

Getting Acquainted- the People, the Place, the Culture

Building and Grounds

- Walk, observe, and walk some more!
- Notice what looks great + note any areas of concern for future improvement.
- Consider artwork, posters, displays, and signs. Check out lighting, tiles, and note hidden spaces.
- Understand why areas might bear a particular name. so and so track/field/pac
- Check for safety signage and make note of language needs. Especially consider clarity of the signage and be sure visitor notices match policy and expectation for sign-in/out.
- Look for what needs to be common in all entries/rooms (goals/AED location)
- Smile and say "hello" to everyone you meet!

Fellow Administrators and Colleagues

- Your new superintendent/personnel director may have given you information or advice about your school— listen and consider it!
- Get to know the members of your administrative team.
 - * They might become your best friends.
 - * Listen for their areas of strength and weakness so you know of whom to ask which questions. Be aware of skeletons.
 - *Read newsletters to gain a sense of what is valued and communicated.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions.
- During administrative team meetings, listen and learn during much of your first year- don't initially give too many new ideas.

Custodians and Secretaries

- Your # 1's! Don't EVER think differently! Swim and don't sink.
- Notice their work and openly appreciate it. (FOOD/Flowers/Cards/Public appreciation)
- Be a teammate of these folks- don't be "above" answering the phone or picking up trash you find in the hallway or school yard. Paint, move furniture, just pitch in as they will notice!

Teachers and Support Staff

- Many will come to meet you (check you out) during the summer. Have a set of questions to ask!
 - * They likely are apprehensive about you being their new boss.
 - * Give them time- they need to know you care and want to know each one individually.
- Take any information you know of individuals with a grain of salt- everyone deserves a fresh beginning with a new principal.
- Value staff members' knowledge of the school, listen to their concerns and wishes, and ask them questions that show you're interested in them both professionally and personally. Consider a few questions to ask each.
- Do not make any quick promises for changes. Do thank them for their advice and let them know you'll certainly consider it.
- You'll find yourself naturally drawn to some people over others- be careful not to show favoritism.
- Let the teachers know you have high expectations for them and their students and that you'll go out of your way to support them in making their great school even better.
- Review personnel files and secure "baggage" information. Be clear on expectations as it relates to evaluation and supervision. Be aware of any issues in process related to discipline, performance plans, etc...

The Successes and Goals

- Research the academic success and opportunities for improvement through the school's website, school improvement plans, published scores, etc. Then, push that information into the back of your mind for a while. The people come first, not the scores.
- Survey every staff member (perhaps in a small tear-off section of your summer staff letter in which you introduce yourself and welcome them back to school) with two questions:
 1. What are the best two things about the school?
 2. What is the one thing you'd like to see change in the school?Capture this information electronically, anonymously, and report out at your 1st faculty meeting.

Traditions, Rituals, Ceremonies, Special Events

- During the first year, don't plan to change any traditions or Special events- just take the time to learn about them. Review newspapers and yearbooks.
- Do start to infuse your own personality into the school to begin new traditions. Some examples:
 - * Make the first staff meeting fun- have a theme such as "Happy New Year," use music to pep things up, facilitate a staff team-building activity, provide gifts, celebrate!
 - * Plan and facilitate a brief "Welcome Back" assembly/pep rally for the school during the first few days.
 - * On the first day of school, pay a quick visit to every classroom.
 - * Add "learning research tidbits" to your weekly staff memo to establish a tone of continuous learning.
 - *Honor and recognize years of service to education for all staff!
 - > Meet with students, parents, and staff to uncover the traditions that are valued and those "tolerated"*
 - > Consider experiences not already in place---music, notes, assemblies, recognition.

Morale and Climate

- It will not take much time to determine the current state- Does the staff laugh, smile, complain, glare, converse readily with other grade levels/departments? Do they stop talking when you enter the room? How about students- do they seem happy and confident throughout the building?
- Your actions will establish the climate for the school! Keep your door open!
- Positive climate building tips:
 - * Walk your talk and model what you want to see from others!
 - * Build confidence in your staff and students.
 - * Focus most of your energy on the "high performing" staff and students, not the "problems." Be fair, firm, and consistent.
 - * Add a "Pause for Praise" column to the parent newsletter.
 - * Give compliment coupons, etc....
 - * Send notes, letters, and cards whenever you can.
 - * READ your local newspaper! Past editions are helpful.

Parents/Community

- You'll get to know past practice by how involved they are and what they ask of you. Learn the past parent-culture problems and take advantage of the fresh start. Get to the grocery store, church, the gas station....listen and learn!
- Be wary of the first few who come to visit with you. They may have a specific agenda in mind. You don't have to answer immediately- "Thanks so much for this information. I'll need time to process it/ investigate it."
- Actively let parents know that you highly value their partnership in educating their child. Add parent-involvement research to your first parent newsletter.
- Get to know how the PTA functions. If it isn't already, guide the group toward helping with your school's continuous improvement action plan.
- The best "PR" with parents is getting to know their individual children.
- Realize that you will be put in the middle between a parent and a teacher. Remember, you can't please everyone – stay true to what you believe is best for the child.

Students

- Students will "check you out," just like staff, during those first few days. Let kids know you are REAL!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
- As with staff, be positive and build confidence in them. ☺
- Make every student feel important. Some examples:
 - * Meet & greet each day. Hello, a name, and a smile goes a MILE and more!
 - * Lunch with the principal for new students.
 - * Hand deliver a birthday card to each child, or announce/scroll.
 - * Bond with the kids that need it most- assign them a special "helper" job.
 - * Pick a few each week from the yearbook and seek them out!
 - * Know your high-flyers in each direction!
- When handling discipline issues, approach it as problem-solving so the students will learn cause and effect. Hear them out, build rapport and respect. Show them an attitude of "I'm not giving up on you." ACCOUNTABILITY is critical!

Yourself – Leadership Style & Stress Level

- Feel comfortable with your leadership style. Be flexible when appropriate, but always be guided by what's best for kids. Set goals each day!
- Walk your talk. It is cliché, but you need to treat others as you wish to be treated.
 - Non-interruption time is a must! Take an hour or two and schedule it!
- Model BALANCE! You have to take personal time to take care of you!
- REMEMBER that culture DOES matter!
- Don't take yourself too seriously.....laugh----levity is a key to survival.
- Realize you cannot be good at everything. Be honest about that and rely on others with expertise in your weaker areas.
- By maintaining a positive, happy school for others (students, staff, and parents), you'll take on a lot of stress for yourself. Learn how to manage the stress level- be sure to maintain your status as a parent, spouse, friend, human being – not just a principal!

Reading References:

Shaping School Culture by Terrance Deal and Kent Peterson
Improving School Climate by Edgar Kelley
Culture and Learning by ERS
Culturally Proficient Coaching by Lindsey and Martinez
The Art of Focused Conversation for Schools by Nelson
Cornerstones of Strong Schools by Zou/Link