

## WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BE A SUCCESSFUL MIDDLE LEVEL LEADER?

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When I was asked to do a pod cast for NASSP on this topic, thinking about the question conjured up many visual images and memories of treasured moments from my years as a middle level principal. Locker bank areas bubbling with the activity of 800 early adolescents, conversations with highly dedicated teachers who knew how to connect with 6-7-8-9<sup>th</sup> graders, the worries of parents, the trials and tribulations of puberty, the growth and maturation we observed; each of these brought a smile to my face and warmed my heart.

Since my tenure as a middle level principal, a high school assistant principal before that and a middle grades teacher even before that, I have been privileged to be on the faculty of a university principal preparation program. I have also been fortunate to have been a member of the 2000-2004 research team of the *National Study of Leadership in Middle Level Schools* (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann & Petzko, 2002, 2004), and that work, coupled with my own experiences, has helped me come to a deeper understanding of what it takes to be a highly effective leader at the middle level. However, as is true in many states, our program recommends candidates for K-12 principal licenses, which means that we have to address teaching, learning, child development and best practices as appropriate for students ages 4-18. We do not have the luxury of spending a great deal of time on the unique qualities of middle level leadership. We search for and value resources that will eventually be helpful to our students. Thus it was an honor to be asked to address the question in the NASSP pod cast, *What Does It Take To Be a Successful Middle Level Leader?* In this article, I reiterate and expand upon the points made there.

### Knowledge and Skills Necessary for Effective Middle Level Leadership

#### Level 1: Leadership and Management

It is important to begin this conversation with clarification that the principalship<sup>1</sup> is about leadership, not just management. Kotter (1990) differentiates the two in terms of both process and outcomes: leadership

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘principal’ in this article refers both to principals and assistant principals.

is about vision, change and working relationships that lead to the improvement of the organization, contrasted with management, which is about maintaining the status quo and running a smooth operation. Any school leader must spend the time and energy necessary to successfully deal with management issues before she or he can have success as a leader for school improvement. There is no question that management is necessary before leadership can take place, but it alone is not sufficient.

Assuming that management is a prerequisite for or the sine qua non<sup>2</sup> of any leadership formula, it can be viewed as the first level, the very base of the model. Any leader, whether a school leader, a military officer or a corporate CEO must be able to count on the organization running smoothly before s/he can raise the bar and improve performance.

**Figure 1: A Model for Middle Level Leadership**



Immediately above the management base is the knowledge and skill set necessary to be a leader of any organization, the 3rd level adds in knowledge and skills needed to be an effective school leader at any level, and the 4<sup>th</sup> level, the circles on the top, focuses on the knowledge and skills specific to elementary, middle or high schools. Those three circles overlap and intersect to some extent, but each has its own unique content and one is not superior to another, they are simply different.

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<sup>2</sup> A condition without which there is nothing

## **Level 2: The Elements of Leadership**

The definitions of leadership vary considerably, reflecting disagreement about both the concept and the processes involved (Yukl, 2002). The major points of agreement, however, are that the foundation for any sort of leadership is grounded in vision and relationships. This is the second level of the model.

Vision is the ability to be able to paint a picture of what the organization might look like in five years that is attractive to the constituency and can be embraced by all stakeholders. Any leader needs to be able to identify who the critical people are with whom to form the guiding coalition (Kotter, 1996) and work with them to develop a plan to work collaboratively toward the vision. The visionary leader, whether in a school, a large corporation or a small business, does not work like the Pied Piper. The leader does not direct a parade toward his or her own goals, but rather operates from the center of the constituency, working with others as part of a movement toward an agreed upon vision of what they want the organization to become.

The second part of this level is about relationships. “Leadership is a relationship” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 24). Kouzes and Posner further characterize leadership as a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow, claiming that it is the quality of that relationship that matters when those involved are trying to get extraordinary things done. In schools as well as other organizations, effective leadership is not done alone and typically not done from the top. The effective leader knows the power of teams and the importance of relationships. The operative pronoun is not ‘I’ but ‘we’. Communication skills, demonstration of integrity and compassion, the ability to motivate people to go above and beyond what they might otherwise do and the willingness to empower others are critical to this element. All effective leaders visualize what the future can bring, inspire others to share that vision, and build the relationships needed to get the work done.

Although that core of knowledge and skills is necessary for effective middle level leadership, it is, once again, insufficient. The aspiring middle level leader needs to also embrace and develop the skills in the next levels to move toward a high level of effectiveness.

## **Levels #3 and #4: Educational Leadership and Middle Level Leadership**

The next level of the model is made up of the knowledge and skills that a leader of any school at *any* level needs; superimposed upon and extending beyond the foundations of management and leadership are the

elements of educational leadership. They are best represented in the ISLLC standards (NBPEA, 2008): vision for learning, knowledge of curriculum, instruction and assessment, understanding of school culture, the ability to work with the community, knowledge of law, politics, advocacy, and a laser-like sense of personal and professional ethics.

Then, on top of that ‘educational leadership block’ are the spheres that represent issues that differentiate one level of school leaders from other another (Figure 1). There are different spheres for elementary, middle and high school leaders; one is neither better nor more difficult than the others and there certainly is some overlap, but each is a distinct knowledge and skills set. A person who has the knowledge and skills for one does not necessarily have the knowledge and skills for the others, and a lateral transfer requires a very strong bridge.

An interesting bit of research to support this concept surfaced in the second phase of the NASSP *National Study for Leadership in Middle Level Schools* (Valentine, et al., 2004). In that study a national sample of middle level principals was compared to a select group of principals of highly successful middle level schools. While it was determined that there was little difference in the certification level of the principals of the two groups, those who were leaders of highly successful schools were twice as likely to have taken three or more graduate courses specific to middle level education than were their counterparts in the national sample (p. 46.).

“Being a competent leader of a middle school is a highly complex job that requires a comprehensive knowledge base about leadership, learning, school improvement, school culture, young adolescents, and appropriate middle level programs” (Clark & Clark, 2008, p. 115). Being an effective middle level leader requires both the knowledge and skills represented in each of the following ISLLC Standards as well as a keen sense of what is unique about and specific to each standard at the middle level.

**ISLLC Standard 1: An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.**

Using the ISLLC Standards as the core of educational leadership starts, again, with vision. In Figure 1, “Leadership” includes vision as a critical element in a general sense, but a school leader’s vision (Level 3) must be focused on learning and success for EVERY STUDENT. She or he must believe and model the belief that the school’s purpose is for students to learn and achieve, that continuous improvement of the

school is expected, and that stakeholders are important elements of the process. A visionary school leader walks the talk that says ‘when a student fails, the school has failed’.

Then, in order to be effective at the middle level, the leader needs to adapt that notion specifically to a vision for excellence at the middle level. S/he needs to understand the concepts in the seminal works of middle level best practices (Jackson & Davis, 2000; NASSP, 2006; NMSA, 1995); that middle schools are not mini-high schools or big elementary schools nor should they be. Their vision of a middle level school includes best practices that are designed around the social, emotional and cognitive development of the early adolescent. It is critical that the middle level leader understand, embrace, and envision a school that is specifically aligned with the developmental levels and interpersonal needs of young adolescents and is focused on their success.

**ISLLC Standard 2: An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.**

The second ISLLC standard is enormous; it is about creating a culture for learning that promotes effective instructional practices and professional development for staff. Implicit in this standard are curriculum and assessment. These are the heart of educational leadership; this is where school leaders set themselves apart from leaders in other organizations and apply a knowledge base and skill set unique to educational settings.

Effective PreK-12 school leaders understand that teaching and learning can only take place in schools where the climate is conducive for learning and the culture is one of a professional learning community. Leaders need to have the knowledge and skills to establish and maintain collaborative cultures and safe and secure schools. They know how to set high expectations for everyone; they build teacher efficacy so that teachers truly believe that they are the critical element in the classroom and seek to teach that way. They understand curriculum/instruction and assessment: what needs to be taught, how to teach it, and how to know if students have learned it. They recognize and can foster scaffolding and rigor; they implement standards based instruction. They know that curriculum and instruction must be student centered, they require differentiation and re-teaching, and they recognize the importance of curricular integration such as literacy, numeracy and technology across the curriculum. They insist on authentic and varied assessment. They use student data to evaluate programs and instruction. They base professional development on data and the school improvement plan. They disaggregate data so that high expectations

can be set for all. And, perhaps the most important of all, they can develop new teachers or further develop veteran teachers who can implement these strategies with children.

While that knowledge and skill set is enormous, once again, effective middle level leaders ratchet it up to a level that is specific to the early adolescent. They need to respect, promote and implement best practices that have been the cornerstone of seminal middle level literature: small learning communities, interdisciplinary teaming, exploratory courses, advisory programs, and co-curricular activities. They must understand why student engagement is so very critical at the middle level. They recognize that teaming, true exploratory opportunities and flexible scheduling/grouping might take more resources but see their value and why they should be a priority. They value and promote professional development which helps good teachers grow into excellent middle level teachers. They dig into literature such as *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000), *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1995), *Breaking Ranks in the Middle* (NASSP, 2006) and *Leadership that Makes a Difference* (Clark & Clark, 2008). They turn to professional organizations such as NMSA and NASSP and use their resources and recommendations to implement the educational leadership and best practices possible for middle level schools and students.

**ISLLC Standard #3: An education leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.**

All school leaders have to be able to implement the 3rd ISLLC Standard, that of managing the organization and its resources. Management of the organization was discussed earlier, but the management of resources, the most important of which are time and teachers, is critical to educational leadership at all levels.

In a study recently completed with new middle school and high school principals and assistant principals, one of the two skills areas perceived as most important to their success was the human resource function: recruiting, hiring, developing, maintaining, and retaining the best teaching force possible (Petzko, 2008). Effective principals know that the faculty of the school is its single most important resource. They can prioritize appropriations so they develop the human capital in their schools and allow teachers to focus available time on teaching and learning. Principals at all levels know the importance of bell-to-bell instruction and uninterrupted learning time and how school schedules can make or break the improvement of instruction.

Once again, the management of time and personnel are unique in middle level schools. Middle level leaders need to be able to support scheduling that is flexible and allows teachers to organize blocks of time as appropriate. Middle level best practices call for decisions about the schooling of young adolescents to be left to the teacher teams wherever possible, and highly effective middle school principals need to support that norm (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Professional development at the middle level needs to focus not only on content and instructional strategies but also on the teachers' ability to work with other adults in interdisciplinary teams. The previously mentioned national study of middle level schools revealed that although teachers were expected to work in grade level teams, only about one quarter of the principals who were surveyed felt their teachers were competent in working as a team member or in collaborative decision making (compared to over 60% who perceived their teachers as competent in adjusting instruction for individuals and developing positive relationships in the classroom) (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann & Petzko, 2002. p. 49).

Finally, ISLLC Standard #3 at the middle level demands that effective school leaders manage the environment so it is safe. Although the implications of this may be clear for all schools, there are unique aspects that are essential for effective middle level leadership. Knowledge of adolescent social and emotional development is crucial for student safety. Middle level students are furiously seeking a level of independence that might exceed what is reasonable for their age and maturity level. Some are less interested in pleasing their parents or teachers than before and discipline and classroom management become hot topics. Middle level students are exceedingly peer centered and vulnerable to bullying, from which the consequences can be devastating. Effective middle level leaders need to be able to work with others to develop safety procedures and policies that are preventive, not just punitive, and that teach students what is appropriate while holding them accountable for what is not. Discipline plans at the middle level need to be constructed with the students as stakeholders and along developmentally appropriate levels (Evans & Lester, 2010). There is no question that school leadership at all levels need to be committed to safe and secure schools, but how to do that at the middle level requires a distinct set of knowledge and skills.

**ISLLC Standard #4: An education leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.**

The 4<sup>th</sup> ISLLC Standard, that of working with the community, also has a unique perspective for the middle level. Middle level leaders need to know how to work with the broader community: how to build

relationships with other constituents, how to involve the community as stakeholders, and how to serve and be served by them. They must see their school as part of a bigger community and network, and can establish their school as a critical component of that network. While collaboration with faculty has been addressed as part of both Standards 1 and 2, parent and community involvement are cornerstones of Standard 4. Parent involvement is an important element of a successful elementary school, and it must remain so at the middle level. While it may appear that parents are less likely to want to be involved, and while their children appear to not want their involvement, the relationship of the parent to school personnel is as important as ever. “Families (must be) allied with school staff through mutual respect, trust, and communication” (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 2). Middle level leaders must be able to nurture and build these relationships. Data from the previously mentioned national study demonstrated that highly successful schools involved parents in more meaningful ways than did the national sample: they were not just asking parents to work the concession stands at ball games or run copies for teachers, they were involving parents in decision making, leadership teams, and the curriculum and implementation processes (Valentine, et. al, 2004).

**ISLLC Standard 5 and 6: An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner. An education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.**

The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> ISLLC Standards address law, ethics, politics, context and advocacy. At every level, school leaders need to have finely tuned skills in these areas. Knowledge of legal standards and the ability to apply them are essential for success. A razor sharp code of personal ethics is a make-or-break element of any effective principal’s leadership platform. The ability to see the big picture, politically and globally, is necessary for keeping change and improvement in perspective. What sets the middle level leader apart in these standards is the willingness and ability to propose and advocate for policies and priorities that may not be immediately popular at the school board table. The best practices for middle level schools may be perceived as expensive in view of other district priorities, yet the effective middle level leader needs to have the courage to advocate for what is best for the students in his or her school. Teaming might cost a bit more in terms of staffing, and advisory programs do consume some instructional time. Professional development at the middle level needs to look different than at other schools. Co-curricular programs are not the same as interscholastic sports and their implementation may suggest a break in tradition in some arts or athletic programs. The effective middle level leader needs to be able to educate district office personnel and school board members and advocate for these and other best practices. Without such courageous leadership, budget reductions and district mandates can erode and

eventually eliminate those things which we know are unique and critical to high performing middle level schools.

### **How Would a Person Transition Into The Job of a Middle Level Leader?**

National data tell us that most middle level leaders are not specifically trained for that level. In 2000, 46% of the principals surveyed in a national sample had K-12 certification, 39% had secondary (7-12) certification, 7% had elementary certification but only 4% were specifically certified at the middle level (Valentine, et al., 2002, p. 30). Those percentages were almost identical for the principals of highly successful middle schools. There was little difference between the two groups in the amount of teaching experience or assistant principal experience at the middle level (Valentine, et al., 2004, p. 44). What set the two groups apart in terms of preparation was that while 14% of the principals of highly successful schools and 37% of the national sample had no graduate classes in middle level education, 54% of the highly successful school principals had three or more courses, compared to 29% of the national sample (Valentine, et al., 2004, p. 46). Knowledge and skills specific to the middle level make a difference.

Educational leaders who aspire to be effective middle level leaders should consider the following recommendations:

1. *Become knowledgeable about best practices at the middle level.* This does not have to be only through graduate level classes, but can also be through individual study, book groups, institutes available through NMSA or NASSP, and regular reading of professional publications, such as *Middle School Leadership* (NMSA), *Principal Leadership* (NASSP), and *Middle Ground* (NMSA). The literature referred to throughout this document and in its reference list should be well worn and on the bookshelf of any aspiring middle level leader. The concepts within, the cornerstones of best practices for middle level schools, are fundamental to effective leadership at the middle level.
2. *Network.* Identify effective middle level leaders in your geographic area and visit them. Establish ongoing communication (meetings, email, virtual networks or phone). Interview teachers who are successful at the middle level and learn from them. Consider a professional support group of other new middle level leaders in your area. Ask for and listen to feedback and learn from others.
3. *Create your leadership team and participate in training together.* Once a position as a middle level leader is obtained, assess what is going on in the school you just joined, identify what is working well, determine what the data tell you and what kinds of changes need to happen. Work with the leadership team to implement what is needed to move you toward a vision of excellence at the middle level.

Over ten years ago Jackson and Davis (2000) said that no single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in student performance at the middle level than the school principal. They also said that those principals cannot do it alone but only through leadership that empowers teachers, involves parents, and focuses on what is unique and special about students ages 11-15. Although leadership itself might be somewhat intrinsic, school leadership and especially middle school leadership are not only intrinsic but informed. The effective middle level leader knows middle level values and best practices and can apply those concepts in a visionary and collaborative environment.

As a former middle level principal, I can say that there is nothing more rewarding than watching middle school students develop and learn. Teachers who choose to work at that level and who are successful doing so are incredible educators and a pleasure with whom to work. The transition from 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 9<sup>th</sup> grade is phenomenal. The growth and maturation along the way is a joy to watch. Being part of that process has been the single most rewarding aspect of my long and varied career. I encourage others to take up the challenge; it is well worth the effort.

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