

A NEW PRINCIPAL LEARNS WHAT IT TAKES TO SURVIVE THE STORM

When I arrived at Freedom Hill Elementary School in a driving rainstorm two years ago to be introduced as the new building principal, my umbrella would not open on the way into the building. I got drenched. What a fitting sign — with a professional staff of more than 100 adults and a student body of 500 children, I was feeling underprepared and overwhelmed. The skills and knowledge I had gained over 25 years as a teacher would need to be completely retooled, much like my umbrella. Honestly, I feared that I would be



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a failure. However, my mentors and my wife listened and reminded me to hold tight to my mission. A former principal told me to approach every decision thinking of what was best for the students and my decisions would be good ones.

I knew the job would be demanding. There was a collar of responsibility wrapped tightly around my neck that was heavier than I had imagined. Suddenly I was “the boss” and very challenged and lonely. Ultimately, I was responsible for the actions of more than 500 students and 100 staff members. People came to me for answers about curriculum, personal leave, interpretation of special education law, staff development, personnel conflicts, funding, assessment, and student behavior. As a teacher, I worked toward a goal that teachers would lead the school forward, and as a principal, I believe it is the teachers who can best lead us forward. Yet as the principal, I realized people were watching me like hungry hawks — how would the new principal respond to conflicts, issues,

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and pressure? Frequently, I woke up at 2 a.m. and thought about our school, working out solutions in my sleepless brain.

I was thrust into a world of powerful adult stakeholders. I learned that sometimes I needed to negotiate a compromise and sometimes I had to stand my ground. I had not imagined the variety and number of people I would come to know: all of the elementary school staff plus school board members, PTA officers, high school principals, business partners, central office staff, neighbors of the school property, and many others. I learned new relationship skills, such as gaining the trust of staff and facilitating inclusive relationships between the professional staff and our parent community.

I tried to ask the right questions to support my learning and to encourage those with whom I work to reflect on their practices. My focus was to listen, care, be present, model professionalism, and believe in the good work of our children and teachers. My learning came from many sources. I turned to the expertise of Rick DuFour as we looked to support growth through a professional learning community. He writes about asking grade-level teams for specific products like quarterly plans and common assessments. When I recently lost a teacher I interviewed to another school, I called the principal to ask him how he “stole” a great teacher. He talked about knowing when an interview candidate would be a good fit for your school. And as I walked around the 16 construction trailers on school property, overseeing the renovation of our school, I learned what I needed to know from our contractor. One of my teachers asked, “When you took the job, did you know you would be managing a major construction project?” You learn to expect the unexpected as a principal.

Now as I sit at my desk early in the mornings, I feel a great, positive energy, thanks to the actions and words of children and adults in my school. My mission is to increase individual teacher efficacy. I strive to spend more time in classrooms getting to know our teachers and how they help our students learn. I want to guide and inspire our teachers to teach like Rafe Esquith writes about in *Teach Like Your Hair's On Fire* (Viking, 2007). But I still remain overwhelmed by the responsibility of the position. Fortunately, my wife reminds me that my umbrella is just fine — I will remain focused on our students even through the intense rainstorm. ■