

Connecting Elementary and Secondary Principals AN OPPORTUNITY WE ARE MISSING

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Creating a Culture, Improving Instruction, Managing Resources, Engaging Communities

*“Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.
The important thing is not to stop questioning.” – Albert Einstein*

As elementary and secondary principals, we are deeply focused on the students we serve, in present time: their grade level, academic and socio-cultural needs, the standards, and the accountability for ensuring achievement for all. Yet, clearly an understanding of the past, present and future are all key to student success. Hence, here lies our challenge: We must focus not only on who these kids are today, but also where they came from and where they are going.

Here are some practical and fun tips to build and sustain connections among our K-12 colleagues:

Reach out with family connections in mind. We often share students, at least sibling groups, between our various school levels. A strong and meaningful relationship can be created and sustained when we find positive ways to let families know we care, long after they leave a particular grade level. Big brothers and sisters, cousins and aunts and uncles can serve as a positive influence and way to build trust and culturally responsive interactions with parents. Often a phone call to a middle school checking on a sibling’s performance and attendance can shed light on family dynamics in a proactive way.

Learn together. Start a professional book study that has a K-12 perspective and encourage participation from K-12 principals. Some examples of books that could work for everyone are “Teach like Your Hair’s on Fire,” “Cultivating Curiosity,” “The Art of Possibility,” “Not Quite Burned Out, but Crispy Around the Edges,” “Teaching Outside the Box,” “Focus, Causes and Cures in the Classroom,” and “How Full is Your Bucket?” Book studies may occur before or after school (coffee chats or happy hour). In such settings, it is recommended that someone act as a facilitator who understands a bit of both worlds (elementary and secondary) who can move the conversation forward, but in a friendly way.

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Connect during administrative meetings based on common interests. Sure, you may have more in common with those who work in the same structural organization

as you, but welcome the learning curve that comes with learning a new subsystem or subculture. Encourage and seek opportunities to connect with colleagues with whom you don’t really connect with breakout sessions by zone (district), area of interest (common core, technology integration, social justice) or years of experience. In other words, consider sitting at a different table, or in a new area of the room.

Set up a principal buddy system. Create a “buddy system” program (pen pal/correspondence match) with weekly check-in. This could be through text, email, morning coffee, a phone call. The idea here is simple: Step outside of one’s own box, and look through someone else’s lenses with the idea that we are supporting all students in our system, even those who come before and those who are ahead of us. The buddy system isn’t to “fix” things, but rather to support each other as colleagues and learn something new at the same time.

Ask questions/embrace curiosity. We know our business and how things operate. We enjoy feeling confident and having a solution-oriented attitude towards our positions as principals. However, questions are an easy and equitable way to create connections. A secondary principal question might be, “How do you deal

with so many little kids at once in the lunch room?” And an elementary principal question could be, “How do you deal with so many giant teenagers in the lunch room?” While questions like this might seem trivial and slightly silly, they allow for us to break the ice and learn a little something about our daily work.

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Get creative with partnerships.

Consider mentoring and role modeling opportunities among K-12 schools. Placing secondary students in positions of social responsibility is a positive move to remind our young adults of the role they must embrace in society. On the other hand, when elementary students observe older students in front of them in any capacity, they are engaged and pay attention. Dance troupes can visit elementary gymnasiums. Varsity teams can visit at lunch and recess to eat and chat with their young fans. High school choirs can perform at elementary school assemblies. Drama clubs can set up intro to theater events for younger students, and also provide personal invitations to see high school performances. Orchestra and band can provide introductions to music as well. High school student council officers can meet with elementary school young leaders to discuss issues of importance and provide mentorship. Also, in today’s digital era, students can share information on cyber bullying and pen-pal through blogs.

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Open your door. Have an open door policy to school visits. Invite each other to school assemblies and special events. When elementary students visit secondary campuses, the experience creates a visual for what is to come, and this brings an exciting sense of hope, rather than anxiety and fear. On the other hand, when secondary students visit elementary schools, they remember some of their fondest, most nurturing times, and feel a sense of pride for how far they can come as scholars.

No matter which of these suggestions prove to be possibilities for you, it is true that we have much to gain by learning about each other’s professional words. Personally, when I moved from the high school world

as a teacher and specialist into the elementary principal domain, I was a stronger, better-equipped leader for both my staff and my students. I no longer envisioned my role serving only the students on my campus; I became part of a larger cohort, committed to the moral imperative of preparing all students for post-secondary pursuits.

Clearly, there is an opportunity to grow vertically as professionals when we reach out to those who serve our students of the past or of the future. So get growing; you will be pleasantly surprised how building bridges with colleagues enhances your daily professional journey. ■

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