Expectations Between Superintendents and Principals

I am serving in my second superintendency, yet I still remember the interview for my first principalship. It was a tough assignment and the middle school superintendent believed that I was a superstar assistant principal who could get it done. The interview went well and as we were wrapping up the session, she asked me if I had any questions. I asked, “What are your expectations of me in this role?” She looked me squarely in the eyes, took a deep breath, and said, “Why, I need you to walk on water and raise test scores!” Now that was a tall order. And even though we did raise those scores, it wasn’t until I became a superintendent myself that I fully understood what she meant and exactly what she expected.

As a superintendent, here are five things I look for in a principal:

**Leadership and Management Skills**—Will the school leader be able to lead and manage the building? There is a difference between managing and leading; I believe we manage things and lead people. Management relates to finance, nutrition, and the proverbial “books, buildings, and buses.” Superintendents need principals who keep proper oversight of the funds, as well as look for and perform the “peek and smell test” of the school building. This basically boils down to two things: What does the building smell like, and how clean are the floors and walls?

Leadership, on the other hand, asks, Is the principal able to cast a vision, communicate that vision to the teachers, and effectively lead the staff toward achieving the vision? The ability to lead is a crucial asset for the principal.

This lesson of leadership became crystal clear to me during my second year as a principal. We were “on the list,” and I wanted to get the staff excited about improving the academic performance of our students. I devised a wonderful plan of dos and don’ts for our students to follow, but then realized that the plan creation did not include the professionals who would be executing it. So I called a faculty meeting and asked the teachers to respond to the following prompt: List the top 10 characteristics of the best educational experience you have ever had, either as a student, a teacher, or an observer. I then asked everyone to take their individual list of 10 characteristics and work with a partner to combine them into one list of 10. When the two original lists were combined into one, they were to work with another group of two and combine the two lists into one list of 10. You could feel the energy in the room as the teachers listed what became our list of 10 nonnegotiables. But the power was not in the process; it was in the empowerment of the teachers. And by the way, we did get off “the list” that same year.

**Loyalty**—The superintendent needs to have principals who are loyal to the school district and to the superintendent. A question the superintendent may consider: Is the candidate for the principalship one of my people or capable of becoming one of my people? This attribute is not taken lightly as the school building is the first stop for most parents and members of the community. The superintendent needs to have a true ambassador of goodwill when parents and others ask questions about school and district matters. A loyal principal sheds a positive light on matters, while maintaining integrity and loyalty toward the school district and superintendent.

The loyalty of one of my principals was called into question when he had a run-in with a particular member of the school’s alumni association. Apparently, each year for more than a decade, the alumni association sponsored an event at the local high school. Coincidentally, as the planning of this event was occurring, I began my initial review of the policies related to the use of school facilities. As part of my review of the rental of district facilities, I instructed our director of facilities not to allow use of any building without the proper paperwork on file. Sure enough, as Murphy’s Law would have it, the president of the alumni association failed to complete and submit the proper paperwork to secure the building for its event. After learning of my instructions, and the rejection notice I signed prohibiting the use of the building, the alumni association representative marched into my office and asserted that the principal, who normally just let him use the gym, couldn’t this year and said, “The principal said that you said that I couldn’t use the building.” He also added that the principal would have let him use the building but couldn’t because “the superintendent said so.” I was stuck in the middle of a quandary between the words of the alumni association president and the loyalty of the principal.

I was new to the district and hoped the principal wasn’t blaming me for enforcing the policy to save face with the alumni association. But, I didn’t know and had to find out, so I called the principal and asked for clarity. It turned out that the alumni association had insisted on the date but had never, even after being told to do so by the principal, completed the proper paperwork. While it was true that I said he couldn’t use the building, what was left out of the conversation was that the principal had told him he needed the proper
paperwork. The alumni association representative had twisted the words of the principal to pit us against one another. It was the principal's loyalty, to both the policy and me that won the day.

**Insulation**—This area shows the ability of a principal to resolve problems before they reach higher levels of administration. Or to put it more plainly, how well can the principal keep angry parents from storming the central office or superintendent’s office? One of the more difficult issues to address is when angry and frustrated parents storm into central office. These parents will often say what a teacher did or said to their child and tell me that the principal didn’t do anything about it. For a superintendent like me, who was once a principal and understands the complexity of these situations, it is equally frustrating because I am now in the middle of a situation that will require hours of investigation. And depending on your community, frustrated parents will sometimes contact the local television network, which creates an entirely different set of issues.

Superintendents expect principals to have the disposition and skills to keep potential volatile situations insulated in the building. These principals have strategies, systems, and people in place to address upset parents in a manner that prevents or diminishes the majority of potential problems from escalating.

**Instructional Leadership**—The role of the principal has transformed from simply being a good manager of school affairs into that of an instructional leader. The superintendent relies on the principal to set expectations for students and teachers that will increase the academic performance and achievement of all students. This expectation is where the proverbial chalk meets the board and where my former superintendent rested her decision to hire me. As a superintendent and as a principal, I was blessed to lead teams of schools and teachers to exemplary levels of student achievement. What method did I use for school and district turnaround? Instructional leadership in the form of vision and mission setting was the key. In both instances, we used a simple formula that I have coined as: Wearing WIGs, Having FITs, and Saying our ABCs. WIGs are Wildly Important Goals (from *The Four Disciplines of Execution* by Chris McChesney); FITs are Focused Instructional Teams (a hybrid of professional learning community); and ABCs are Attendance, Behavior, and Course performance (key indicators of student success). The implementation of this formula was essential to the turnaround of the schools and districts I have led.

**Communication**—Can the principal appropriately represent the school and school system to parents, teachers, staff members, students, business and community leaders, unions, community agencies, faith-based leaders, and the media? Or, more pointedly, will the principal make the district and the schools look foolish by his or her inability to communicate effectively?

A colleague of mine was in crisis mode when his schools took a huge hit regarding school safety. The local media carried a story on the ability of strangers to access school grounds and buildings without being questioned and reported that they were able to enter into a school from the front door and exit out the back door without being approached by an adult. My colleague was furious and took to the media as a way to vent his frustration. Needless to say, it was not the best approach, and he suffered ridicule for his inability to effectively communicate during a crisis.

As principals and superintendents, we must be mindful that we are the mouthpiece for our students, parents, and teachers. We must measure each word and apply grace as we speak. It may not sound fair, but as my pops once asked me when I complained about the work, “You did apply for the job, didn’t you?”

Now, on the other hand, what can principals expect from their superintendents? Here are my top three:

**Advocacy**—Will the superintendent promote, defend, and protect school board policy? The principal is expected to follow board policy and should expect, when it is followed, the superintendent will support and defend any actions that are policy driven. A hot topic is often school uniforms because principals administer consequences to students who fail to follow established policy and guidelines for dress. Unsympathetic parents may then visit the superintendent’s office to protest. The superintendent must advocate both for policy and the professional and appropriate actions of the principal. A superintendent whose actions are inconsistent with policy creates a rift, both in the relationship with the principal and with protocol established by the school board.

An example of this happened several years ago. A division of a school district (not mine, thankfully) was being investigated regarding the inappropriate use of district owned vehicles; the chief investigator had been given a tip that several district-owned cars were being driven for personal use. The investigation revealed
two employees who had been issued district-owned vehicles were driving them to unauthorized locations. The superintendent was approached about this situation and told that one of the members of her cabinet was using the vehicle against school policy. Talk about a rock and a hard place. The superintendent had to confront the cabinet member and discipline him accordingly. This took courage and backbone that regrettably every leader does not possess. Thankfully, this one did.

Integrity—Will the superintendent tell the truth and expect the principal to do the same? It may not be surprising to read this as an expectation, but sadly it is surprising that for some, it is not a priority. Principals need superintendents to be honest, up-front, and truthful to them and about them. Additionally, principals need to be able to professionally trust the superintendent to do what’s right even if it’s not popular. There are few things worse than a principal/superintendent relationship that is combative and adversarial. On the other hand, when the relationship is built upon trust and integrity, it nurtures a culture of support.

An example of this was when a high school basketball coach was accused of having an inappropriate relationship with a student. The investigation revealed that the principal may have had knowledge of the relationship, but did not properly disclose the facts, nor properly report the situation to his supervisor. In the course of the investigation, the superintendent directly asked the principal if he knew about the relationship and failed to report it. Did he do the right thing and tell the truth? What would you have done, knowing your job was on the line? What’s most important to note about this is that the answer the principal gives the superintendent will determine more than just the future of the job; it will determine the level of integrity and his or her character.

Consistency—Will the superintendent be consistent in decisions? Will yes on Monday still be yes on Friday? To some, this may sound trivial, but to those who have served under a “wishy-washy” leader, it makes all the difference in a career. Principals need to know that the superintendent will not simply give in to the political winds or change his or her mind when trouble rears its ugly head. Equally important, principals should expect a superintendent will not bring personal issues to work and have a bad attitude on days when things are not right at home.

I worked with a colleague whose superintendent’s attitude and disposition changed every day. He once told me that during an all staff meeting, the superintendent walked into the room, slammed down her notebook, and commenced to shouting indignations to the group. At the end of her tirade, she exited the room and slammed the door. In 20 minutes, she returned and in a calm and low voice, began to outline the agenda and proceed with the meeting. She did this without acknowledging the earlier appearance or apologizing for her actions. Needless to say, the rest of the year was spent walking on eggshells and wondering if the next day at work would be the last.

The relationship that exists between superintendent and principal is one to be nurtured and valued. As a superintendent, the key leverage point is the principal’s office. Superintendents should present clear vision and expectations for the principals they serve. As a principal, careers can sometimes rise and fall depending upon the leadership and guidance of the superintendent. Principals should be keenly aware of the superintendent’s expectations and work to promote a good working relationship.

Let me end with five quick absolutes that can strengthen the relationship between superintendents and principals:

- First, invite your superintendent to visit your school on a regular basis.
- Second, consistently communicate with your superintendent, keeping him/her informed of both positive and negative events.
- Third, agree that there should be no surprises. Give the superintendent the heads up on major incidences, especially angry parents with the media on speed dial.
- Fourth, initiate conversations by asking the superintendent what’s important to him/her and how you can be of assistance.
- Finally, send your superintendent a card on his or her birthday. He or she will appreciate that!

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