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Neither Fish nor Fowl

Diane Lopez and Naomi Garza have been best friends for many years. They worked across the hall from each other as English teachers at Mesa High School, and the two decided to begin graduate studies in educational administration at State University and pursue certification as school principals. Although both were recognized in their district as outstanding teachers, they wanted to do more and become the leaders of schools in the future.

Diane and Naomi took all their classes together. They worked on projects, prepared for exams, and completed their preservice internships at the same school. They became known by State University faculty and other graduate students as the “Mesa Twins” because they were always together. But after completing their studies and passing the state principal certification exam, the two began to apply for different administrative positions in their own school district and other nearby systems.

Naomi was the first to land a job as an assistant principal. She was extremely pleased to become an assistant to Mark Stevens, another former teacher at Mesa and now the principal at Quincy Middle School, an old building serving a middle-class community in the Greenwich Community School District. Mark had taught in the same department as Naomi and Diane for several years, and Naomi felt very comfortable with having a strong potential mentor in her first assignment.

About two weeks later, Diane was asked to take the assistant principalship at a new middle school in her own district, the Wooded Mountain Community School District. The school was set to open the next school year with Diane and Mary Jane Allen as the administrative team. Mary Jane was a newcomer to the district. She had served as a principal of two

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secondary schools in a district in another state. She had a great deal of prior successful administrative experience, so Diane was looking forward to having the chance to learn from a veteran.

Both Diane and Naomi were happy about their new positions and both looked forward to these positions serving as stepping-stones to their future goals of eventually becoming principals together in the same school district. They often joked about reuniting the Mesa Twins as leaders. For now, however, the “Twins” would be separated for a while so they could learn about becoming effective administrators. Fortunately, both seemed to have landed on their feet by having the opportunity to work in good schools with excellent, well-respected educational leaders. Naomi and Diane promised each other that they would get together at least once a week during the time they served as assistants at their respective schools. They wanted these jobs to serve as learning experiences for their futures, and being able to share war stories regularly would be important ways to gain greater insights into the principalship.

Best intentions, of course, often go awry. From her first day on the job, Naomi realized that she was not going to have any free moments for quite some time. Mark Stevens immediately began to give her one assignment after another. First, he assigned her to do the textbook distribution and inventory for the year. The last assistant principal left in April, so she wasn't around to complete the end-of-year return of books, and the book room was a mess. It was also explained that, because Mark did not have a strong background in special education, the new assistant principal would be expected to devote her time to that program area this next year. He concluded his first meeting with Naomi by informing her that he would be out of town at the state principals' meeting for the next three days, so she would be in charge during his absence. While she was mentally recording the “laundry list” of duties she was just handed, Naomi recognized that this new job was going to keep her busy day and night for quite some time.

Diane was also experiencing a number of reservations about her job. She thought that it was going to be fairly simple since she was going to be opening a school with a principal who did not really know much about the district. She anticipated that she would be learning along with her boss. Diane probably knew more teachers in the school than the principal. At least four people had worked with her at Mesa over the years, and another handful of people were former teachers from Diane's old district. She was hoping that knowing a number of the teachers would make her transition to the assistant principalship a lot easier. But the principal had her assigned to do so many things during the first few weeks that she spent hardly any time with her old friends. And as the school year began, the teachers were also busy, and the assistant principal's chores just continued to grow.

What was supposed to be a regular occurrence for the two friends—getting together once a week—became a special event in late September when Naomi and Diane finally found one night when they could have dinner. Naomi and Diane each began their meal by joking about how tired

the other looked. After a few minutes, they settled into a conversation that reflected why they were so fatigued in their new jobs.

"It's a lot different from what I expected," started Diane. "There are ten times more things to do than I thought there would be. And what's getting me down is the way things are going with some of the teachers. I've known many folks for years, but no one comes around to see how I'm doing, or if I need any help. And I know that I'm definitely not one of the administrators yet, but some teachers still appear to avoid me because they view me as 'one of them.'"

"Yeah, I know that feeling," said Naomi. "I was sure that Mark was going to take a little bit of pity on me as a rookie. But the job is really demanding, and I feel like I can't catch my breath. It's really a lot of work, and even with an old friend like Mark as my boss, the job keeps me busy all the time. I really hope that he still respects me as his colleague."

The next hour was spent sharing similar observations about their new jobs, and also some of the jobs that they were expected to do. The Mesa Twins went their separate ways without even having dessert. After all, both had early duties tomorrow and no doubt stacks of student discipline referrals on their desks.



People pursue the position of assistant principal for many reasons. For some, it represents an opportunity to earn a salary that is higher than one makes as a classroom teacher (in most cases). In other cases, people see the role of assistant as a necessary first step toward eventually becoming a school principal. After becoming assistant principals, some people realize that this job is sufficiently rewarding or challenging, and they no longer seek a principalship. But regardless of what the short-term or long-term goals of any single aspiring assistant principal may be, most people who take on this job make the assumption that it is an important leadership role in schools. A person needs to be capable, dedicated, and responsible to become an administrator, at any level. As is the case for our two beginning assistants in the opening scenario, people discover quickly that the assistant principalship is very demanding in terms of time, energy, and personal dedication. They also begin to find out that it can be a frustrating role.

Why is it frustrating? Beyond the fact that the job requires a great commitment of time and energy, there is an even more pronounced aspect of the job that catches many people by surprise. Being an assistant principal can often be summed up by the phrase "neither fish nor fowl." When you take on an assistant principalship, you enter a kind of "gray world." You are no longer a classroom teacher, although you may feel as if that is still where you work. After all, you just spent at least (in most school districts and states) three years as a teacher before you qualified for an administrative certificate or license. The challenging aspect of this is that, even

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though you might still identify as being a teacher, you are not. Your former colleagues in the classroom will tell you very quickly that you are no longer part of their group. You will often feel the separation and isolation from the classroom very quickly. Conversations between teachers will stop abruptly when you approach, informal conversations with people in the hall or out in the parking lot will begin to become rare, and your old friends will not be stopping by your office regularly. Friday afternoons at the local watering hole will not be the same—after all, “the administration” is often a topic during “TGIF” sessions.

Another perspective is that you are *only an assistant principal*. That means that, in the minds of many veteran administrators in your district, you are not yet “one of them.” Many principals and other district administrators remember that they, too, were once assistants on individual campuses. That’s how they got their start in administration. You will hear many fond (or not so fond) recollections of the days “when I was an assistant principal,” as if it were like a period of hazing that people have to endure if they eventually want to land a “real job.” For the most part, assistant principals will work with principals and other administrators who are sympathetic to their colleagues and their roles. On the other hand, you may encounter a principal who truly believes that it is best to treat assistant principals in the ways that new army recruits are treated during boot camp. There is still a sense among many administrators that they “learned it the hard way—on their own.” They use that as their justification for making things less than wonderful learning experiences for assistants.

As a beginning assistant principal, you have probably just completed a preservice certification program at a local university where the curriculum included a great deal of information concerning “leadership” as opposed to “management.” You have heard descriptions of how effective school leaders are critical ingredients of effective schools. You have also heard many stories about the central role that instructional leadership plays by building administrators and that this is vital to ensure increases in student learning and achievement. If school administrators spend less time with management issues and more time with curriculum development and monitoring the teaching and learning activities of their schools, they will be more effective.

So what are you doing as an administrator? Disciplining students, sitting in on what often seem to be endless court hearings, working with custodial staff, keeping track of textbooks, and handling parking lot (or bus) duty before and after school. There is not much time left for leading the school in such weighty matters as curricular reform, staff development, or vision setting. If your personal goal is to become a principal some day, none of these duties may seem to have much relevance. Remember, however, that serving as an assistant principal of a school can be understood in broader terms, as seen through a comparison with other professional roles. There are *assistant* coaches of World Champion basketball teams and Super Bowl-winning football teams, and assistant managers of Fortune 500 corporations. All of these are critical contributors to their organization’s

success. They are all similar to assistant principals because they are not necessarily classified as “chief executives.” Nevertheless, they add much to overall success.

From the perspective of your former colleagues in the classroom, you seem to spend most of your day doing things that have little to do with supporting teachers. In fact, you are absent from classrooms except for those moments when you must do some required teacher observations.

In short, you are neither the fish in charge of anything nor part of the flock of fowl. That is one of the main reasons why I believe that your service as an assistant principal might be one of the more difficult educational jobs that a person can do. Teachers know what they are supposed to do every day—they teach—and principals are hired to lead, or at least “run the school.” Counselors counsel. Assistant principals, on the other hand, do a lot of things that do not appear on the list of normal, routine activities of any school.

PROBLEM WITH DEFINITION

The frustrations you may feel concerning the lack of precise identification of your duties may be the product of some long-standing lack of clarity about what assistant principals are supposed to do. Assistant administrators in public schools have been identified as important workers in schools for many years. For example, one of the earliest scholars of school administration, Ellwood P. Cubberly (1916), noted that assistants could be quite helpful in doing many of the things that were beyond the scope of duties that were most important for lead administrators of schools. One example of a “nonessential” duty that could be delegated to an assistant is the visitation of teachers in their classrooms.

Kyte (1952) noted the following with regard to the duties and responsibilities that should be assigned by a principal:

The assistant principal should be assigned to specific responsibilities and duties. He may have some teaching assignment, but the remainder of his school time he should spend on the work of the principalship. In many schedules, his teaching is limited to planned substitution in all classes. Thus, he obtains teaching experience on all grade levels and in various phases. This practical exposure contributes to his insights into teachers’ problems and needs and to his understanding of all children. (p. 394)

In this instance, the assistant principal is viewed as a candidate for future principal responsibilities by gaining insights into curriculum and instructional practices. Kyte also notes, however, that the assistant principal has many other responsibilities in the course of each day, as noted in the following schedule for a “typical Monday”:

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8:00–8:30 Inspect the school plant

8:30–9:00 Confer with parents, children, and teachers; assign new pupils to classes; handle minor discipline cases; supervise junior traffic squads; supervise playgrounds, corridors, and boys' lavatories.

9:00–10:30 Teach fourth grade

10:30–10:45 Recess duty

10:45–11:15 Visit Kindergarten and primary grades, observing activities and reading; study individual cases assigned by principal either on teacher's request or for other reasons; give needed demonstration lessons

11:15–12:00 Teach fourth grade

12:00–12:20 Supervise lunchroom and junior traffic squads; lunch

12:20–1:00 Confer with parents, children, and teachers; supervise junior traffic squads; supervise playground, corridors, and boys' lavatories

1:00–2:00 Supervise office staff; direct assemblies

2:00–3:10 Spend time in supervisory activities

3:10–4:10 Participate in building and group meetings

After presenting this ideal work schedule for an assistant principal, Kyte then notes an actual record of a 1950s assistant principal's duties for one day:

8:00–8:25 Conferred with Miss S. about the reading observed in her class yesterday; I am to help her regroup her children

8:25–8:35 Conferred with new pupil and his mother; assigned him to third grade; introduced them to Mrs. G.

8:35–8:40 Advised Mrs. G. to check on child to see if he belongs a half grade higher

8:40–9:00 Supervised the Second Avenue Traffic squad, with special attention to the new lieutenant's work

9:00–10:30 Taught class

10:30–10:45 Conferred with new lieutenant regarding timing the use of his whistle and waiting until all children reach the sidewalk; checked boys' lavatory

10:45–11:15 Observed second grade class; commended Miss L. on extent of pupil participation with interest

11:15–12:00 Taught class

12:00–12:40 Lunch period

12:40–1:00 Observed on the school grounds, Miss B. and Miss W. being in charge; requested Miss B. to test the new boy tomorrow, discussing the case with her

1:00–1:15 Conferred with parent regarding her son's frequent tardiness

1:15–2:00 Discussed with Miss W. and her class the care and use of cutting tools, demonstrating usage

2:00–2:05 Observed traffic in the upper hall; noticed congestion still occurring near west stairway

2:05–3:10 Discussion with school secretary on method of scoring tests and sample checking the scored results; dictated short statement on diagnostic use of the results; dictated note to Mrs. S. about upper hall congestion; checked classification report

3:10–3:20 Reported to Miss W. the agreement reached with parent about the tardy pupil

3:20–3:50 Conferred with Mrs. R. regarding the science lesson observed yesterday; she is to encourage more diversified interests, providing for more planned excursions to the park

3:50–4:20 Conferred with Mr. S. about Miss M.'s problems in handcrafts; made a memorandum of suggestions to be included in my conference with her

As you review these lists of planned and actual duties of the assistant principal of 50 years ago, you are no doubt struck by a number of issues. First, note the fact that assistant principals are described in masculine terms. On the other hand, with one exception, teachers appear to be women. When "Mr. M. is brought into the discussion," it is to tell him about a (woman) teacher's problems. Second, there is little discussion of the work of the assistant in responding to discipline situations. Not once in these lists is there a description of an unruly student being sent to the office by a teacher.

Third, there is no reference to the assistant being involved with special education matters, no doubt because schools simply did not deal with special education issues a half century ago. Fourth, the assistant principal was a teacher, at least for a short period of time each day. And above all, the supervision and oversight of "traffic squads" was a major concern for the assistant principal. Also, note that the work day seemed to end at a reasonable hour so that the principal could probably get home in time for a family dinner, helping his children with homework, conversing with his wife, reading the newspaper, and many other regular evening activities at home.

Although it may be somewhat amusing to see how the old-time assistant principal enjoyed a different set of daily activities, it is also important to note that the assistant of the past was busy all day long and engaged in a wide variety of activities.

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In your experience as an assistant principal, take an “average” day and record the events that you carry out during the day.

In addition to the differences already noted, what are some more things that you do now that were not part of the world of a 1950s assistant principal?

No doubt you indicated that you do a lot more student disciplinary work now, more special education conferencing, and perhaps more in-class observations of teaching. You may also be responsible for the management of certain aspects of the physical plant, but you probably do not have the inclination to dictate memos to teachers about their control of students near one stairway or another. In short, you live a much more reactive work life than your predecessors. Rarely are you able to predict what you will be doing each day, or even from one moment to the next. It is largely because of this fact that your role might become stressful and difficult to manage. No two days are alike, and you have to be able to respond to many different issues that are likely to come across your desk. At the same time, you need skills in dealing with your principal, the teachers, students, parents, police, central office administrators, nonteaching staff, media, and people from the community. The list of interactions of the assistant principal of the past is much shorter than your daily work routines.

A few years ago, the National Association of Secondary School Principals carried out a survey of assistant principals across the nation to identify the kinds of duties they faced each day (Pellicer, Anderson, Keefe, Kelly, & McLeary, 1988) from “most frequent” to “least frequent.” The following list was generated:

1. Student discipline
2. Evaluation of teachers
3. Student attendance
4. School policies
5. Special arrangements
6. School master schedule
7. Emergency arrangements
8. Instructional methods

9. Building use—school related
10. Orientation programs for new students
11. Administrative representative at community functions
12. Informing public of school achievement
13. Graduation activities
14. Orientation program for new teachers
15. Faculty meetings
16. Substitute teachers
17. Teacher selection
18. Curriculum development
19. Teacher “duty” rosters
20. Assemblies
21. School public relations program
22. Innovations, experiments, and research
23. School daily bulletins
24. Liaison with community youth-serving agencies
25. Clerical services
26. Teacher incentives, motivation
27. School dances
28. Staff inservices
29. School calendars
30. School club programs

In this whole list of many duties assigned to assistant principals, there is no mention of one item that seemed to be so important in the past—checking on boys’ lavatories! Having made that observation, no doubt every assistant principal in the United States has made unannounced visits to school rest rooms—boys’ *and* girls’.

The list developed through research by the National Association of Secondary School Principals contains several items (e.g., “Graduation activities”) that may not concern you if you work in a middle school or elementary school. But there are many items on the list that are probably part of your regular routine. The one thing that is remarkable in the research from less than twenty years ago is that no mention is made of one of the responsibilities that has become a central part of the world of so many modern assistants—working with special education issues. No doubt the

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majority of assistant principals today serve as liaison administrators in conferences designed to develop Individual Education Plans for special needs students.

In the space below, list the top ten (or even top eleven) activities that you now carry out on a regular basis. Compare this list with the preceding NASSP research.

THE INVISIBILITY FACTOR

The role of assistant principal is filled with many contradictions. For example, in many schools, when a parent or community member wants to “talk to an administrator,” that administrator will often be an assistant principal. In many cases, this is done not to shield the principal from visitors but to serve as a kind of “steering mechanism” that will help the visitor connect with the most appropriate staff member. In that respect, the assistant is a visible person representing the official interests of the school. Yet assistant principals at many schools are often virtually invisible to the public. They do their work in their offices, or as members of committees, or with individual students. They rarely get the recognition commensurate with the work that they do for the school. It is interesting to note that, for example, statewide directories of schools include the names of principals but rarely the names of assistants.

This discrepancy between the assigned duties of assistant principals and their public importance is another example of the mixed messages that are often given regarding this educational role. Schools are in critical need of assistant principals, principals fight hard to retain their lieutenants when there is talk of cutbacks during budget crises, and a resource sought in cases where there are enrollment increases is inevitably another assistant principal. By contrast, assistant principals tend to do their work backstage most of the time. The “neither fish nor fowl” description fits.

What are some of the ways in which you have felt as if you were an “invisible resource” in your school?

SO WHY DO THE JOB?

With all the frustrations and contradictions concerning the role of the assistant principal, it may seem strange that you—or anyone else—would ever

want to have the job. Despite the fact that there currently exists a national shortage of people interested in serving as school administrators, we are fortunate that many still want to take on the challenges of a job as complex and often ill defined as the assistant principalship. But the question remains, "Why?"

There are many possible answers to this question. The most critical one, however, is the one that you provide in your own case. Why did you become an assistant principal? (Or, why are you seeking a job as an assistant principal?)

For many, the response provided may be quite similar to yours. You may have stated that you are (or will be) an assistant principal because it is the path that you believe must be followed on your way to other administrative roles in education. In many cases, candidates for principalships will not be considered unless they have three or more years of experience as an assistant. In this regard, service as an assistant principal is seen as a means to a goal, not an end goal in itself. "You have to put in your time" may be the motto of many who step into the assistant job.

Related to this "dues-paying" motivation is the reason offered by many other assistant principals. They realize that being a principal is a difficult and demanding job for which they could hardly be well prepared through any university preservice training program. As a result, there are those who view the assistant principalship as a kind of intense, long-term internship where it is possible to learn much about the practice and reality of the principalship. You may also have stated that your goal is to serve students and your school as a career assistant principal; you do not wish to move up to become a principal.

You may also believe that taking on the assistant principalship is a way to serve the broad interests of a whole school, not just an individual classroom. Accepting an assistant leadership role can allow a serious commitment to service. Chief executives are not the only ones who can contribute to students and teachers.

No doubt many other reasons can be identified to explain why you and others have decided to take on the ambiguous and challenging job of a school assistant principal.

PLAN FOR THE BOOK

In the remaining chapters of this book, the assumption will be made that, regardless of why you became (or will become) an assistant principal, you will hold that position for the foreseeable future. I also believe that you want to do an excellent job as a school leader. This first chapter has pointed

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out some of the difficulties that assistant principals have always faced as part of their jobs. Assistants are often caught in the crossfire of competing expectations and ideal role definitions held by administrators on one hand and teachers on the other. Or, they are viewed as outsiders by both of these groups.

Assistants have a lot of different duties and responsibilities on the job, from serving the needs of special education students to evaluating teachers to disciplining students to monitoring bathrooms. And to top all of this off, not many people seem to recognize or appreciate what assistant principals do each day.

The remaining chapters of this book consider a wide variety of topics that are introduced as a way to help you succeed in your current job, whether your intentions are to use your experience as an assistant to qualify for a principalship, use your current job as a kind of internship, or if you have decided to make this job your goal as an administrator. We begin with a consideration of how to analyze your personal values and your strengths and limitations both as a leader and as a manager of a school. Then, we look at a number of specific suggestions designed to help you succeed each day as an assistant principal.

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