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SHARPENING THE SAW: HOW TO BE A LIFELONG LEARNER WHILE LEADING A SCHOOL

Article by Bob Steffes, PhD

Abstract

School administrators are currently faced with increased responsibilities and expectations as a result of escalating state and federal mandates. As a result, administrators need to learn new skills and acquire additional knowledge in a variety of areas such as curriculum and instruction, data analysis, assessment, and diverse classrooms. Unfortunately, while these demands intensify, budgets are tightening and making it difficult to engage in quality professional development. Finding the time, motivation and finances necessary to be a life-long learner continue to be a challenge. With his Seventh Habit of “Sharpen the Saw,” Stephen Covey (1989) warns of letting our minds atrophy after leaving the discipline of formal education, and the critical importance of “continually honing and expanding the mind” (p. 295). This article will highlight effective ways for administrators to continually engage in life-long learning to meet the increasing demands of the job, in spite of limited time and budgets.

Over the years, researchers have identified school principals as among the most influential individuals linked to improved student achievement (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013; Edmonds, 1982; Hechinger Report, 2011; Lezotte, 1999; Sergiovanni & Greene, 2015). Increased responsibilities and expectations as a result of escalating state and federal mandates are compelling principals to gain new knowledge and enhance current skill sets in areas such as curriculum and instruction, data analysis, assessment, teacher evaluation, and diversity. Unfortunately, while these expectations intensify, budgets are tightening and making it difficult to engage in quality professional development. Finding the time, motivation and finances necessary for a principal to be a lifelong learner continue to be a challenge. With his Seventh Habit of “Sharpen the Saw,” Covey (1989) warned of letting our minds atrophy after leaving the discipline of formal education, and the critical importance of “continually honing and expanding the mind” (p. 295). If principals want to continue to be effective 21st century school leaders, they must expand their minds and become lifelong learners.

The Principalship

As early as 1982, Edmonds (1982) identified principal leadership and the ability to create quality instruction as characteristics of effective schools. Over the years, the characteristics have evolved, but instructional leadership still remains at the top of the list. When discussing the correlates of effective schools, Lezotte predicted in 1999 that the role of a school principal would change from a leader of followers to a leader of leaders.

Over 30 years later, the principal as instructional leader continues to be recognized as a critical aspect of school improvement. Sergiovanni and Green (2015) wrote “principal leadership is the key ingredient in school effectiveness, and it takes a special person to lead a 21st century school” (p. 2). The Hechinger Report (2011) took this a step further stating that 21st century principals cannot be lackluster leaders, and that they must be given a set of skills that can transform a school. Branch, Hanushek, and Rivkin’s (2013) research found that “highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year; ineffective principals lower achievement by the same amount” (para. 3). Branch’s research demonstrated that working to become highly effective must be a priority for every principal.

Increasing Demands

Research has left little doubt regarding the important role principals play in schools. However, the roles of principals have certainly evolved. Ubben, Hughes, and Norris (2017) stated,

The role of the school principal has evolved considerably since the days of the little red school house. Currently, it is cast under the umbrella of school improvement and carries with it enormous moral and ethical challenges to build community among diverse and ever-changing populations. (p. 3)

Rice (2010) pointed out that the job of a principal is complex and multifaceted, and that the level of experience and sense of efficacy are critical aspects of effectiveness. In addition, school administrators are consistently faced with increased responsibilities and expectations as a result of escalating state and federal mandates. In 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which changed how school effectiveness would be measured. The terms “Adequate Yearly Progress,” “Subgroups,” and “Highly Qualified Teacher” quickly became a part of the educational jargon (Editorial Projects, 2015). Then, on December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA essentially replaced NCLB, eliminating some of the earlier requirements and establishing several new expectations (Editorial Projects, 2016).

Even before the new requirements established by ESSA were signed into law, 45 states were already in the process of implementing standards and assessments requiring significant changes in instructional strategies that would ensure deeper levels of understanding for students (ASCD, 2013). At the same time, many states were

implementing new teacher evaluation systems. As a result, it was becoming more and more critical for educators to receive the support and training necessary to address complex new assessments (ASCD, 2013).

Through all of this, as expectations for schools change, pressure on school principals increases and the essential roles and skills of the principal must change. According to Sytcher, Podolsky, and Espinoza (2017) “for principals to lead school wide change, they need to learn how to establish ambitious goals with clear plans for achieving those goals, how to implement a plan for change, and how to garner staff and student ownership in supporting the change” (p. 12). O’Neill (2015), a current senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, pointed out that the principal’s job is becoming increasingly demanding, where each day” brings with it innovations to implement, limited resources to manage, and crises to navigate” (para. 3).

A 2013 survey by MetLife showed that the job of a principal is becoming more and more demanding. Some of the findings from the survey included the following:

- Three-quarters (75%) of principals feel the job has become too complex.
- Seven in 10 (69%) principals say the job responsibilities are not very similar to five years ago.
- Job satisfaction among principals has decreased nine percentage points in less than five years, to 59% very satisfied from 68% very satisfied in 2008.
- Half (48%) of principals feel under great stress several days a week. (p. 5)

There is little doubt that the role of the principal continues to evolve, causing increased responsibility and stress on many in the profession. As the job becomes more demanding, the need to have the knowledge and skills to meet these challenges becomes all the more imperative.

Lifelong Learning

Administrators must become lifelong learners to continually develop new skills and acquire additional knowledge in a variety of areas such as curriculum and instruction, data analysis, assessment, and diverse classrooms. So, what does “Lifelong Learning” mean? Fischer (1996), director of the Center for LifeLong Learning and Design (L3D) at the University of Colorado, Boulder noted that lifelong learning is one of the major challenges for the future of our society. He predicted the need for environments that would support the integration of working and learning and self-directed learning. According to Malone (2014),

Lifelong learning is continuous education and training throughout life, using formal, non-formal, and informal methods of learning, with the objective of improving knowledge,

skills, and competence for personal development or employment. Lifelong learning leads to change, development, and the desire to learn more. (p. 123)

He described the process as the “acquisition of relevant skills, knowledge, and experience” (p. 124). Among his rationale for the undertaking of lifelong learning, Malone pointed out several benefits including creating a purpose and structure to your life, satisfying an innate desire to reach our full potential, the need to constantly upgrade our skills and knowledge, and to maintain our motivation and purpose (2014).

Malone (2014) used the acronym PRACTICED as a means to summarize how to become a lifelong learner.

- Priority: We must make lifelong learning a priority by setting aside a specific portion of our day to build knowledge or skill.
- Reflect: Thinking deeply about our learning helps us to retain and apply what we have learned.
- Action Learning: We learn best by doing, and repetition can maximize our skill acquisition.
- Curiosity: We must be inquisitive, ask questions, and seek out the answers.
- Teach: Teaching others deepens our understanding and reinforces our knowledge.
- Insight: We must work to see things from different points of view.
- Concentration: Increasing our powers of concentration helps us to excel
- Exercise: Keeping physically and mentally fit must be a part of our lifelong learning habits.
- Different Learning Styles: Utilizing a variety of learning styles enhances our learning.

The importance of lifelong learning has been highlighted by state principal organizations. The 2017-2018 priorities of the Missouri Association of School Administrators (MASA) Legislative Platform included the need for specialized training for administrators, especially those working in high poverty areas and/or with diverse populations. Another priority was adequate funding for administrator training to deliver effective and constructive teacher evaluations (MASA, 2017). The 2016-2017 resolutions of the Missouri Association of Secondary School Principals (MOASSP) included dedicating funds to establish and maintain the necessary training and ongoing professional development for the growth of teachers and principals. Another MOASSP

resolution echoed the need to provide funds to train administrators to work with teacher evaluations (MOASSP, 2016).

Challenges and Barriers

However, finding the time, motivation and finances necessary to be a life-long learner continue to be a challenge. Prothero (2015) pointed out that “professional development for school leaders is often bypassed for other pressing needs such as teacher training” (para. 2). Prothero (2015) also observed that principals often neglect their own lifelong learning, especially as they spend more time in the role as principal. Even if principals can find the time, budgets are tightening and making it difficult to engage in quality lifelong learning.

In 2015 The Missouri Budget Project found that between the 2000-2001 and 2013-2014 school years, the funding for local schools increased by 22.7%., far below the inflation rate of 34% during the same time period (Missouri Budget Project, 2015). In 2015, the Missouri Foundation Formula, which is the distribution mechanism for Missouri schools, was \$400 million below the statutorily required level (Missouri Budget Project, 2015). The state was finally able to fully fund the formula in 2017, but the governor retains the ability to withhold money if revenue is lower than expected (Taketa, 2017). The 2013 MetLife study found that schools with decreased budgets were more likely have reduced professional development opportunities. Malone (2014), however, insisted that time and budgets should not limit a pursuit of lifelong learning.

In addition to the exterior challenges, personal challenges can also stand in the way of lifelong learning. Malone (2014) identified several personal barriers to lifelong learning, some of which could affect principals.

- Lack of ambition: Some people lack the ambition or drive to become lifelong learners. They have “a know enough already attitude,” and do not feel any need to continue with either formal or informal learning.
- Responsibility: Some people may not want the responsibility, inconvenience, disruption, and change of lifestyle that comes with promotion, and therefore, see no point in undertaking further learning.
- Life balance: Many people find it difficult to balance family commitment with the demands of their work and formal learning.
- Inappropriate learning style: Play to your strengths by using your favourite (sic) learning style, while at the same time developing the others by combining visual, audial and tactile styles as appropriate.
- Negative attitude for learning: You need a growth mindset, rather than a fixed mindset for learning. (p. 133-134)

In spite of the barriers, it remains a necessity for principals to continue their professional growth. Malone (2014) explained “We can learn informally, on-the-job through apprentice-ship schemes, induction, shadowing, job rotation, job enlargement, and job enrichment. We can be coached and mentored by more experienced people. Mentors offer personal instruction, guidance and encouragement, and real time immediate feedback” (p. 135).

Making it Work

Even though every principal has limited amounts of time, there are many ways to consistently engage in lifelong learning. To begin, complete a self-assessment of current skills and knowledge base. What are the necessary tools needed to guide a building to the next level? What knowledge and skills do new expectations demand? What areas need to be enhanced in order to become a more effective principal? It is important to be honest. This is where digging deep and discovering strengths and areas of improvement pay off. For example, enhancing abilities in data-based decision making may emerge as an area on which to focus. According to Sytcher et al. (2017), this would require a principal to develop “competencies in data use and assessments, to identify problems, and to inform and monitor solutions” (p. 14). Books such as Stephen White’s *Beyond the Numbers*, or Angela Peery’s book *The Data Teams Experience* might appear on a reading list. When areas for enhancement are identified, the next steps are to establish goals and set priorities. Even though regional, state and national workshops or conferences provide excellent professional development, budget decreases have made attendance more and more difficult. In addition, Evans and Mohr found that “the workshop experience seems to fade surprisingly quickly. The principal returns to school with little more than a few insights that have already begun to dim” (para. 2). The key is to find low-cost ways to maintain a level of dedication to being a lifelong learner.

NETWORKING

Peer collaboration has been found to be one of the most effective means for enhancing skills and knowledge. One of Evans and Mohr’s Seven Beliefs was “Principals’ learning is personal and yet takes place most effectively while working in groups” (para. 8). O’Neill (2015) found that professional networks allow principals to “engage with fellow practitioners across public, charter, independent, and faith-based schools. Collegiality among leaders offers a rich source of learning and access to the multiple sources of strength and perspective needed to be successful” (p. 28). Jun, author of *Connect the Dots: Strategies and Meditations on Self-education*, urged educators to enhance learning by organizing a network where learning from books and journal articles can be applied and shared with others (n.d.). Sytcher et al. (2017) stated that networks that meet regularly can provide principals with a professional learning community that provides “opportunities for principals to share best practices, develop a shared orientation toward instruction, and problem solve through mutual, interactive, and self-initiated learning” (p. 6). Collaboration might be regularly scheduled meetings with peers, an email group to discuss new strategies, Twitter chats with fellow educators, or

study groups with a particular focus such as data analysis. Other forms of networking might include peer coaching, mentoring, and/peer observation (Hitt, Tucker, & Young, 2012). Regardless of what type of networking is utilized, a major key is to pursue positivity; network with peers who are positive and optimistic.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Every principal should have a reflection journal close at hand. Ubben et al. pointed out that “Through personal reflection, leaders encounter their beliefs, strengthen their convictions, and challenge their thinking toward higher levels of more commitment” (2017, p. 3). Although it is often difficult to allocate the time to sit and reflect, Evans and Mohr (1999) found that regardless of the amount of time it takes away from other duties, this is an essential practice. Costa and Kallick (2008) found that reflection encourages insight and complex thinking, and involves a form of scaffolding that links current and previous learning. They explained “To reflect, we must act upon and process the information, synthesizing and evaluating the data. In the end, reflecting also means applying what we've learned to contexts beyond the original situations in which we learned something” (para. 3). Principals can reflect on personal strengths and how to enhance them, key decisions made during the day, status of initiatives, upcoming projects, successful time management strategies, or ideas and theories. There many topics for personal reflection, but the most important part is scheduling the time to reflect and write.

READING

Selecting books to read, discuss, and analyze is one of the cornerstones of lifelong learning. This can be done individually or as part of book study groups. Books such as *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* by Patrick Lencioni, and *Grit* by Angela Duckworth might appear on reading lists to enhance overall leadership. A book list might include *School Culture Rewired* by Whitaker and Gruenert, *Transforming School Culture* by Anthony Muhammad, *Shaping School Culture* by Terrence Deal, or *Culture Re-Boot* by Kaplan and Owings if enhancing school culture is the goal.

VISITING HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Visiting other schools in the area costs little more than some time and a few gallons of gas, and the payoff can be significant. Spending time in other schools can expand a learning network and provide new and innovative ideas. Teachers are often encouraged to participate in peer observations, and principals should be no different. Education World's Michele Israel (n.d.) observed that school leaders are viewing peer observation as a form of collaborative professional development, similar to how teachers observe fellow classrooms. These opportunities provide benefits through the sharing of leadership techniques and ideologies among peers.

UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA

Having an active presence on social media can provide a great deal of new knowledge. According to the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), "Social networking sites such as Twitter have created innovative ways for educators to connect and share ideas. In fact, when surveyed, 61 percent of principals found social networking very valuable for sharing information and resources (NAEPS, 2016, para. 1). Follow Twitter hashtags/groups such as #edchat, #principalsinaction, #kidsdeserveit, #Mondaymotivation, #satchat, #edadmin, #edleadership, @robertmarzano, @usedgov, and @ronclarkacademy. Join LinkedIn and subscribe to groups such as 21st Century Education, Educational Leadership, Innovative Learning and Education Innovators, K-12 Education Technology, and/or National Association of Secondary School Principals. Follow Facebook pages such as Mind Shift, Edutopia, ASCD, NASSP, Educational Technology, Education Week, and ISTE.

As the leaders of our schools, it is imperative for principals to continue to enhance their knowledge and skill sets to best meet the needs of students. Covey (1989) tells a story of a man in the forest cutting down a tree. When the man asked why he does not take a break in order to sharpen the saw, the man replies "I don't have time to sharpen the saw. I'm too busy sawing!" Evans and Mohr (1999) found that "Principals foster more powerful faculty and student learning by focusing on their own learning" (para. 9). In spite of the external challenges, personal barriers and time constraints that educators will encounter on their journey to becoming lifelong learners, there is great value in making the time to sharpen the saw.

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