

Introduction

Because I teach in a university educational leadership program, I spend much of my time talking with aspiring principals and other school leaders about the role of the principal in creating effective schools for today's children. Without a doubt, we all agree that the principal is the catalyst for this success or failure. Yet, at the same time, we recognize the difficulty of this important position. Hardly a day goes by that we don't hear at least one of the following concerns about the job of the principal:

- Too stressful
- Too much time is involved and too little time left over for the principal's own family
- Too difficult to satisfy parents and the community
- Too much emphasis on testing
- Too much litigation
- Too difficult to focus on instruction due to societal problems, and, of course,
- Too little pay

In fact, Mertz (1999) reported that principals said the job "involved more work, more pressure and frustration, greater demands, and more responsibilities than even when they assumed the position" (p. 17).

On the other hand, effective principals remind us that this is a job to love. When the role of the principal is successful, principals have rich, fulfilling experiences

xxviii Best Practices of Award-Winning Elementary Principals

- Helping children
- Assisting families
- Supporting teachers
- Strengthening the community
- Contributing to making the world a better place

Toward helping principals have positive experiences, many states have mandated mentor programs, universities have emphasized standards such as NCATE, ISLLC, and ELCC, and countless journal articles, books, and resources have been produced that detail effective practices.

With the goal of contributing to a strong foundation of support for new principals, struggling principals, and principals who are just in need of one more good idea, I began to wonder what principals who have been recognized for being the very best would say when asked about their most important best practices. So I e-mailed, telephoned, and wrote letters to elementary principals who were recognized for their success as principals. Responses included National Distinguished Principal award winners, principals of Blue Ribbon Schools, and other recognized principals. These award-winning elementary school principals shared many of the “best practices” that have helped build effective elementary schools. Principals who contributed to this book lead public and private schools in a variety of settings throughout the United States. Their schools represent an array of diverse populations in regard to location, socioeconomics, ethnicity, learning styles, and other differences.

Award-winning principals’ best practice ideas focused on the following categories:

- Leadership
- Shaping campus culture
- Collaborating and communicating
- Effective instructional programs
- School improvement plans
- At-risk programs

In addition, many of these successful principals added other helpful hints, as well as brief words of wisdom. They also suggested books, which have been compiled in a recommended reading list in Chapter 9.

In addition to learning about best practices, it is also important that principals be reflective. In fact, a valuable activity for principals is to reflect on experiences of the school day every day. It is this process of reflection that contributes to trying out new ideas and affirming or changing processes, programs, and behaviors. Reflection leads to critical self-inspection of personal and professional actions, which leads to self-correction. This is an ongoing process with effective leaders at all levels. As you read through these ideas, reflect on your school. Identify areas where your school is strong. But also identify those areas where there is a need. Which ideas in these chapters would be most helpful to your campus? Write these ideas down; then consider how you can implement them in your school. How might the ideas need to be revised to be effective on your campus? Questions for reflection are provided at the end of each chapter. Also at the end of each chapter, I have included Web sites for some of the programs or concepts mentioned as a quick resource for gathering additional information.

Effective principals are busy people. Their workday starts early in the morning and often ends late at night. Thomas Edison said, "Results! Why, man, I have gotten a lot of results. I know several thousand things that won't work." The best practice ideas in this book work. They have proven to be successful, and this success has led to these schools and their principals being recognized at state and national levels. To the principals who contributed, thank you for sharing your award-winning best practice ideas to help future award-winning principals.

xxx Best Practices of Award-Winning Elementary Principals

REFERENCE

Mertz, N. (1999). Through their own eyes: Principals look at their jobs. In F. Kochan, B. Jackson, & D. Duke (Eds.), *A thousand voices from the firing line* (pp. 119–139). Columbia, MO: University Council of Educational Administration.