Getting Your Political
BEARINGS

By Jane Owen

Being an instructional leader is important, but no one can be an instructional leader without a job. Political astuteness is key to survival in the principalship. The salient question, of course, is, How do you become politically astute? This process involves learning how to conscientiously and accurately keep a finger on the pulse of the community to discern the changing tides of favor and disfavor, the covert criticisms, and the coalescing groups with a single agenda. Although the political leadership aspect may be less well-defined than the role of instructional leader, there are some basic concepts that can lead to longevity and success in the principal's office.

Getting the Right Fit

The key to stability on a campus and in a district is the amorphous concept of "fit." Does the principal fit in with the stakeholders? Administrators need not be identical to the other members of the community, but there must be an alignment of philosophy, priorities, power, and personality that will enable the principal to lead the community and the school to a higher level. The essential subsets of being fit for a position are defined by:

- Philosophy: what educational outcomes are stakeholders seeking?
- Priorities: which educational activities are deemed important and which are deemed superfluous?
- Power: will the community, represented by the board of trustees, be willing to grant authority to an expert in the field—and will the expertise be valued?
- Personality: is the principal an individual who can get along with the stakeholders as they are, not as he or she wishes they were?

Exploring fitness should begin in the interview process when an aspiring principal carefully assesses the district and the community to ascertain whether this job is right for him or her. In their desire to obtain the new position, even veteran principals can forget that the cordial, welcoming selection panel may not be accurately reflecting the community's values, which may not be the same as the candidate's.

Philosophy and Educational Priorities

A school is embedded in and owned by its community. A community employs a principal to provide the education it desires for the next generation. Each decision a principal makes must first be vetted in light of personal philosophy and then in light of the culture of the community.

Principals must learn to negotiate matters of preference and hold firm on only a few matters of principle. Every administrator should formulate a short list of nonnegotiable principles—the hills he or she is willing to die on. Which issues are negotiable and which are not is a topic for discussion

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during the interview process. The non-negotiables will vary from principal to principal, but the list should include only the few closely held beliefs and values that cannot be compromised.

For example, if the community puts athletics before curriculum or believes that a general all-purpose curriculum with a strong emphasis on vocational classes is preferable to the wide array of AP and honors classes that the principal prefers, difficult decisions will have to be made. If compromise isn't possible, the principal has three choices: mount an intensive education effort to bring the community around to his or her way of thinking, cave in to community pressure, or leave the school.

Power

The constant interaction of politics, power, and conflict are as much a part of the educational organization as are academics, athletics, and kids. Principals must establish policies that respect the community's wishes and values and at the same time steer them toward sound education principles (Jackson, 1995). To be both servant and guide to the community, a principal must be acutely aware of four political indicators of school-community interactions: the type of community; the type of school board; the type of school; and the role of education in the community (Glickman, 1993). A clear understanding of these characteristics will enable the principal to manage conflict as well as use it constructively to facilitate communication and encourage reform (Kowalski, 2006).

Type of Community

Communities can be categorized according to size, relationship to the school, socioeconomic status, educa-tion level, power structure, heterogeneity, and mobility. Although every community has unique qualities, some generalizations can be drawn about school-community relationships on the basis of the size and location of the community. In smaller communities, social activities revolve around the school, the community's calendar is set to accommodate school events, and the principal is a very public figure. When a school is such an integral part of the community, stakeholders feel that they have a legitimate voice in how the school is managed. Principals must listen carefully to community members' advice, validate their concerns, concede to their wishes when possible, and carefully explain when concessions cannot be made. Honoring the community's wishes and culture whenever possible is advisable, even if change initiatives take longer. The stakeholders must be prepared before institutionalized change can occur.

In larger communities, the conditions can be much different. In a district with multiple high schools, one principal will not be such a public figure. Parents will be involved and advocate on their children's behalf, but there is more competition for stakeholders' attention. The downside is that it may be more difficult to attract and hold stakeholder support.

McCarty and Ramsey (1971) identified four types of community power: dominated, factional, pluralistic, and inert. Each of these types reflects the power distribution in the community and its effect on the school:

- A dominated power structure is demonstrated by a small group of prominent stakeholders who guide the direction of education, and the school board is heavily influenced by this group. As long as the power structure does not shift, this type of community is relatively easy to manage because the priorities are clear.

- A factional community is characterized by a balance between two interest groups of approximately equal strength. A factional community is a dangerous place to be. Principals must work carefully with both sides to maintain allegiance as the winds of power favor first one group and then the other. A factional community demands politics at its best.

- A pluralistic power structure is seen in the community with numerous groups who have conflicting interests. Generally, the more interests that are vocalized, the more difficult it is to lead a school. This community requires a principal who can move fluidly among groups, build coalitions, and make few promises until all issues are carefully examined. The pluralistic community favors a principal who is visible, pleasant, and willing to spend evenings mingling at community events.

- An inert community shows little interest in the activities of the school; the power structure is loose and unfocused. On the surface, a prinicpalship in an inert community can appear to be a dream job. The stakeholders do not seem to be paying much attention and the educators are free to do what they feel is best. But even the most inert community can rise up with a vengeance if school policies diverge too far from the community's culture. The fact that the community is silent does not mean it isn't watching. Principals must provide

avenues for community input, demand participation from all segments of the community, and spend much time and energy crafting a school that meets the desires of an uninvolved community.

School boards can be major forces for preserving a community's philosophy of education and operate to maintain the status quo. Such boards want principals who will respond to stakeholders who have control. Other boards seek educational expertise to inform their decisions and look to educators for guidance.

Although members of the school board do not directly interact with a principal as much as a superintendent, it is good practice for a principal to keep the superintendent between him- or herself and the board. Board member contacts, requests, and even friendly visits to the school are red flags, and most superintendents will want to be notified immediately. The one exception to this occurs in very small districts when it is impossible to avoid school board contact simply by virtue of the fact that everyone knows everyone else.

Another important indicator is whether a school is open or closed to the community. An open school has active parent groups, volunteer workers, parent newsletters, and extensive interaction with the constituency. Sergiovanni (1994) identified such a school as *Gemeinschaft* (community)—one that embraces team building, values people as individuals of equal worth, encourages partnerships with the community, and strives to create a familylike structure. On the other hand, a closed school—a *Gesellschaft* (society) organization— runs on rules and contracts instead of common beliefs and understand-

ask yourself

- How do educators make meaning of the political messages directed toward the schools?

- How do the political messages become translated into educational policies and procedures?

- How are the internal organizational structures of the public schools influenced by the political pressures from the environment?

Source: Crowson as cited in Owen, J. (2006). The impact of politics in local education: Navigating white water. *Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.*

ing, de-emphasizes relationships, and focuses primarily on the task at hand, which leads to isolation instead of camaraderie, impersonal acquaintances instead of warm relationships, and disconnect instead of collegiality. It takes a substantial outlay of time and emotional resources to build a *Gemeinschaft* environment, especially if the framework does not exist.

Another political indicator is the school's role in local education. There are three identified roles—delegate, trustee, and politico (Mann, 1976)— that are made visible by the actions of the administrator. If a principal chooses a delegate role, the wishes of the constituency will be honored in every case. A school that functions in a trustee position pursues a vision of providing the best education possible for the students in its care. The school that embraces a politico position will strive to balance community interests with educational interests. Whether to be a delegate, a trustee, or a politico can be determined by community stance and the principal's list of nonnegotiables. Prudence dictates moving fluidly from one position to the next, depending on the issue and the interest it has aroused.

The role of the school in the community must mirror the community's ultimate purpose for education: simply put, to preserve the community, to maintain the status quo, and to highlight that control is in the hands of the stakeholders or to prepare students to take their places in a global society, to give them options, and to expose them to different ways of thinking.

Personality

The overarching question when discussing educational leadership and success in the principalship is whether or not there is a "leader" personality. The trait theories of leadership focus on personal qualities that differentiate leaders from followers (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991). The attribution theory states that leadership is merely a designation that individuals make about other individuals who possess intelligence, outgoing personality, strong verbal skills, aggressiveness, understanding, and industriousness (Lord, DeVader, & Alliger, 1986). Shared leadership, embedded leadership, and servant leadership shift the focus away from the positional leader—the principal—and toward those who populate the organization. Distributed leadership, such as site-based management, has become a well-respected method of organizational management and is even mandated by law in several states.

But an investigation of educational leadership research and literature returns again and again to the fact that leadership is situational. Situational leadership theory, a model developed by Hersey and Blanchard (1974), states that successful leadership is a blend of the leader's relationship to the followers and their ability to do their given task. Until one knows the

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situation, the followers, and their abilities, one cannot even begin to lead them.

It all depends on fit—whether the principal can fit into the community and lead education forward without alienating the stakeholders. Principals in large suburban campuses and rural K–12 campuses and in poor neighborhoods and elite neighborhoods must know how to maintain a personal philosophy and keep priorities straight, read the community and manage the politics, and relate to the constituents in a way that builds trust and respect. **PL**

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