

role of the principal

Coaching vital to quality leadership

School principals play an integral role in the education of California's children. Their job responsibilities are multi-faceted, but what, exactly, do they do? What are the challenges they face? This three-part series, reprinted from EdCal, the official newspaper of the Association of California School Administrators, takes a close look at the job of the school principal today and what it takes to lead a school to success.



Wes Smith, principal of Anderson Middle School in Cascade Union ESD, says coaching has given him insight into what the job really takes.

Difficult job; big rewards

The job of the school principal has changed drastically over the years. Today, principals wear many hats. They are curriculum experts, chief financial officers, disciplinarians, health and safety officers and community liaisons all rolled into one.

The numerous responsibilities can be a deterrent to those considering a career in site administration. As a result, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find qualified candidates to lead California schools.

But despite the long hours, the stress and the increased public scrutiny, the job is still as rewarding as ever, and it is up to practicing administrators to get the word out that the pros do indeed outweigh the cons.

One way to do this is through leadership coaching. In fact, leadership coaching is often the only way to shed light on what the job is really all about. This, in turn, can encourage teachers to take the next step up the career ladder.

Such was the case for ACSA's Wes Smith, principal of Anderson Middle School in the Cascade Union Elementary School District. He cred-

its coaching with giving him insight into what the job really takes, and how worthwhile it is.

"Leadership coaching is a passion of mine because I see what it can do," Smith said. "If we can coach leaders and help them be successful, we show them that the job is not only doable but rewarding. Challenging, but rewarding."

Smith, who serves on ACSA's Leadership Coaching Task Force as well as the state Equity, Achievement and Diversity for Success Committee, had only been in the classroom for four years before beginning his career in administration.

As a high school teacher, he had no experience at the elementary or middle school levels when he was recruited for the principalship at Anderson Middle School. He calls then-superintendent Barry Reed a "visionary" for hiring him and several other new principals with no leadership experience but plenty of potential.

"I was young and inexperienced, but the superintendent had faith in my abilities and hired me," said Smith, who was himself appointed superintendent of Cascade UESD,



effective July 1, just days before EdCal went to press.

To help prepare his protégés for the job ahead, Reed hired a retired superintendent to serve as leadership coach. This was a crucial step in their success, as it provided them with a valuable resource to ask questions and seek advice, Smith said.

“That first year, that assistance changed my career and allowed me to be successful,” he said. “While induction programs are necessary, they don’t answer the day-to-day questions.”

Smith said he is a first-hand example of why leadership coaching is necessary to combat the shortage of qualified administrators. Without it, the future of administration – and education – is dire.

“Nothing could be more catastrophic than having all these inexperienced people come on the job. We have to teach them to be effective, otherwise we’ll send the profession into a tailspin,” he said. “There is a huge need and an overwhelming interest. More people would not only get involved, but enjoy educational leadership.”

Worth the challenge

While Smith certainly enjoys his job as an educational leader, it is not without its challenges. The myriad responsibilities can be overwhelming, but well worth the effort.

One of the greatest challenges Smith has faced is changing the public perception of the school. Having attended the school himself as a child, Smith recalls Anderson was a source of pride for the community, and parents wanted to send their children there. But the nearby lumber mill closed, changing the demographics, and 25 years later, the school’s glory days had passed. So Smith took on the role of public relations specialist, getting the word out about all the good work going on in the classroom.

“I had to help the community see what’s right with the school, rather than the few things that are wrong with the school,” he said.

Smith focused his efforts on the pride and joy of Anderson: the Performing Arts Academy and the Anderson Middle School Band, of which half of all students are involved.

“We’re trying to build that source of pride,” he said.

The job of the school principal is never ending. Although Smith writes himself a “to-do” list every day, it is rare that he completes everything on that list. “The work is never done. There’s always something to be done and you have to be OK with that. You have to learn to prioritize,” he said.

In addition to his “official” duties, a large part of Smith’s day, as with most principals, is putting out fires. For example, two vehicles carrying students to an out-of-town band event were recently involved in a car accident, upturning the day’s schedule. “The job is so diverse and it can be overwhelming,” he said.

But at Anderson Middle School, as at many schools across the state, often the most troubling work has little to do with the school itself. Family life, such as poor nutrition and homelessness, often has the greatest impact on student learning. “We know we can help students at school, but if they don’t get it at home, it doesn’t have much of an impact,” Smith said.

Smith spends a large part of his day interacting with students. He greets them as they arrive in the morning, which helps assure parents that their children are safe. Every day, he’s met with a long line in the office of both students and parents with questions and concerns, and he rarely returns to his office without a blinking light on his phone.

“Our job is all about people,” he said. “The more time you spend with people, the more successful you’ll be.”

It is working with people that attracted Smith to the job in the first place. He said working on a team and leading others is the highlight of his job. He said his leadership style is such that he doesn’t tell others what to do, or find solutions for them. Instead, he challenges them to think it out themselves.

“The way to empower people is to encourage them to think for themselves and to find their own solutions,” he said. “The job is everything I expected and more because I love leadership. This is a great profession. I can’t think of anything I’d rather do.”

Recruiting principals a growing challenge

Long hours, high stress, low pay: It’s no wonder it’s getting more and more difficult to find qualified principals to lead California’s schools.

The shortage of qualified principal candidates is real. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reports a 10 percent increase in the number of openings for elementary and secondary school administrators between 2004 and 2010.

The bottom line is fewer teachers are leaving the classroom for administrative posts. At the same time, many in the current pool of practicing administrators are reaching retirement age, leaving more and more positions open. In fact, a 2002 survey conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals revealed 66 percent are planning to retire within 10 years.

But why the diminishing interest in school leadership? The reasons are myriad, but not surprising: The job requires long days, night and weekend work and year-round work. The compensation is not commensurate with the level of responsibility. Salaries for new principals are just a fraction higher or even less, considering the average daily pay rate, than veteran teachers.

According to a still valid 1998 survey conducted by NAESP and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the top three discouraging factors cited by respondents were insufficient compensation compared to the high level of responsibility at 58 percent, too much time required of the job at 25 percent, and the high level of stress at 23 percent.

The stress has been made

worse in recent years by increasing accountability for school leaders. Policymakers have placed greater pressure on principals through current law, including the federal No Child Left Behind Act, to hold principals responsible for their low performing schools. Sanctions under some accountability programs even include firing principals whose students fail to meet certain performance levels.

If the shortage of qualified principal candidates is serious, the shortage of qualified principal candidates of color is downright dire. While the number of principals of color has increased over the last few decades, there is still a wide chasm between the cultural and racial backgrounds of school leaders and the students they serve. In fact, in 2004-05, nearly 69 percent of students in California were non-white. But the same year, only 30 percent of school administrators were non-white, according to the California Department of Education.

Former ACSA president Sonny Da Marto, superintendent of the Burlingame Elementary School District, is one of many district leaders facing difficulty in filling vacant positions. In the mid-1980s, while working at neighboring San Mateo-Foster City Elementary School District, he would receive as many as 70 applications for one vacancy. Now, he's lucky to receive 10.

"All the positions are tough to fill, and some are nearly impossible," he said.

In the past, Da Marto had his choice of highly qualified, experienced candidates. But now, many applicants have no experience in school administration at all.

Reasons for the dwindling applicant pool are varied, but in Burlingame, as in many areas of California, one of the contributing factors is the high cost of living – the pay simply can't keep up with the expense of relocating.

"We've tried to make our salaries and benefits packages as competitive as possible for administrators, but there's not a lot we can do because we're not a wealthy district," Da Marto said.

But, as in most districts, one of

Find the good and praise it



Principal Lilli Rollins of Jesse Bethel High School in Vallejo USD shares a moment with some of her "scholars" during the course of the schoolday.

Diversity leads to success

Students must be recognized for their accomplishments in order to reach their full potential. No school or student is without strengths, and highlighting these strengths only encourages students to do better.

Such is the belief of ACSA's Lilli Rollins, principal of Jesse Bethel High School in the

Vallejo Unified School District, who operates under the motto "find the good and praise it." She truly believes that a good leader is one who focuses on the positive to keep both students and staff excited about the work they're doing. "I want to highlight the good things going on in our school," she

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the biggest reasons for the lack of qualified candidates is that fewer are entering the profession. This, Da Marto said, is due to the fact that the job of the school leader is not the same as it once was.

"It's a lot more complicated than it was 20 years ago," he said. "There are a lot fewer people coming out of the classroom and into administration."

One solution in the Burlingame district has been to nurture potential candidates from within. That effort has been successful, but it still leaves the district with a number of inexperienced site leaders.

"When they come in as administrators they're brand new, and some sites require experienced principals," Da Marto said.

The ultimate solution is to

spread the word on how great the job can be, and how important it is to the future of education. ACSA's Leadership Matters project does just that.

"We should tell folks how important leadership is. We should tell our stories," Da Marto said.

Many people enter education to make a difference. Da Marto said he became a teacher to make a difference, but soon realized instead of affecting the lives of just one class, as a principal he could affect the lives of a whole school. Then he realized as a district leader, he could affect the lives of an entire district.

"I went into education because I thought I could make a difference," he said. "As an administrator, you have the ability to really make a difference."

said.

One of the positives at Jesse Bethel school is its diversity. The 1,500-student school is about a third African American, a third Filipino and a third Hispanic, Asian and white. Students and staff take great pride in their diversity. There are a number of ethnic clubs on campus, ranging from the Japanese Club to the African American Students of Honor and Excellence. All clubs work together to host a variety of activities, including multi-cultural assemblies and holiday events featuring costumes, performances and food.

Rollins said highlighting the diverse cultures and backgrounds of students is important in this state because it mirrors the real world, and it gives students pride in who they are. "My school is what California is becoming, what California is," she said.

The school is also socio-economically diverse, with a great divide between low-income and high-income students. "It's one extreme or the other. It's a wide span," Rollins said.

The income gap is actually quite beneficial to the students of Jesse Bethel, as it provides balance and diversity among the student population and for the most part, students get along.

"It provides an excellent social education as well as an academic education," Rollins said. "I've learned through the years that the more you involve students, the less trouble you have on campus."

Rollins, who came to Jesse Bethel in 2004, said the key to success is to hold all students to the same high expectations and to push them to meet those expectations. Even taking little steps to change perception makes a big difference – for example, Rollins refers to her students as "scholars," where before they were just kids.

"It gives them confidence that they can succeed at life," she said.

Taking on a diverse school such as Jesse Bethel presented new challenges for Rollins. One of the greatest challenges has been trying to make a difference in stu-

dent achievement, especially after working as an assistant principal in a high-performing district in Marin County, which averaged an 800 API.

Now, at Jesse Bethel, the slightest improvement is monumental. This year, for example, the API grew 20 points, to 665.

"I'm really proud of that," Rollins said. "We're getting there."

Progress at Jesse Bethel is also evident in the number of students going on to college, something that before was only a pipedream for many students.

"More students this year were accepted to colleges across the country," Rollins said. "For some students, they didn't ever think about the reality of college before."

Leadership

Rollins said a quality leader is one who models appropriate behavior for staff and students. This sets the tone for the entire school.

"A principal is the guiding leadership of such principles as respect, responsibility, honesty, compassion and perseverance, which should be embedded in the school culture," Rollins said.

Rollins said she has never been a top-down leader and instead works hand-in-hand with staff to help guide the school's success. She involves the entire team, and ensures everyone is on the same page.

"I believe in shared decision-making," she said. "Leadership is the responsibility of everyone."

A good principal, Rollins said, is one who sets goals, develops a clear vision and makes sure all players know what is expected of them as they strive to meet those goals.

"A good leader motivates people to want to follow them. Leadership means getting people to buy into your ideas," she said.

To do this successfully, principals must establish trust and build strong relationships with those around them. Simple things, such as celebrating birthdays for staff, can go a long way.

"It helps build bridges of trust with staff," she said. "Strengthen-

ing relationships is a worthwhile effort to bring relevance to education."

Establishing relationships with students is also important. Every day, Rollins spends time walking the hallways, saying hello to her "scholars," chatting them up to keep up to date on the latest school gossip. At the same time, she sneaks in her words of wisdom.

"I enjoy talking to students, and I can pitch my sound doctrine," she said.

Career coaching

Leadership coaching was vital to Rollins in her climb up the career ladder. Throughout the years, a fellow teacher who began her educational career at the same time encouraged Rollins to continue on.

"I was complacent with being a teacher. But she saw my potential and encouraged me to enter administration," Rollins said. "She played a major part of me being where I am today. It's not what she said or what she did but how she made me feel."

Rollins said her experience over the years prepared her to take on the role of high school principal. Previously, she worked as assistant principal at San Marin High School in the Novato Unified School District and assistant principal at Armijo High School in the Fairfield Suisun Unified School District.

"If I had not had my years of preparation, I would have been in shock," she said. "I had been preparing for a number of years to become principal of a high school."

Although she initially wanted to become a social worker, Rollins always knew she was meant to help people, and entering the field of education allowed her to do just that.

"I've always wanted to give back to kids," she said. "I enjoy being around young people."

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Respecting the individual

There are many characteristics that make a quality school leader, but one of the most important is the ability to forge strong relationships with others. In fact, the ability to work together with all players on the educational team is vital to school and student success.

Such is the case for ACSA's Luis Valentino, principal of Evelyn Thurman Gratts Elementary School in the Los Angeles Unified School District. He said not working together and respecting each individual's unique contributions is counterproductive to the end goal of academic excellence.

"It leaves out a lot of the human element," he said.

Instead, Valentino appreciates the creativity and self-expression brought to the table by each member of his staff. He believes as a leader, his job is to lay the foundation and encourage his staff to do what they need to do to get the job done.

"It's about creating boundaries for all of us and allowing extensive freedom within those boundaries," he said.

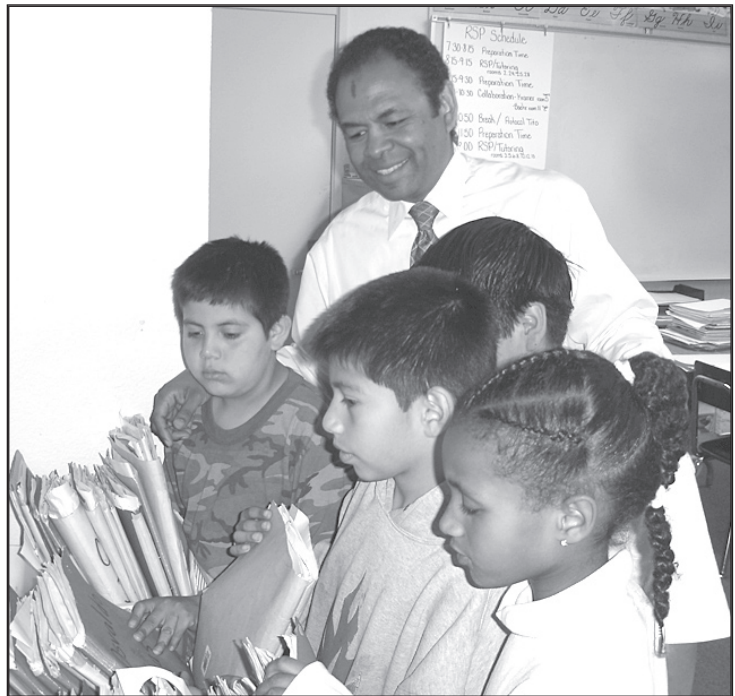
Valentino, who became principal of Gratts School in 2000, truly believes that giving staff the freedom to operate on their own and respecting them as the professionals they are is the best way to ensure a quality education for children. It lets staff know that each and every one of them is personally responsible for the outcome.

"I try to create an environment of trust, support and nurturing, but one that is also demanding," he said. "I allow teachers to take risks and make mistakes. I empower them to become leaders in the school and community... They are professionals and they have a strong sense of ownership of their work."

Relationships have been vital in Valentino's personal success. If not for the support and encouragement of supervisors and colleagues throughout the years, he would not be where he is today. "Coaching and mentoring has been essential," he said.

In fact, Valentino is continuing those efforts as a protégé in the California Association of Latino Superintendents and

Human element key to leadership



Administrators Mentoring Program. As a member of the program, Valentino is paired with Compton Unified School District Superintendent Jesse Gonzales, a member of ACSA's Urban Education Committee, who provides him with an inside look at the superintendency.

"All of it has given me great insight, but it's a tall order," Valentino said.

Becoming an elementary school principal was also a tall order for Valentino before he began at Gratts. Although he had worked as an assistant principal in the past, he had more recently been a faculty member and lecturer at the University of California at Los Angeles and California State University, Los Angeles, and wasn't sure he wanted to return to K-12.

"At first I didn't want to do it because I knew it was a challenge," he said.

But it was because it was a challenge that Valentino decided to take the job. He said he took it on out of selfishness, because he wanted to see whether he could successfully apply the research he studied at the post-secondary level to make a difference in the classroom.

"I needed to determine whether things I learned could play out in the school site," he said.

Valentino soon realized what he had gotten himself into. With nearly 1,000 students, Gratts had high gang activity, a 17 percent transient rate and 10 percent homeless population. "I didn't know if as an assistant principal I could handle a school

Luis Valentino accepted the challenge of the principalship so he could apply his post-secondary knowledge to make a difference in the classroom.

“If we can coach leaders and help them be successful, we show them that the job is not only doable but rewarding.”

Wes Smith
Cascade UESD

of that size,” he said. “I got myself into a challenging situation, but one that I had to take on.”

On top of the socio-economic challenges, Valentino also had to face academic challenges. His first day as principal, he found out Gratts, the second lowest performing school in the district, was eligible for the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program.

“I didn’t even know what that was,” he said. “All this was happening and I was trying to learn about the school and the community.”

Knowing relationships with the greater educational community are essential to student success, Valentino set out to improve those connections. What he learned was that many parents felt disassociated from the school, and he set out to reverse that.

“When I arrived, they were clear what they wanted. They wanted to be involved,” he said. “So I tried to build stronger relationships with the community.”

Valentino also took a close look at his teaching staff. With 50 percent turnover, 65 percent of teachers on emergency credentials and most with less than four years of experience, Valentino knew he had to improve his instructional staff and expand professional development.

“There was a reason why we were performing so poorly,” he said, noting that none of the 24 original teachers are still at the school. “Not everyone working here was right for the job.”

So far, Valentino’s efforts have been successful. From 2001-03, the school’s Academic Performance Index jumped from 375 to 600. It wasn’t always easy, but it was well worth the effort.

“It’s taken a lot of work,” he said.

Under Valentino’s leadership, Gratts Elementary School has made significant progress. But there’s still much to do, and Valentino will continue to strengthen ties with the school community and staff to ensure students achieve to their fullest potential.

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