	Dr. Kim Evans-Johnson	William Penn SD
Dr. Rachel McClellan-Kirksey	Norristown Area SD	Stephanie Washam	Wissahickon SD

NEW MEMBER SPOTLIGHT CAMERON SULLIVAN BUSH



"I am honored to be a new member of the Pennsylvania Principals Association. Through my membership, I hope to gain access to high-quality resources such as research, publications and professional development opportunities, all of which will continue to inform my practice as I lead in our current educational landscape."

Cameron Sullivan Bush has served as the Assistant Principal at Westbrook Park Elementary School in the Upper Darby School District for one year. Previously, she served as a Special Education Intake Coordinator at Upper Darby High School. She taught first grade for eight years in a neighboring district, as well as a Life Skills Support classroom for two years. She can be reached at cbush@upperdarbysd.org. ■

Promoting Teacher Mental Health Through a School Wellness Room

By Chris Montagna, Ed.D.



It's been five years since the COVID-19 shutdown of schools, which has had innumerable effects on education. In the years preceding the pandemic, Pennsylvania schools were already facing a shortage of teachers entering the classroom. The

Act 82 Report from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) illustrates the decline in Instructional I certifications issued by PDE in the years leading up to 2020. In 2012-2013 PDE issued 16,614 Instructional I certifications, compared to 5,577 in 2022-2023 (PDE, 2024). In the fall following the pandemic, 183% more teachers retired during the first month of the school year than the previous September (Samuel, 2020).

Teaching has always been a stressful career, and that stress was exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic and then amplified by the shortage of newly certified teachers and increase in retirements. The downward trend of teacher certifications, highlighted in the PDE data, along with early retirements has created ripple effects through the school system (Castro, 2023; Ingersoll & Tran, 2023, Samuel, 2020). Castro's (2023) findings show how teacher shortages within school impact instructional management (coherent instructional programs, evaluating teachers, planning professional learning, etc.), organizational management (hiring, managing non-instructional staff, managing a schedule, etc.) and internal relations (professional development, building relationships, staff conflict resolution, etc.) (Montagna, 2025).

Research tells us that burnout occurs after a prolonged exposure to stress caused by an inability for an individual to function effectively within their profession (Tan, 2022). Burnout has been found

to impact a teacher's self-efficacy as well as hinder a teacher's physical and emotional well-being. There are certain factors that schools can control when it comes to the stress and burnout facing today's teachers. Providing support structures and assisting teachers in identifying ways to support their physical and mental health are two ways that districts can support teachers.

Teachers need to feel supported and valued in their roles. This has led to the development of the "Zen Den," a teacher wellness space at Clay Elementary. This space was available due to a shift in Head Start locations to another elementary building which freed up office space. With the help of staff and a little research, we were able to identify specific items and changes that we could make to this space to create an environment to promote wellness and relaxation.

"Time in the Zen Den provides staff a calm and comfortable space of respite to recharge and refocus. In doing so, we can better serve our students and families. In addition, the implementation of the Zen Den has shown staff that their mental and physical well-being is a priority in their workplace."

– Steve Lauer, School Counselor



This image shows the Zen Den with the lights dimmed, offering a quiet space with a sound machine, water fountain and blinds drawn.

With the support of our Parent Teacher Organization and personal donations, we filled this small office with a zero-gravity chair with massage insert, refrigerator with water, coffee and tea through a single serve dispenser, low-lighting options, white noise machine, an air purifier, yoga mat and roller and a free, sharing library. We also have storage bins for staff to store their personal belongings, which is helpful for nursing mothers needing a lactation space.

Additionally, we outfitted the room with plants, both live and artificial. Through some quick research, we identified calming colors which we selected to paint the walls. As time went on,

we slowly added new items to the space, including an upright exercise bike and a cork board for wellness tips or fitness opportunities.

This space was introduced at the conclusion of the 2022-2023 school year and has become a popular spot for many of our staff and substitutes. As demand increased, establishing a method to reserve the room became a priority. Our technology department helped us add a calendar through Outlook so that staff could sign out the space and lessen the possibility of “overbooking” the room.

“The Zen Den is a wonderful spot to take a breather, relax and recharge so I’m ready to face the rest of my day and I’m ready for whatever might happen! I love the cold water, snacks and coffee maker, as well as the reclining massage chair.”

– Kim Bell, Support Staff

For those who used the space first, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Those who were resistant did tell us that they felt bad about “resting during the day.” This go-go-go-go mindset has led to burnout for staff, not only at Clay, but across the commonwealth. To help remove this barrier, we established short coverage plans and assigned staff to a 5-10 minute “Zen Den” session. We allowed teachers to use the time as they felt necessary. Teachers may use the time to make positive phone calls home, send emails or schedule appointments for themselves using



This image shows the wellness room fully lit. Teachers have the option to reserve a bin to store their own yoga or lactation supplies. A HEPA air filter is situated in the corner, and a shareable library is also available in the room.

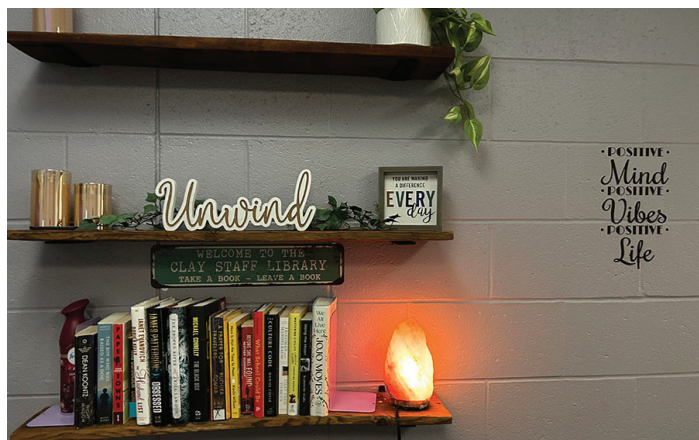
the phone that was installed in the room. Due to this approach, many skeptics of the project were able to see the advantages of using this resource.

“I go to our Zen Den about once a month during the time my class has a guidance lesson. This room provides a quiet place where I can work or take a few minutes for myself in the middle of a busy day. I feel recharged as I return to the students and look forward to this time each month!”

– Sue Wenrich, Second Grade Teacher

In addition to giving staff members a place to decompress, our wellness area demonstrates how much importance the school’s leadership team has placed on teacher and staff wellness. Our space continues to grow and evolve as our teachers’ needs change. While staff are at home, our shareable library promotes relaxation and “unplugging.” The goal is for this space to continue to help support teachers and staff so they can be their best for our students every day.

For further information, please contact Dr. Montagna at christopher_montagna@easdpa.org.



While staff are at home, our shareable library in the Zen Den promotes relaxation and “unplugging.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: **Chris Montagna, Ed.D.**, is the Principal at Clay Elementary School in the Ephrata Area School District. Before being appointed principal in July of 2020, Dr. Montagna was the assistant principal at Doe Run Elementary in the Manheim Central School District.

PA Principals Association PIL Program

The Team: Building Leadership Success that Improves Student Learning

30 Act 45 PIL Hours - Cost is \$300/person



The Pennsylvania Principals Association will bring this PIL workshop to your school or district.

Goals of the Program:

This course is designed for building and district level teams or individuals looking to improve their leadership skills regardless of position. The text for this course is *The 360° Leader* by John Maxwell. Beyond the author's excellent leadership advice, chapters focus on leading down if you are the boss, leading up if you are the assistant and leading across to members on your team.

Participants could include any of the following:

- A principal and assistant principal. **(1&2)**
- A superintendent and assistant superintendent (and other cabinet members). **(1&2)**
- A principal, or group of principals in a district, without an assistant principal(s) who wants to improve their leadership ability. **(1-1-1)**
- An assistant principal who wants to improve their "leading up" leadership ability. **(2-2-2)**
- A school or district team. **(1-2-3)**

Learning Objectives:

- Review, discuss and improve upon the **team relationship** at the building level / district level to improve overall effectiveness and improve student learning.
- Establish routine opportunities for **communication** between the team and others.
- Assess **trust** at the building level / district level and identify pitfalls and opportunities to improve the importance of trust.
- Assess and reflect upon their personal **leadership style** to maximize impact on the team.
- Develop strategies for **leading up, leading down** and **leading across**.
- Create **daily, weekly, monthly and yearly** opportunities to talk about building leadership, building culture and student learning.

Program Requirements:

- Read text and complete **Book Read Summary**.
- Complete an **Action Plan Summary**.
- Complete a **Performance Goal Template**.

If you have additional questions or would like to schedule this Act 45 program, please contact Dr. Michael Snell at msnell@paprincipals.org

Turning Concern into Connection: Addressing Cyber Enrollment Through Listening

By Dr. Brian Randall



In the weeks after I stepped into my new role as principal of Conemaugh Valley High School, one trend was immediately clear: Our students were disappearing into cyber schools. This topic struck me personally, as I believe deeply in the power of in-person learning. In-person learning has certain aspects that cannot be replicated in an online format, like face-to-face relationships, classroom dynamics and daily social interaction that lead to learning opportunities. Recent research confirms that students continue to associate in-person learning with greater support for academic success, focus and meaningful peer interaction (Bright & Vogler, 2024). But my belief and recent research did not matter. Clearly, families in our district were making a different choice, and I wanted to understand why. That was the start of my two-month journey, during which my team and I called every family whose child was enrolled in a cyber program, whether it was our in-house cyber or otherwise. We called to ask one question: Why?

What we heard changed the way I lead. This article focuses on how those conversations are reshaping our school's approach to relationships, trust and student engagement. Listening to parents and students was step one and the easy part. Now, the real work starts with applying what we have learned.

As I looked at the list of cyber families, it was obvious that our district was experiencing a steady rise in students leaving for cyber education. The numbers were not just data points; they were names and faces missing from our classrooms. Each withdrawal had a ripple effect: a smaller classroom community, state funding exiting our system and a growing sense of disconnect between families and our school. As our team began to make phone calls, there were three core reasons why families were leaving our hallways. There were many concerns about bullying. This trend is echoed in recent research, which shows that many families, especially those with students receiving special education

services, cite bullying and school climate as key reasons for choosing cyber charter schools (Eppley et al., 2023). Bullying was definitely the most common response we received from our calls, followed by families avoiding disciplinary issues or attendance consequences. The last common theme was a desire for more educational flexibility. As we listened, a pattern emerged. Families were leaving to escape bullying, discipline avoidance or attendance barriers, or they were leaving to provide more educational flexibility. These conversations opened my eyes. The decision to leave was never about academics; it was about safety, belonging and feeling heard.

After listening to the families, we did not just take notes; we took action. Their concerns became the blueprint for tangible improvements in our school. In order to address the bullying concerns, we introduced a new student incident reporting system where students can self-report concerns. The dean of students, behavioral health technician and the school counselor review each concern. Then either disciplinary action is taken or conflict resolution is pursued. In most cases, students have been able to resolve the conflict through a circle talk or other conflict resolution techniques.

Students have had an excellent opportunity to learn dispute resolution techniques, which will help them in the future. Parents are informed at every stage of this process and are even asked to participate. The behind-the-scenes effort that parents used to feel was lacking is now visible to them.

We faced challenges when addressing discipline and absenteeism. Student behavior could not be ignored, and state law regarding attendance matters must be observed. Our approach was to implement a progressive discipline model and increase communication regarding our attendance and discipline policies. Parents are now more informed about student behavior and absences. Parents are no longer blindsided by a Student Attendance Improvement Plan meeting request or truancy charges because they are clearly communicated in advance.

“Our approach was to implement a progressive discipline model and increase communication regarding our attendance and discipline policies.”

Although we still have students who leave our district to avoid discipline consequences or because they have trouble coming to school, we have seen a decrease in our absentee rate as a result of our efforts. Our initiatives align with contemporary research advocating for systemic approaches to address absenteeism. Kearney et al. (2022) emphasize the necessity of understanding the multifaceted reasons behind school absenteeism and propose comprehensive strategies for fostering student engagement and attendance. By being more transparent and consistent, we have helped families understand not just the ‘what’ but the ‘why’ behind our expectations. Strong school-family communication is foundational to trust and student success. Studies consistently show that when families feel informed and involved, students are more likely to stay engaged and perform better academically (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sempeles & Cui, 2023).

Flexibility was the most challenging concern to tackle. As a small school with limited resources, we do not have the capacity to offer several electives, specialized tracks or even custom schedules the way cyber programs can. However, we knew we had to start somewhere. We began by asking our students directly, What do you want to learn? What do you feel is missing? Their input guided us in adding some new course offerings that better aligned with their aspirations and needs. These additions gave students more ownership in their education and helped them feel heard. To expand even further, we partnered with a local university to offer online dual enrollment courses to our juniors and seniors. While these courses are delivered in a cyber format, they are integrated into the student’s in-person educational experience. Students take online courses from our building, built into their day-to-day schedule, surrounded by

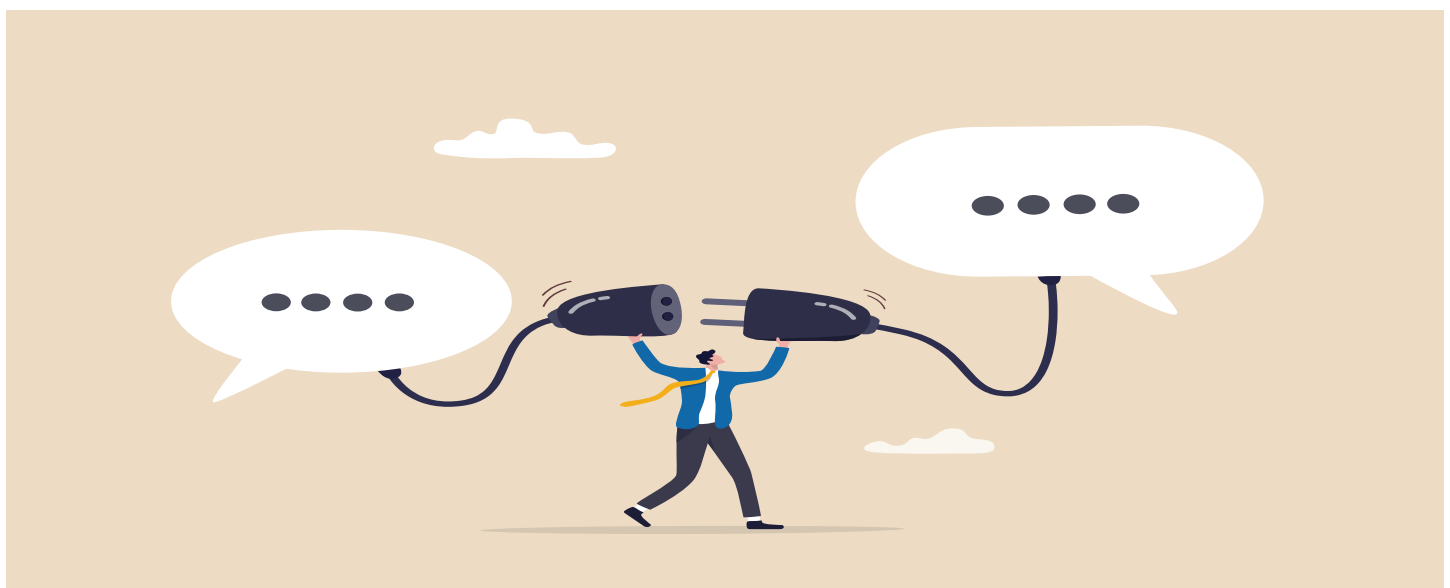
peers and supported by our staff. We do not see this as a concession to cyber education; rather, we view it as a hybrid model that provides flexibility while maintaining the essential social connections crucial for adolescent development.

This approach has not only helped us retain some students who might have otherwise left, but it has also broadened the definition of what learning can look like in our building. Across every initiative, one shift has been key: communication. When families feel informed, they feel valued, and when they feel valued, they are more likely to stay.

The experience of reaching out to families and asking “Why?” has been a very meaningful action as a school leader. It has served as a reminder that every family decision carries its own story and deserves to be acknowledged. While we cannot always offer every option or solve every problem immediately, we can always listen, learn and improve. Our school is not perfect, but we are committed to growing! We are building a culture where student and family voices matter, where concerns lead to change and where relationships come first. By opening the lines of communication, we have started to rebuild trust.

The work continues, but the message is clear: When schools lead with empathy, transparency and action, families respond. We are not only focused on bringing families back to the building, but we are also focused on improving our product. Each and every day we are working to build a school our families are proud to choose and a place where students feel they truly belong.

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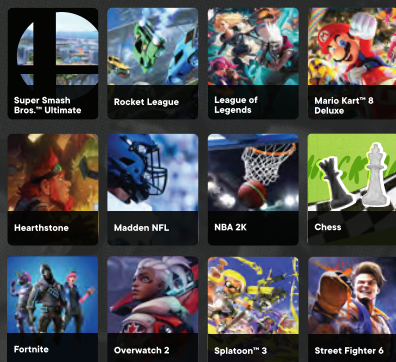
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Student

Guiding the Growth: Change Leadership That Builds Stronger Schools

By Dr. Kimberlie B. Rieffannacht



Implementing change in public education is a complex challenge, often falling to building and department leaders to turn ideas into reality. A new initiative, program, idea or philosophy, whether driven by state mandates, leadership transitions, or, ideally,

compelling research, creates tension for school-level administrators. As a building leader, you may have a thorough understanding of the change and feel fully committed to its success because you believe it will benefit your students and staff. In that case, leading the change is significantly easier. You may be initiating the change and have complete autonomy, or you may not. However, there are also times when you're asked to champion a change you may not fully understand, believe in, or feel the same sense of urgency about as others. In those moments, finding the right way to lead becomes critical, not only to the success of the change but also to your effectiveness as a leader.

Recognize the *Me* Factor

The first step in managing change is identifying where you stand. The principal is the visionary, manager and champion of change within a building, ensuring the best outcomes for students in all circumstances (Meyer-Looze et al., 2019). Begin with an honest and thorough exploration of the change and your own understanding (Meyer-Looze et al., 2019). Your emotional response to what is being asked of you is essential in determining a way forward. As a leader expected to be the face of support for this change, ask yourself, is there research you need to read? What conversations do you need to have? What clarity do you need to feel equipped?

In my role as Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education, I often lead change across multiple buildings. As a former principal, I deeply understand the impact these initiatives have on both the building and the leader. At one point, we implemented a significant scheduling and instructional change across all the district's elementary schools. One principal, reflecting on this directive, reached out to me to express her concerns. She respectfully disagreed with the decision, sought clarity on the motivation behind it and engaged in a meaningful discussion about its pros and cons. When it became clear that the change would proceed, she led her team with vision, integrity and true leadership. In addition, she acknowledged her own feelings, had an open dialogue and guided her team to a successful transition.

By recognizing your strengths and acknowledging your gaps, you can either work with your team to bridge those gaps or take the necessary steps to build your own capacity. Change is often over-managed and under-led due to a lack of understanding or skill (Meyer-Looze et al., 2019). Your vulnerability in this process can actually become a source of strength. When your team sees you modeling growth and openness, they are more likely to engage and invest. Often, they can support your growth as much as you support theirs.

Emotions play a larger role in leadership than we often admit. Even if you try to mask your true feelings, your team, especially those who've worked with you for some time, can sense them through your tone, body language and how you communicate. Be mindful of the emotional tone you leave behind after meetings or updates. Seek feedback from trusted colleagues: How does the room feel when you leave? Your team will mirror your energy. If you appear dismissive or uncertain, they'll follow suit. If you express enthusiasm and belief, even amid uncertainty, they're more likely to lean in.

Defining and Equipping the Vision

Vision provides clarity and minimizes confusion. Visionary leadership isn't always easy, and it's not always tangible, but its absence is immediately felt. Change requires vision, a shared and articulated understanding of what success looks like and the purpose behind the initiative. Share the value and importance of the change, and if it's not immediately clear, take the time to find it.

Explain the "end in mind." Help your team see where you're going, why it matters and how it benefits students. If a vision hasn't been clearly defined by district leadership or other stakeholders, it becomes your responsibility to craft one that resonates within your sphere of influence. The principal leading the schedule change I mentioned earlier took the time to create a vision focused on enhanced teamwork and academic support.

Once the vision is established, equipping your team becomes paramount. People cannot meet expectations if they lack tools, training or confidence. Change efforts often fail, not due to a lack of will, but due to a lack of support (Meyer-Looze et al., 2019). Engage in open conversations with your team about what they need and then work to provide it. When people feel supported and involved in the process, they're more likely to buy in and commit.

That same principal listened closely to her team, advocated for essential components of success and helped elevate practices not only in her building but across the district. Leading through tough changes can be uncomfortable, but if done well, it can be incredibly rewarding.

Moving Forward

Developing a plan that outlines the steps of the change process, including vision, expectations, timelines and roles, provides a sense of purpose and direction. While plans should remain flexible, they still offer a roadmap that builds confidence and stability.

Transparency and open dialogue are essential. Regular check-ins, opportunities for feedback and honest conversations keep everyone connected to both the vision and each other. This doesn't just build momentum; it builds trust.

Celebrate small wins along the way. Acknowledge progress, even if it's incremental. Highlight individuals or teams that exemplify the change. Remind everyone of the long-term goal and why the journey is worth it. These efforts do not just sustain energy; they foster shared ownership and pride.

By listening, engaging them in the planning process and celebrating their achievements, the principal I mentioned earlier guided her staff through the schedule change. She provided them with recognition for their teamwork and supported them during challenges. It was not always pleasant, but she stayed on the course with a positive outlook. These leadership practices are easy to overlook, especially when change feels slow or intangible, but they make all the difference.

Owning the Outcome

If a change is happening in your building, it's yours; own it. Whether you're in a large district with centralized mandates or a smaller district with more autonomy, your influence over how the change is experienced cannot be overstated. Even if you didn't initiate the change, your leadership will shape how it is interpreted, how your team responds and whether it succeeds.

Ownership means more than compliance; it means presence. Show up, be visible, be engaged and be



willing to do the same heavy lifting you ask of your team. When questions arise, be the one seeking answers. Advocate for your team's needs, whether that's training, time or support.

Communicate clearly that this is a shared journey. Model transparency and accountability. Acknowledge when something isn't working and be willing to adjust. Build trust by standing with your team, especially when the change is messy or the results are hard to measure in the short term.

Change challenges systems, and it tests leaders. Choosing to own the outcome through uncertainty, resistance and even failure sends a powerful message: "We're in this together, and I will lead us through." The principal who led her team through the scheduling change did just that. Her team succeeded because of her coming alongside them to walk through it. That level of leadership transforms compliance into culture. Change cannot be successful or sustained without that level of commitment (Beycioglu & Kondakci, 2021).

At its core, managing change is about leading people. It's not just about launching initiatives or meeting deadlines; it's about inspiring belief, building capacity and sustaining trust. The most effective change leaders are those who reflect before they act, define a clear path forward, support their teams and never forget that people are at the heart of every transition. As a school administrator, you have a powerful opportunity not just to manage change, but to shape it, leaving your schools stronger, more resilient and better prepared for the future.

For additional information, you may reach out to Dr. Rieffannacht at rieffannacht@hasdpa.net. ■

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Where Have All the Kidney Tables Gone?

Reimagining Small-Group Instruction and Real-Time Feedback in Secondary Classrooms

By Scott Weinstein



Walk into almost any elementary classroom, and one piece of furniture is nearly ubiquitous: the kidney table. They are hubs of feedback, centers of differentiation, and maybe, just maybe, where the magic really happens, possibly the place where the most “aha” moments occur in school. These crescent-shaped instructional hubs foster proximity-based learning and personalized feedback. Around them, three to five students lean in while a teacher, centrally positioned like a conductor of a small orchestra, offers direct instruction, scaffold learning and provides targeted, just-in-time feedback. These small-group instructional practices are so embedded in elementary teaching culture that their effectiveness is rarely questioned.

Yet, in the transition from elementary to secondary education, roughly fifth through seventh grade, these tables and the teaching practices they represent frequently disappear. What was once an essential element of responsive teaching is conspicuously absent. Thus, the following questions arise: Where have all the kidney tables gone? And why have so many secondary classrooms abandoned the model they represent — feedback-driven, small-group instruction?

Differentiation Still Matters in Adolescence

The disappearance of small-group structures in secondary settings cannot be attributed to a diminished need for differentiated instruction; quite the contrary. Adolescence introduces greater variability in students’ cognitive development, executive functioning, motivation and self-regulation (Sousa & Tomlinson, 2018). Research in educational neuroscience and developmental psychology confirms that adolescent learners benefit significantly from timely, formative feedback and differentiated learning environments (Willis, 2006; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The need for small-group instruction does not diminish; if anything, it intensifies.

Despite this, secondary classrooms often default to whole-group instruction, where feedback is typically delayed, returned with assessments days or even weeks later or generalized through broad, class-wide commentary. This instructional shift does not stem from a lack of care or competence among secondary educators but rather from systemic norms and structures prioritizing content coverage over embedded formative assessment and more of a personalized learning approach (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). We have traded kidney tables for content coverage.

The Kidney Table as a Symbolic Structure

Although a physical kidney table holds significance in elementary settings, it serves as a powerful metaphor for the kind of teaching we hope to use — one which values proximity, responsiveness and relationships. The fundamental idea behind the kidney table is that every learner should have direct access to the teacher’s thinking, not only during whole-class instruction but also during those more private, individualized times when feedback can truly advance learning.

I’ve worked at every level of the K–12 system over the years, including elementary and high school teacher, elementary and high school principal and middle school assistant principal. One trend has emerged during that time: As children age, the frameworks that facilitate responsive, small-group instruction tend to fade. Students do not change overnight. What shifts isn’t their need; it is the system’s assumptions about how learning should happen.

Toward a Secondary Model of Small-Group Instruction

Reintroducing the spirit of the kidney table into secondary classrooms does not require a wholesale redesign of classroom furniture. Instead, it demands intentional instructional strategies that prioritize formative feedback and student engagement. Secondary educators can adopt several research-supported strategies to embed small-group instruction into their daily practice:

- **Flexible Seating and Classroom Design:** Create adaptable classroom layouts that support the formation of small groups for discussion and instruction (Tucker, 2020).
- **Workshop Models:** Particularly effective in English and social studies, the workshop approach allows teachers to rotate among student groups, providing formative feedback during writing, discussion or project work (Calkins, 2001; Gallagher, 2004).
- **Math Intervention Blocks:** Schedule regular periods for targeted support based on real-time assessment data, aligned with Response to Intervention (RTI)/Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) frameworks (Burns et al., 2008).
- **Interactive Science Labs:** Rather than front-loading instruction, teachers act as facilitators, circulating to clarify misconceptions and deepen student understanding in real time (National Research Council, 2005).



Critically, these structures require students to work independently and collaboratively while the teacher engages a small group. Elementary educators routinely trust six-year-olds to manage independent tasks during guided reading. It is reasonable and necessary for secondary classrooms to expect the same level of autonomy from adolescents.

The Stakes of Inaction

Failing to integrate small-group feedback structures in secondary education communicates unspoken messages: that feedback can wait, students should learn at the same pace and instruction is best directed to the mythical “middle.” Nevertheless, cognitive science shows that feedback is one of the most

powerful influences on student achievement (Hattie, 2009). Do we inadvertently send the message that students must now sink or swim in whole group settings? Personalized, real-time feedback is not a luxury; it is an evidence-based practice critical to growth.

Why the Kidney Table Still Matters

Students don’t suddenly become more homogeneous or self-sufficient when they enter adolescence. They do not outgrow the need for proximity to an engaged and responsive teacher. If anything, they need more connection, more feedback and more personalized support. So maybe this isn’t just about kidney tables. Maybe it’s about the structures we create, or abandon, that communicate what we value. When we remove the table, do we inadvertently send the message that feedback can wait? Should teachers teach to the mythical middle? Or do we reinvest in the conditions that maximize learning for all, not just fast learning?

Because the truth is, no student should ever outgrow the need for a teacher sitting across from them saying, “Let’s work on this together.” So yes, I am asking: Where have all the kidney tables gone? And, more importantly, can we bring them back, not necessarily as furniture (though that might help), but certainly as a mindset and model for responsive, small-group instruction?

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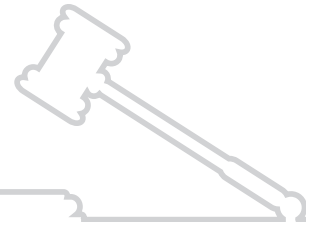
NEW MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

CLARK J. MCCREADY



"I joined the Pennsylvania Principals Association for many reasons, but mostly because I am a lifelong learner and wanted more opportunities to learn from, network and collaborate with other motivated administrators across Pennsylvania."

Clark J. McCready has served as the Assistant Principal (AP) at West Perry High School in the West Perry School District for two years. Prior to becoming an AP, he was a high school/middle school English teacher for Central Dauphin School District, while also serving as the varsity head track & field coach and head JV football coach for CD East High School. He can be reached at mccreadyclark@gmail.com. ■



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By Michael I. Levin, Esq., PA Principals Association General Counsel

Mandatory Reporting for Principals Under the Child Protective Services Act and Title IX — Don't Become a Headline



As building leaders, principals are on the front line of student protection and play a critical role in ensuring compliance with both the **Child Protective Services Act (CPSA)** and **Title IX**. These laws are essential tools in safeguarding children from abuse, harassment and discrimination and the responsibilities they impose on school personnel, especially administrators, must be understood and consistently followed.

Noncompliance can expose individual employees and school districts to serious legal consequences, compromise student safety and erode community trust. Reputational damage resulting from the failure to do what should be done is incalculable. No principal should want to be named in a media article or a grand jury report that he or she did not do what should have been done regarding mandatory reporting. Examples of media headlines include:

“Principal accused of not reporting abuse by two teachers at St. Helens High resigns.”

“5 school employees arrested for alleged failure to report student’s sexual assault.”

“Millsap ISD Superintendent Ousted for Failing to Report Teachers’ Abuse of Autistic Student.”

A Grand Jury investigated the Plum Borough School District and issued a scathing report. In 2015, two teachers were arrested for having been involved in multiple relationships with several female students at the school for several years. After the arrest, an investigation was conducted as to whether the members of the administration and staff had had reasonable cause to suspect such incidents and, if so, why no information about such activities had ever been reported. The investigation revealed that multiple administrators, over the course of several years, had heard numerous rumors of teachers having

relationships with students. Despite having multiple meetings with both the suspected teachers and the students involved, no reports were ever made to ChildLine. Various excuses were made for these failures — no reporter had actually witnessed any misconduct, reports had only been made to a supervisor, and the employees did not believe they could report rumors. The Grand Jury found that the failure to report “thwarted the entire goal of making a ChildLine report, which is to ensure the protection of children.” The Grand Jury also found that the superintendent and school resource officer’s failures could constitute the crime of a failure to report (23 Pa.C.S. § 6319). Conversely, the Grand Jury found that the vice principal who at one point witnessed an interaction between a student and the arrested teachers that had left him “uncomfortable,” despite no signs of misconduct, acted properly. In that instance, the vice principal reported that feeling to the school resource officer, who failed to report.

The Grand Jury Report makes it extremely clear: “ChildLine obviously intends, and is designed to accept, reports from sources that have no direct knowledge of suspected abuse. In fact, ‘rumor’ is an anticipated source of information.” As such, mandated reporters should always err on the side of caution and make a ChildLine report if they suspect abuse.

The Child Protective Services Act (CPSA)

Enacted in 1975, the CPSA (23 Pa. C.S. §§ 6301–6388) governs the reporting of suspected child abuse in Pennsylvania. All public-school employees, including administrators, teachers, custodians and volunteers, are **mandatory reporters**. This obligation applies to all school personnel who, in the course of their duties, come into contact with a child under 18 years old.

As noted, the purpose of the CPSA is to report suspected child abuse. Under the CPSA, “child abuse” includes that infliction of bodily injury, any type of

sexual harassment or assault or placing a child in fear of imminent injury. 23 Pa.C.S. § 6102. A “child” is defined as any individual under the age of 18; as such, the CPSA’s provisions of the mandatory reporting of child abuse applies to nearly all students who attend schools or after-school activities.

The CPSA identifies numerous persons as mandatory reporters, including “school employees.” A “school employee” is defined as “an individual who is employed by a school or who provides a program, activity or service sponsored by a school.” 23 Pa.C.S. § 6303. The term does not apply to “administrative or other support personnel unless the administrative or other support personnel have direct contact with children.” 23 Pa.C.S. § 6303. Notably, these requirements extend to the typical school employee (teachers, janitors, etc.), as well as any school volunteers.

The CPSA also addresses “confidential employees.” A “confidential employee” is one that, due to statutory restrictions, is generally not permitted to share any information they learn about a child through the course of their professional duties. However, even such confidential employees are still mandated reporters and must make a report if they learn about or suspect any child abuse. A relevant excerpt of the Pennsylvania Judicial Code is as follows:

(a) General rule. – No guidance counselor, school nurse, school psychologist or home and school visitor in the public schools or in private or parochial schools or other educational institutions providing elementary or secondary education, including any clerical worker of such schools and institutions, who, while in the course of his professional or clerical duties for a guidance counselor, home and school visitor, school nurse or school psychologist, has acquired information from a student in confidence shall be compelled or allowed:

- (1) without the consent of the student, if the student is 18 years of age or over; or
- (2) without the consent of his parent or guardian, if the student is under the age of 18 years.

to disclose such information in any legal proceeding, trial or investigation before any government unit.

(b) Exemption. – *Notwithstanding subsection (a), no such person shall be excused or prevented from complying with 23 Pa. C.S. Ch. 63 (relating to child protective services).*

42 Pa. C.S. § 5945. (emphasis added).

The CPSA mandates reports of suspected child abuse. Therefore a mandated reporter must make

a report of any suspected abuse if said reporter (1) comes into contact with such a child in the routine course of employment; (2) the mandated reporter is responsible for that child or is affiliated with a school responsible for the care of that child; (3) a person makes a disclosure to the mandated reporter that such child is the victim of child abuse, or (4) an individual, 14 years or older, reveals to the mandated reporter that the individual has committed child abuse. 23 Pa.C.S. § 6311. The “routine course of employment” is when an employee has “regular and repeated contact that is integral to a person’s employment or volunteer responsibilities.” 23 Pa.C.S. § 6303. In a broader sense, a mandated reporter is required to report any cases of “reasonably suspected” child abuse. Courts have noted that reasonable suspicion can be based on the medical, professional or other training or experience of the mandated reporter. *T.D. v. Dep’t of Pub. Welfare*, 54 A.3d 437, n.3 (Pa. Cmwlth Ct. 2012).

In terms of process, the CPSA requires that mandated reporters must “immediately” report abuse via phone call to the Department of Human Services’ Child Welfare Portal, more commonly known as “Childline.” 23 Pa.C.S. § 6313(a)(1). Then, within 48 hours of making the oral report, the mandated reporter must also make a written report, submitted electronically through the Child Welfare Portal. A failure to make a Childline report can result in anything from a misdemeanor of the second degree to a felony of the second degree, so it is vital that proper reports are made. These reports must contain as much known and detailed information as possible, as outlined in § 6313: the name and address of the child and any parents or guardians responsible for the child, where the suspected abuse occurred, the age and sex of each person/child involved, the nature and extent of the suspected abuse (including any evidence of prior abuse), the name and relationship of each individual responsible for causing the suspected abuse, the family composition, the source of the report, the name and information of the person making the



report, any actions taken by the person making the report and any other information required by whatever department/agency taking the report. 23 Pa.C.S. § 6313(b). In simpler terms, a report of child abuse must be comprehensive and include as much information as possible.

Best Practice for Principals

Principals should cultivate a building culture that encourages prompt reporting of all concerns — even those based only on rumor. The 2015 Grand Jury Report involving the Plum Borough School District is a powerful reminder: Failure to act on rumors or suspicions allowed abuse to continue unchecked. Administrators who failed to report were scrutinized, while those who acted on “gut feelings” were commended.

Title IX Overview

The Department of Education issued revised regulations in 2020. Under the regulations, Title IX is designed to eliminate “discrimination on the basis of sex in any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance, whether or not such program or activity is offered or sponsored by an educational institution[.]” 34 CFR § 106.1. “Discrimination” under Title IX also includes sexual harassment, and Title IX defines such harassment as to include any of three types of misconduct on the basis of sex that jeopardize the equal access to education Title IX is designed to protect: any instance of *quid pro quo* harassment by a school’s employee, any unwelcome conduct that a “reasonable person” would find so “severe, pervasive and objectively offensive that it denies a person equal education access,” and any instance of sexual assault, dating violence, domestic violence or stalking. 20 U.S.C. § 106.30.

Title IX is intended to protect the students and employees of a school district. Part of this protection is the establishment of mandatory reporting requirements. While not explicitly stated, the language of the Title IX regulations presupposes that all employees of a school district respond “promptly” in a manner that is not “deliberately indifferent” to instances of sexual harassment. 34 § 106.44(a). It also presupposes that such responses be made to the Title IX coordinator. Such responses can be made “in person,

by mail, by telephone, or by electronic mail, using the contact information listed for the Title IX coordinator, or by any other means that result in the Title IX Coordinator receiving the reporter’s verbal or written report.” 34 § 106.8(a). Similar to the CPSA, failure to properly report a Title IX violation will have legal implications. However, unlike the CPSA, there are legal ramifications for the school district itself as opposed to the mandatory reporter. As such, *all* employees must be trained in Title IX reporting requirements.

Unlike the CPSA, which requires reporting by a confidential employee, confidential employees are not permitted to disclose any information received in their professional capacity in any investigation, hearing or legal proceeding before a governmental unit under Title IX. 42 Pa. C.S. § 5949. Making a Title IX report, or participating in a Title IX investigation, would require a confidential employee to disclose information gained in their professional capacity, and as such confidential employees are not permitted to directly make a Title IX report. All confidential employees should be

aware of their duty of confidentiality. However, while unable to make a report, a confidential employee must inform the victim of this lack of permission to report such discrimination and provide both the contact information for the Title IX coordinator and instructions on how to make a Title IX report. This, of course, is based on the presumption

that a Title IX violation is discovered in the scope of a confidential employee’s duties; if any such violation is discovered outside of that scope, that employee *must* make a Title IX report.

When Both Laws Apply

Many situations may involve conduct that is both child abuse under the CPSA and sexual harassment under Title IX. In these cases, dual reporting is required. Even if an employee is exempt from reporting under one law, they may still be required to report under the other.

As a principal, you are responsible not only for making your own reports but also for:

- **Training your staff** in their reporting obligations.
- **Creating an environment** where concerns are elevated promptly.

“Principals should cultivate a building culture that encourages reporting of all concerns — even those based on rumor.”

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WOW! THAT'S WHY I BECAME A PRINCIPAL

Chutes and Ladders: Being a Principal

By Dr. Diane Pauli, Principal/Special Education Director at Montessori Regional Charter School



Chutes and Ladders is a board game that many children play with their parents and friends; but what do this board game and being a principal have in common? The goal of the game is to get to the end of the board by landing on the ladders, while avoiding

the chutes. The goal of being a principal is to get to the end of the day in one piece (both physically and emotionally). After two years of being a school principal, I have learned to embrace the chutes as well as the ladders.

In the day-to-day operations of being a principal, it is not always possible to avoid the chutes. In the beginning, any situation that came my way caused me emotional stress. Whether it was a fight between two seventh graders, an escalating student whom I had to restrain, an irate parent screaming in my face or a staff member ready to quit, I took on each of these incidents as if my life depended on it. I thought I had to solve the situation immediately. Realizing that it could take some time to get to the bottom is part of the experience of going down a chute. Before long, I came to discover that before reacting, I needed to pause, reflect and analyze each situation. This takes discipline as well as the ability to seek advice when a challenging situation arises. A saying that I try to live by is “Wise people know what they don’t know and go

to those who know.” I have sought counsel from other principals and experts at the state level to help me address difficult situations and decisions. As a principal, you will encounter difficult situations on a daily basis. How you deal with them is entirely up to you.

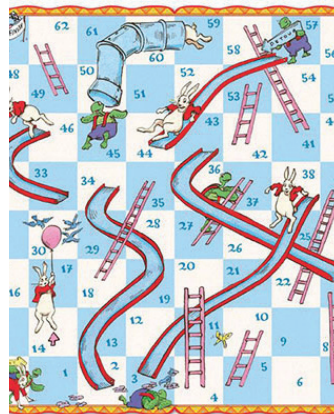
Embracing the ladders is essential to surviving in the principalship. The most challenging aspect of working as a principal has been this. My day seems to revolve around challenging circumstances and problems — every day brings with it a ladder or two. I have learned

to focus on the positive when it arises, so it can fuel me for the day. These are the ladders that are often overlooked but are essential for one’s mental health: a successful phone conversation home, a tear wiped away when a student becomes injured on the playground, a “thank you” from a staff member or a simple high five from an eighth grader.

As principals, every day is a game of Chutes and Ladders. One cannot avoid the chutes or the ladders; dealing with each one is an essential skill that takes time to develop. A principal’s job is not easy, and statistics show the burnout rate is

significant. As a new principal, I have discovered writing down each chute and ladder daily allows me to leave each day behind. *Look for that ladder the next time you feel like your day is full of chutes!*

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Legal Corner

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- **Ensuring documentation** and follow-through of all reports.
- **Consulting with** district administrators or counsel when in doubt.

Final Considerations

The laws governing mandatory reporting reflect a clear and unwavering policy: **protect the child and**

act immediately. Courts and administrative agencies have made it clear that the threshold for reporting is **reasonable suspicion**, not certainty.

Erring on the side of caution is always the right decision. Encourage your team to do the same and never hesitate to make a ChildLine or Title IX report when concerns arise. ■



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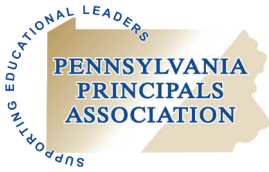
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