

# Tips for First Year Principals: Eight Ways to Make Your Mark

By Carol D. Birks With Judith Richardson

Since becoming the principal of Warren Harding High School in Bridgeport, CT in July 2007, I have worked tirelessly to begin a four-pronged partnership of accountability to move Warren Harding High School on a path of continuous improvement. The partnership relies on the cooperation and commitment of faculty members, students, parents and the community. A theory of action for my first year emerged from the one-to-one interviews and focus groups with all stakeholders that I conducted soon after my appointment. The fundamental collaboration of all stakeholders has been the driving force behind the school's successes.

During my time at Warren Harding, there has been an increase in the teacher retention rate and an increase in students' test scores in the areas of reading and writing. Community and parental involvement has improved by 90%. There are a number of community members who serve as guest lecturers on a weekly basis to support the smaller learning communities concept, and the school governance structure is designed to engage all stakeholders. The lessons I have learned are included in the following tips for other new principals.

## **Eight Ways to Make Your Mark**

### ***1. Evaluate the Existing Culture.***

Even in the summer it is possible to gather indicators of the culture of your new school and its effectiveness for your stakeholders.

Talk with students. I conducted one on one interviews and focus groups of students enrolled in the summer school program. I aimed to meet a good percentage of the student body and representatives from all school subgroups. Students will be glad to discuss what is working and what is not working for them in their school. It was surprising that many students stayed long after the meetings to talk and volunteer their time to improve the school. I was named in May but my tenure did not begin until July 1, 2007, so I took advantage of the opportunity to begin to interview faculty and students and conduct focus groups with students and community stakeholders.

Talk with the teachers. From May until the opening of school, I made an effort to conduct interviews with everyone on staff, approximately 120 people. I asked the same questions that I asked the students as well as How do your students learn? Why do you think students are not achieving at high levels? What would you do first if you were principal?

Talk to parents and community stakeholders. I invited parents by mail to attend informal meetings at school and sent surveys to community stakeholders regarding the school and its impact on the community. I talked with the summer support staff members and custodians asking basically the same questions of all stakeholders. Involve all stakeholders in the school improvement discussion so that you gain perspectives from every angle.

Use the responses. It was from the stakeholders' responses that my theory of action emerged. After the interviews, list programs that can support student achievement. Define the intervention process for students who are not successful. Identify data to review and update your school improvement plan. Have the school leadership team set goals, priorities and benchmarks. Align your improvement plan for the school with the district and state goals. Establish a process to begin an on-going evaluation of the initiatives in the school improvement plan.

### ***2. Look at the Data, Look at the Data, Look at the Data.***

Principals are often told not to change anything during the first year; however, the reality is if things don't change—for the better—there may not be a second year. The best advice is to proceed cautiously and rely on data to provide the direction. Review incident reports, attendance reports, discipline reports, teacher observations, standardized test scores, school history, grade reports, and so on. What do you have too much of? What don't you have enough of? Too many Fs, too many tardies, too few honor students, too many absences, too few teachers getting good results, too little appreciation of the contributions of staff members and students. How can you change those things?

Create momentum: Drill down in the data and create action plans. I looked at teachers' grades and conducted a needs assessment of teacher professional development needs. I also called parents to introduce myself, and talk about the impact of absences and tardies on success and the new school routines. We distributed a parent bulletin with student expectations and successes. With district resources and support, students, teachers and volunteers, painted the foyer, bathrooms, halls, and walls. The students and community also designed and created murals. Although these changes were mainly cosmetic, the project made the volunteers anticipate future improvements and the students enjoyed seeing the transformation!

### ***3. Use the Data***

Use the data collected from staff, student, and community interviews and your school test scores and reports to evaluate the effectiveness of existing school structures and to determine your readiness for the opening of school. Ensure that:

- Staffing is complete
- Student schedules are balanced and complete
- Parents are notified about recommended student program changes
- Facility preparation and maintenance are on schedule
- Faculty handbooks, student handbooks and parent handbooks are updated, reviewed and complete
- A school calendar is begun with regular school and community meeting dates identified
- Registration process and orientation programs are planned
- Monitoring processes are in place for student achievement and classroom visits
- Support programs are planned for struggling students.

### ***4. Know What You Stand For***

When the staff sees you—do they see the vision for the school and its students? Remember, "Always stand up for what you believe in...even if it means standing alone." I thought: "This school will be successful—I graduated from this school and it served me well. It will again. I believe in this school and its students and faculty."

Plan for success. I tried to envision what the school should look like 6 months, 12 months, and 5 years after I became principal. Ask your leadership team how the school would feel at each of these benchmarks. A successful school must develop a strategy of action that revolves around establishing a core curriculum, cultivating relationships, building capacity, and engaging students. List your action items in each of these four areas as quick wins (things you can do immediately), moderate tasks (things you can do next year), and difficult tasks (things you can do in 5 years).

Envision the leader you want to be. As an assistant principal, I learned that one of the biggest pitfalls to moving a school forward is the innate conflict that exists between the necessity to lead and evaluate teachers and to be of genuine help to those same teachers. As principal, I was determined not to make this same mistake. And, while I expected to be challenged often in the early days of my principalship, I planned for these challenges. I envisioned them as an opportunity to listen to the concerns and interests of my staff members and students. This is a crucial aspect of establishing a collegial atmosphere and culture.

Recognize and respect those who came before you. I quickly realized that regardless of how tumultuous staff members' relationships with a previous principal had been, he or she becomes untouchable once a new principal is appointed. It is what a friend of mine refers to as revisionist history, remembering things as they never were. So don't take it as a personal affront when your leadership style is compared with that of previous principals. Instead, view it as an opportunity to once again communicate your vision and start building relationships.

### ***5. Don't Go It Alone***

Look for allies on the faculty and in the community. Identify your critical mass to assist you through the difficult times. These people may not be the most vocal members on faculty, but they support you and your vision. One week before school was scheduled to open, I held a community forum where I shared both my vision and my theory of action. During this forum, I showed data about where the school was and where it should be. I also made sure to acknowledge the fact that although I was principal, I would not have been

able to move the school forward alone. I acknowledged that I needed help from staff members, parents, and community members alike.

With this honest approach, by being transparent about the problems the school faced and the work ahead, I laid the foundation that involved the community in the school's success. Because of this, there has been a 90% increase in community involvement. There are now several local businesses partnered with the school; regularly scheduled community forums; members of the community facilitating classes; and business owners, community members, and university deans on the School Planning and Management Team. Community stakeholders also joined members of the administrative staff to canvass the community and visit students and families in our catchment area. Parents were given materials to help their child be successful in school, an invitation to join the Parent Teacher Student Organization (PTSO), and an overview of the school programs offerings.

### ***6. Support Professional Development***

Create opportunities for ongoing professional development for leaders and teachers. Change is only sustained by building capacity through high-quality, focused, and ongoing professional development. Look for schools with successful programs that you and your staff can visit and then share with other faculty. We volunteered as members of accreditation teams for school visits. We wrote grants to provide funding for professional development and attended NASSP *Breaking Ranks* training with a team of administrators and leadership team members. We sent administrators to the state data workshops. We applied for and received a Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) grant and continued to fund resources for school personalization, improvement, leadership mentors, and community forums. Ensure that your professional development is focused on school and staff member needs, involves teachers in their own training, provides an opportunity for feedback, and is worth their time and effort.

### ***7. Take Care of Yourself***

In the words of Steven Covey, don't forget to sharpen the saw. As a new principal, I had a tendency to work late into the night and on weekends. And, while I still have a tendency to do that, I have learned that I need balance in my life. The paperwork is always going to be there and there will always be a litany of meetings to attend. Take time to renew yourself: take a class, go to the gym, meditate, pray, or simply spend time with loved ones. To hone my leadership practice, I am pursuing doctoral study in the Urban Educational Leadership Program at Columbia University's Teachers College. Renewing yourself and your spirit can go a long way toward helping one get through those late nights and weekends.

### ***8. Enjoy the work!***

Stay current on best practices in school reform. Build the capacity of your staff. Always do what is right for kids.

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