

Introduction

The greatest compliment that was ever paid to me was when someone asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.

—Henry David Thoreau
(as cited in Blaydes, 2003, p. 176)

Being a principal in the 21st century is a challenge. To qualify for the job, principals need to be visionaries, instructional leaders, curriculum specialists, technology experts, disciplinarians, facility managers, budget analysts, community representatives, politicians, counselors, public relations experts, testing gurus, legal analysts, policy writers, and mediators. And don't forget, they need to know something about educating children, too. Along with all of these responsibilities, today's schools are rated from exemplary to unacceptable based on the results of mandated one-size-fits-all standardized tests. Consequently, it seems that nearly every day, the media reports about our failing public schools, and the "blame game" is in full swing as everyone seeks to find fault for failing schools. Many times, principals end up in this "hot seat" when they are told that if a school does not achieve a certain rating, they will be reassigned, if not terminated from the job altogether. To make things even harder, more children than ever before are enrolled in our schools—nearly 48,000,000 students in U.S. public schools and 6,000,000 in our private, independent schools! That is a lot of blame for principals to bear.

Is it possible that in our zeal to educate all of America's children and educate them well, our criticism is out of balance? Is it possible that although our schools have room for improvement, good things are still happening in them? Can it be that we are so busy finding fault with what is not working, we are failing to notice what is working? Maybe Mark Twain was on to something when he quipped, "Schools ain't what they used to be—but they never were" (as cited in Blaydes, 2003, p. 130).

xxvi Best Practices of Award-Winning Secondary School Principals

We know that successful school leaders have a strong influence on student achievement as they support and develop effective teachers and as they implement effective organizational processes (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). Consistently, research for effective schools has found that principals of these schools have common behaviors. For example, they

- are assertive instructional leaders,
- are goal and task oriented,
- delegate responsibility to others,
- communicate high expectations for all,
- define and communicate school policies clearly,
- are visible,
- support good teaching, and
- build strong relationships with parents and the community (Robinson, 1985).

This list identifies much of what effective principals do and often what we look for when identifying strong principals.

Despite what the media would have us believe, you and I know that great principals are leading effective schools throughout our nation. I teach in an educational leadership preparation program, and every day I see and talk with hard-working, effective principals who are leading strong schools for today's children. They are all around us. In addition, every year, organizations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) and National Association of Elementary School Principals recognize these principals for their successful school leadership.

How do these effective principals know what best practices to use? Many times, they select programs and strategies based on what research has identified as effective. Other times, they choose a strategy based on what they have seen be successful for others, and sometimes, they listen to their own "inner compass" and select practices intuitively based on what they feel their school needs. This book is a qualitative study that asks the question: What best practices are principals who have been recognized for their leadership implementing on their campuses? To identify these strategies, I e-mailed, faxed, telephoned, and wrote letters to secondary school principals who were recognized for their success. I asked them to describe the practices that they attributed to their success and to the success of their school. In other words, what did award-winning principals consider their best practices at their schools?

The 34 principals, representing MetLife/NASSP State Principal award winners, Blue Ribbon Schools award winners, and other recognized principals who contributed best practices to this book lead public and private schools in a variety of settings all across the United States. Their schools represent an array of diverse populations, ethnicities, learning styles, and other differences. Although the practices submitted rarely fit neatly into just one category, and all represented various examples of leadership, I categorized them into the following chapters:

- Leadership
- Shaping Campus Culture
- Communicating for Collaboration
- Curriculum and Instruction
- School Improvement Plans
- Personalizing the Learning Environment for All

Chapter 7 is a compilation of principals' brief words of wisdom, and Chapter 8 is a complete resource of books principals consider "must reads."

At the end of Chapters 1 through 6, I have included a brief summary of the award-winning practices principals shared. By glancing at the practices in each summary box, the reader can get a quick picture of best practices that worked for these principals.

Also at the end of Chapters 1 through 6, I have included questions to encourage reflection. Learning about best practices is important, but the challenge does not end there. For these practices to be implemented in our schools, the next step is reflection. Reflection helps principals think through new ideas and consider how they will work in their school and how they might need to be revised or restructured. This ongoing process contributes to the successful implementation of many of these ideas. As you read through the ideas, consider your own school. Identify areas in which your school is strong and areas in which you are strong. Then, identify areas of weakness. 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. Will they need to be revised to be most effective at your school?

Finally, the chapters conclude with a list of resources to help readers gather extra information about interesting ideas that were mentioned from the Internet.

Of course, it is true that not all schools are doing some things well. Recognizing that, it is our responsibility to improve them. But who should

provide that help? One obvious resource is to seek support from the best of the best themselves, those who are recognized as effective principals. The best practices in this book are strategies, programs, ideas, and suggestions from those who have been recognized as award winners. As award-winning principal Lyman Goding told me, "We do not call them 'best practices,' we call them 'successful practices,' because there are so many great and successful ideas." So don't let the title *Best Practices* fool you into thinking that one size fits all! The word *best* suggests that there is only one way, but the principals who contributed to this book submitted a variety of strategies and ideas that have proven successful in their schools. Rarely are these earth-shattering, radical new ideas that lead to a new concept of leadership. Instead, most often, they redirect and refocus us to what is important and what is proven to work. It is our hope that in this collection, principals everywhere will find ideas, strategies, and best practices that will help them be successful in leading their schools to be the best they can be!

Principals sit in the hot seat every day. If they must accept much of the blame when something does not work, they should accept the praise when it does. To the award-winning principals who contributed to this project, thank you for sharing your award-winning best practice ideas.

REFERENCES

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