

What Great Principals Do Differently

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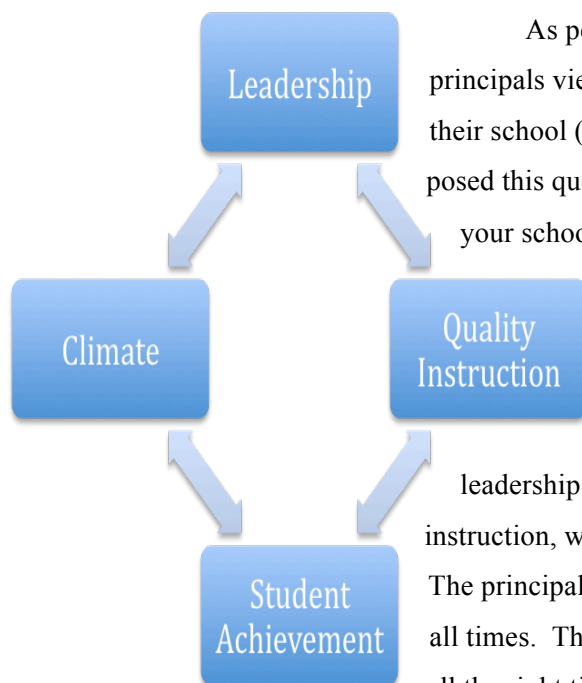
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According to Whitaker (2003), “the purpose of this book, [*What Great Principals Do Differently: 15 Things That Matter Most*] is to identify some of the specific practices that set apart the outstanding principals and incorporate them into your repertoire” (p. 5). Mr. Whitaker has incorporated some of his own personal experiences and case studies that he has conducted in hundreds of schools across the country, in order, to identify what makes an effective leader of a school. Mr. Whitaker believes that effective leaders possess the following abilities: show empathy; treat everyone with respect every single day; focus on the personnel within the school and not the programs; provide safe, efficient, and effective learning environments; act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner; and most importantly, base every decision, in regards, to your best teachers.

“The most effective principals understand that their school will go as far as their best teachers take it” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 68). Mr. Whitaker, states, the principal must set the climate of the school, but an effective leader understands it really is up to their best teachers to make the school a great school. According to Whitaker (2003), always consult with your best teachers before making a decision. This ideology is to ensure a ‘buy-in’ factor, because if the best teachers do not think something is a good idea, what are the chances that the rest of the faculty will accept it?; and if my best teachers do not think something is a good idea, what are the chances that it is a good idea? (Whitaker, 2003, p. 68). An effective leader must always rely on his best teachers to be honest and forthcoming with the ideas/programs that the principal will present. The principal should always include their best teachers in the decision making process, because they will be honest and have the experience to speak up, in order, to tell you whether or not that decision would be effective for the school and the school’s personnel. “What really matters is what the best people think... When we face challenging decisions, we’ll feel less alone if we ask ourselves, ‘What will my best teachers think?’ ” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 79).

“Good teachers consistently strive to improve, and they focus on something they can control—their own performance... Effective principals constantly work to make all teachers accept responsibility” (Whitaker, 2003, pp. 14-15). When the principal accepts the responsibility to do their best to work with all teachers to make them better, and accept the responsibility of his/her classrooms—the principal would, then, have the ability to work to improve upon the school’s climate and culture. According to Whitaker (2003), there are only two ways to make your school better: First, hire teachers that possess higher skill sets and qualifications; and the second, is to focus on improving the current teachers’ skill sets within the building through professional development or higher education opportunities. An effective principal will inspire the current teachers within the building to take responsibility of what occurs in his/her classrooms and will make it an environment where it is ‘cool’ to care—when that environment is established, then, there are not any wrong decisions, and everything is based on what is best for all of the students. When administrators set the tone, within the school, of how to act in a responsible manner they are, effectively,

exemplifying the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 **Standard 3**: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (Council, 2008). “Accepting responsibility is an essential difference between more effective and less effective employers, teachers, principals—even parents” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 19).



As per what Whitaker stated (2003), effective principals view themselves responsible for all aspects of their school (p.15). According to Whitaker (2003), when posed this question, “Who is responsible for the climate in your school?” The more effective principal responded, “I am. The less effective leader responded, “The teachers are,” or “Everybody is” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 16). Therefore, it is justifiable to state that an effective leadership creates a superb climate and institutes quality instruction, which ultimately leads to student achievement. The principal needs to control the climate of the school at all times. The principal must always do the right thing, at all the right times. “Effective principals understand that one

unfortunate tantrum might hinder the [climate in the building], so effective principals aim to treat people with respect ten days out of ten” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 97).

Not only does the principal have to uphold a positive climate, they must also focus on quality instruction. “As school leaders, we must recognize that not matter what programs we introduce or seek to strengthen, our most important work is to improve the people in our schools” Whitaker, 2003, (p. 12). A principal’s primary role should be to focus on the instruction that is occurring within the classrooms- of course programs/committees are important, but they are not as important as teachers providing quality instruction. Whitaker (2003) believes that the best way for a principal to “provide an exceptional learning environment for students is to give them outstanding teachers. Great principals focus on students—by focusing on teachers” (p. 35). Whitaker focusing on improving teachers to achieve student success is a direct correlation with Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 **Standard 2**: A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth (Council, 2008).

“As principals, we must recognize that unless we show teachers a better way, they will probably never even attempt a different instructional practice” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 37). In order, to improve our teachers, we need to provide them with different strategies and techniques that will allow them to become more successful, less stale, and effective within the classroom. We need to provide the teachers with support, whether that be through professional development sessions, one-on-one meetings, or inspirational talks; However, the best way is through peer observations, of the best teachers, within the school, at hand. “Our goal is to help all teachers be as good as our best teachers. A logical place to start is giving everyone a chance to observe and learn from quality” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 41). By providing our teachers with this kind of support, our teachers within the school will, ultimately, lead the students to achieve success. “The more we can build the skills of our teachers, the less we are drained by reacting to the results of ineffective practices” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 38).

Within Whitaker’s book, he focuses upon the ideology that principals need to act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. Whitaker believes that principals are “faced with difficult decisions, not necessarily the easy decision, it is important to ask the question of what is best *for all the teachers* and what is best *for the school*” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 64). Also, when dealing with disciplinary actions, Whitaker believes that the following question should always be asked: ‘What is best *for this student* and what is best *for all the students*?’ (Whitaker, 2003, p. 64). Principals need to keep in mind what is best for the individual(s) that could be affected from the decision. With that said, the principal (at all times) needs to look at the ‘bigger picture’ and see how that particular decision will affect the entire school, both teachers and students, alike. “Effective principals expect teachers to place the needs of their students ahead of their own personal desires, and they expect no less of themselves” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 64). Whitaker states, that principals who promote equality with all individuals, within the school and community, will uphold the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 **Standard 5:** A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner (Council, 2008).

“Every school should have its Back to School Night before the year starts, or at the latest, on the evening of the first or second day of school. The reason is very simple – we are still not defeated” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 106). Whitaker focuses on the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 **Standard 4:** A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources (Council, 2008). Whitaker suggests having a ‘Back to School Night’ before the school commencement of the school year. A night, such as this, would allow the community members to collaborate and interact with teachers, in order, to meet the needs of the individuals that would be in attendance during that upcoming academic year—and, of course, none of the

parents will act in a defensive manner because his or her child has, yet, to attend school for that year. Whitaker considers the relationship with the school and the community is vital. “Focusing on all of the positive things in our schools [and community]—and there are many—gives us more drive and energy to get through the less positive times (Whitaker, 2003, p. 25). By involving our community members in the development of our school’s climate, programs, curriculum, extra curricular events, etc... we will, ultimately, enrich the community, and then, the community is invested into seeing all of the students achieve success.

Whitaker focus on the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 **Standard 1:** A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community (Council, 2008). “Effective principals express clear expectations during the first faculty meetings and incorporate these expectations in weekly staff memos, at monthly staff meetings, and in other interactions to keep them fresh in everyone’s mind” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 108).

Setting clear expectations and incorporating those expectations, into the vision of the school, is critical- according to Whitaker. “Setting expectations at the start of the year is both reasonable and fair. What’s not fair is to expect people to adhere to your expectations if you don’t establish them up front” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 111).



“Developing and establishing a school-wide environment that supports everyone’s effort to what is right. If we create an environment where each person does what is best for the students and for the school, we will seldom make a wrong decision” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 90). Whitaker trusts, that if a principal creates an environment where every person focuses on the success of the student, then, the principal will be embracing the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 **Standard 3:** A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment (Council, 2008).

“As principals, we must adhere to our core values. No matter what others want us to do, we must focus on what is right for our students” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 114). Whitaker wants leaders to believe in themselves and their core values. By always focusing on your core values, one will provide a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment because core values ensure that one will always do what is

best for his/her students. Whitaker will, also, like effective leaders to understand that many different people will have a variety of core values, but, “No matter how much two people disagree, if both consistently make their decisions based on what is best for students, then they are both right” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 65).

“Effective principals are fully aware that success on standardized tests brought their school greater autonomy to do what they believed was best for students” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 55). Whitaker’s take on the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 **Standard 6:** A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context (Council, 2008); is basically to play the game. Whitaker states, that “As a principal we know that our teachers talk about us; so do people throughout the community. We can decide what we want those conversations to be like” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 114). For an effective principal’s school to gain freedom from political, social, and community issues, a principal would have to ensure that all of the national, state, and community requests and legal issues are handled in a timely manner, in order, for him/her to focus upon what is best for all of the students and personnel within the school.

“Instead of an end-of-the-year award, consistently acknowledge that what your best teachers do is different and special. Let them know how much they mean to you and to the students. Write them notes, emails, drop Post-it notes on their desk—in short, consistently reinforce their efforts” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 84). What Whitaker desires, is that after one reads his book, that (s) he will walk away with the mentality that the little things, have the potential, to go a long way. Whitaker wants to provide principals with new specific practices that they could integrate into their toolbox, in order, to become the most effective leader that (s) he could become. “Every principal has an impact. Great principals make a difference” (Whitaker, 2003, p. 115).

References

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