

## The Role of Urban Principals: Prepare, Perform, and Persevere

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### Abstract

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This article discusses the preparation of urban school administrators and the role they play as educational leaders in schools. Principals have to be versatile and lead with a multitude of tools on their belt. Today, being a principal means serving as instructional leaders, managing budgets, building trust with the district, staff, parents, students and the community, overseeing special education mandates, evaluating staff and teachers, being a data-driven decision maker; delegating school responsibilities, being culturally responsive, and maintaining a balanced life. The work of today's school principal is multifaceted and seemingly never done. Urban schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demand performance and accountability by all stakeholders. According to *Education Week* (September, 2011), The No Child Left behind Act of 2001, signed into law by President Bush on Jan. 8, 2002, was a reauthorization of the [Elementary and Secondary Education Act \(ESEA\)](#), the central federal law in pre-collegiate education. The ESEA, first enacted in 1965 and previously reauthorized in 1994, encompasses Title I, the federal government's flagship aid program for disadvantaged students. Coming at a time of wide public concern about the state of education, the NCLB legislation set in place requirements that reached into virtually every public school in America. It expanded the federal role in education and took particular aim at improving the educational lot of disadvantaged students. At the core of the No Child Left Behind Act were a number of measures designed to drive broad gains in student achievement and to hold states and schools more accountable for student progress. They represented significant changes to the education landscape (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Principals, who have travelled this path, lead with a goal of perfecting this challenging position because of the inner passion.

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### Prepare

As a former principal of an urban high school, principal preparation is significant in the role of an educational leader. As stated by Davis, Leon, and Fultz (2013), new policy initiatives such as Race to the Top underscore on the importance of the principal's role in promoting school reforms and, subsequently, increased student achievement. According to Davis et al., in a survey of 853 superintendents, Farkas, Johnson, Duffett, Foleno, and Foley (2001) found that ninety-two percent believed that administrator credential programs are out of touch and ineffective. Even school principals generally agree that the "factors that add the greatest value to their success [as leaders] are on-the-job experiences" (Usdan, McCloud, & Podmostko, 2000, p.1).

Educational leaders must have significant preparation in order to be successful in urban schools. My experience as an educational leader started in the classroom. As a classroom teacher, the daily experience and decision making prepare educators for leadership roles. These experiences are invaluable: learning to work with students with a wide range of abilities, handling unexpected situations at the spur of a moment, making spontaneous decisions that keep student achievement moving forward, managing unfocused students who need to be engaged in the learning process, convincing superiors that curriculum is implemented effectively and on time, and working cooperatively with parents and stakeholders. Classroom experiences assist educators in perfecting their craft as educational leaders.

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In this profession, we accept the fact that we are life-long learners and this requires continues professional development by attending conferences, workshops, and pursuing further degrees. About forty years ago, many classroom teachers continued to perfect their craft by earning degrees in the discipline that they taught. This allowed them to become experts in core subjects and various other disciplines. At this time, many seek degrees in educational leadership without perfecting their craft as a classroom teacher. For many, salaries predict the future and sustainability in the profession. Principals earn six-figure salaries and have six-figure problems to solve daily. Graduate School Programs certify principals in collaboration with state required coursework. In the fall of 2014, Coppin State University redesigned their administrative program so that in-service teachers who desire to be administrators have intentional focused experiences (signature assignments). Prior to the fall of 2014, the Administrative Certification I program and Master of Contemporary Educational Leadership (MCEL) program did not have signature assignments. These signature assignments have been crafted by former principals. A signature assignment is an artifact, task, project, or activity created or modified to collect evidence for a specific learning outcome or learning outcomes.

These signature assignments are spread throughout the administrative program and assessed by a rubric in our Unit Assessment and Accountability System (UAAS). The signature assignments are implemented through the UAAS. Data reports are disseminated to faculty for discussions. These discussions lead to continuous improvement and competency-based outcomes. Faculty is responsible for ensuring that candidates complete the signature assignment requirement for each administrative course through the UAAS. Faculty discussions and analysis of candidate outcomes transitions to continuous improvement on the signature assignments so that program standards are addressed and students exceed expectations. These experiences stimulate transformative learning and competency-based outcomes. The final course required in both programs is the Internship in Educational Administration. This course requires an E-Portfolio of artifacts and 80 hours of mandatory experiences from a mentoring certified principal. The artifacts consist of documenting experiences in the following signature assignments: vision and mission plan and implementation, school profile, school opening, school data analysis, video instructing the leadership team on data, evaluating a school emergency, early release days for professional development, attending a school board meeting, textbook budget including e-books, custodial operations and maintenance procedures, school budget for teaching and learning, emergency management system, technology audit, developing an individual growth plan, personal improvement plan, teacher assistance reflection, professional development plan, special needs reflection, community relations activity, roles and responsibilities of Central Office, curriculum audit, and video tape reactions to a case study on diversity, Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) of a principal, and English Language Learners (ELL) in an inclusive setting. The redesigned administrative courses are planned and implemented by former principals that bring credence to the educational leadership preparation.

### ***Perform***

The principal in a school sets the tone for a community of learners. Principals must have high expectations for the entire school and themselves. According to Stephen Covey, leaders must see the "End before the Beginning." Principals must embrace every opportunity to lead with preparation, performance, and perseverance. As stated by Davis (2013), "Most of what I learned about leadership, I learned on the job." This statement talks about experience. It lets people know that experience might be the best teacher. When educators look back over their careers, most will say, that their experiences made them a better educator. Each day in a school brings new experiences that principals must be able to handle with integrity and ethics. Does a template exist so that every situation can be handled the same? No, this is where critical thinking and life's experiences must take the lead. Principals are life-long learners and in order to accomplish this, they must lead by example.

They must be continuously involved in professional development, conferences, and workshops to enhance their professional growth. As principals engage in life-long learning they become a part of a network of individuals who are always striving to be better. They pick up mentors and peers who believe as they do and strive for excellence in urban schools every day. Principals must have a vision, be able to listen, build trust, know how to lead, know how to connect with others, delegate, think critically, make adjustments, believe, celebrate, and the list goes on and on. Is it overwhelming? Absolutely! Principals are generally appointed in the summer and once they accept the position, the challenge begins. Making appropriate decisions to lead a building is a major responsibility. Past experiences and the opportunity to have collegial collaboration help principals make better decisions.

***Persevere***

Principals must show evidence of substance. It is difficult to follow a leader who doesn't have a clue. Principals lead schools with a staff of experienced and novice classroom teachers. Principals need to be instructional leaders who develop trust in others. Principals must have a vision and implementation plan that staff and faculty recognize and are willing to co-sign. Being willing to roll up their sleeves and assist in getting the job done on a daily basis. Principals must show an intentional commitment to their school, community, and district. Intentional commitment to staff and faculty is witnessed by, building trust, being honest, showing integrity, and helping others to see their talents and abilities. Principals have to take advantage of the exemplary skills of their staff. Principals should not fear using the talents of others. Educational leaders should bring out the best in others and promote excellence among staff so that they aspire to be leaders in the classroom and outside of the classroom. In order to lead effectively, you should never put yourself in a compromising situation where you give up your integrity to please a staff member.

Principals who fail to lead without character and integrity tend to lose respect of their colleagues. Principals should surround themselves with an instructional leadership team who support the vision and mission of the school. The instructional leadership team generally consists of assistant principals, department chairs, and an instructional leadership coach. Principals must delegate with respect to areas of expertise. The instructional leadership team supports the actions of the principal for success in the school. Regular school-based meetings will give principals time to reflect on what is working and what is not. Principals must be reflective decision makers for success in their schools. Principals are researchers, reflectors, and responsible for their assigned school. Prior to competency-based standards, principals were managers of buildings. The demands of the position have changed. Going above and beyond the call of duty is true commitment and dedication. Effective leaders will inspire followers. They are risk-takers who believe success is on the way. It is a "mighty" work for a committed people. When the road is unclear or challenging, educational leaders must push forward. Determination and commitment will be the driving force to get the job done.

**References:**

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