

## **Principal Internships**

### *Five Tips for a Successful and Rewarding Experience*

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*Learning is best when it is hands-on, Ms. Gray reminds us. One can read and study all the books and journals available, but the ultimate test comes when the individual is actually in the trenches doing what must be done.*

IN JUNE 1997 I began a journey that would become the most exciting and rewarding experience of my life. The journey was referred to as a principal internship, and it was the final requirement for the completion of a master's degree in school administration in the state of North Carolina. Although classroom learning through books and discussion was essential to the preparation for my internship, the hands-on experience over a period of one year would prove to be invaluable.

Throughout my internship year, I was challenged to put into practice all that I had learned in my master's program. It was an opportunity that allowed me to combine my research and reading, as well as the knowledge of the professors at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, with everyday life in a public school. The experience left me confident and prepared to enter my first year as an assistant principal or a principal. Overall, the yearlong combination of internship and coursework created an educational environment that made my training in school administration among the best in the nation.

Although some form of student teaching has long been a requirement for obtaining teaching certification, the idea of principal internships for those who are completing a degree in school administration is still in its infancy. The state of North Carolina is among those that have initiated vigorous programs in school administration that require yearlong internships. However, principal internships are relatively new, and definitions of the role of a principal intern and how he or she fits into the school community are still evolving. Many principals who have interns in their schools are unsure of what to do with them. Although interns should be considered an integral part of the school, they are still completing their coursework and are technically not certified school administrators. What should be done with interns, and how should they be incorporated into the school? What should their responsibilities be? These questions and more can be addressed by reflecting on my experiences during the 1997-98 school year.

### **An Introduction to Kannapolis Middle School**

I was assigned to complete my internship at Kannapolis Middle School. The school is located in Kannapolis, North Carolina, a small town known for being the home of Cannon Mills. Currently, enrollment is approximately 950 students in grades 6 through 8, with a large percentage of the population considered to be at risk. The school operates under the middle school concept and uses a teacher advisory program in which students, in groups of about 100, are assigned to four-person teams (with some variations in the sixth grade). During the 1996-97 school year, Kannapolis Middle School achieved exemplary status under the new North Carolina ABCs initiative, the accountability system consisting of end-of-grade tests in reading, writing, and mathematics.

It is important, of course, to understand the culture of the school. The entire staff works in teams, including the administrators, who are most often referred to as the leadership team.

Decisions are made within teams, and site-based management is seen as a major contributor to the school's success. Finally, high expectations exist for all students and staff members. The school's philosophy includes the belief that "all students can succeed," and every day in the classroom teachers live this belief.

### **Tips for Successful Internships**

*Tip 1. Integrate the intern into the school.* From the beginning, the principal and intern should develop a relationship in which the intern feels that he or she is a vital part of the school. Because it takes time and work to build this kind of trust, an internship should last for a complete school year. The process of bringing the intern on board should begin one to two months before teachers report and end on the last day required of teachers.

There are several reasons to bring the intern into the school before the teachers arrive. If the intern is going to be considered a part of the leadership team, it is important that he or she meet the other team members in advance and get to know them on both a professional and a personal level. An introductory period allows time for members of the leadership team to share their philosophy and expectations and to become acquainted with the intern's strengths and interests. The intern should already begin to feel a part of the school, as well as understand his or her place within it, before the staff is on campus.

I actually began working at Kannapolis Middle School in June 1997. We had been told by our university supervisors that we were expected to report one month before the teachers; however, the leadership team invited me to come as often as I could during the summer to see what was going on when students and teachers were not in the building. This period of time proved to be invaluable to me. Before the teachers came back to work, I had come to know and respect the leadership team. The principal, two assistant principals, and the administrative assistant became trusted mentors, and I was able to learn much about scheduling students and hiring teachers. Most important, it was during this period that I began to find my place at Kannapolis Middle School as the intern, and I had discussions with the leadership team about my responsibilities and what was expected of me. In addition, we shared philosophies and beliefs about children and education. By the time the teachers returned, I had a clear understanding of the culture and climate of the school, as well as of how I would fit into the existing picture.

Integrating the intern into the school community, however, does not stop with the leadership team. Members of the staff must also perceive the intern as part of the leadership team. They must understand how the intern fits into the school and recognize the authority the intern has as a part of the leadership team. On the first day teachers returned, we had a staff meeting at which we reviewed our school's vision and mission. In addition, each member of the leadership team was introduced, and his or her primary responsibilities were outlined. The principal made it clear that I was an administrator and that I would gradually be taking on various responsibilities. Then, throughout the year, he continued to communicate to teachers about when they should rely on me, as his shadow, and when they should rely on him. From the beginning, the staff at Kannapolis Middle School viewed me as another administrator - a part of the leadership team. Because the staff was aware of my position in the school, there were no unclear boundaries. This approach made my internship very successful, as teachers gradually began to trust me and to seek my help and advice.

*Tip 2. Develop a vision for the internship experience.* In order for the intern to be confident that he or she will not just turn into an extra pair of hands but will have the opportunity to acquire new knowledge and skills, the principal and the intern must share a vision for the internship experience. Together, the principal and the intern should compose a list of skills that they feel the intern should possess once the internship is completed. The intern's strengths and weaknesses should be discussed, and particular areas for growth should be identified. In addition, the principal must be sure to permit the intern to experience everything that happens in the school and at the central

office. Interns need to have a clear picture of all the duties and responsibilities that are expected of a principal, as well as the knowledge and skills that enable them to be effective school administrators.

At the beginning of my internship, my internship seminar professor provided me with a form titled "Verification of Internship Competencies." The form listed the skills needed by principals entering the field, grouped under the following categories: Technology: Administrative Systems; Budgeting/Finance; Transportation; Food Service; Discipline; Scheduling; Instruction/Duty/Activity; Exceptional Children; Co-curricular Activities; Community Relations; Observation and Evaluation of Teaching; Faculty Supervision; and Conducting Meetings. Extra spaces were included at the bottom of the list for interns to add areas in which they needed more experience. Throughout the internship, my principal and I were to sign the form whenever I reached entry-level competency in a specific area. This form has been very important to my success. It provided a focus for my internship, and it was an essential guide for developing all the skills necessary to be an effective principal.

The internship was excellent on-the-job training. From June 1997 to June 1998, I encountered what seemed to be every possible experience. During the summer, I watched construction on the new sixth grade wing and cafeteria, the scheduling of students into heterogeneous teams, and the hiring of teachers. I observed as the middle school integrated a whole new grade level for the first time and struggled with the addition of approximately 350 new students. I participated in making schedules for the cafeteria and assembly programs. I organized field trips and dealt with transportation. In the process of performing daily duties, I came into contact with very supportive parents as well as angry parents, and I dealt with persons within the community who play a vital role in the educational process, including staff from the Department of Social Services, area police officers, juvenile probation officers, and mental health professionals. In addition, I took part in the hiring, evaluation, and dismissing of teachers.

Not only was I able to experience administration at the school level, but I also became a part of the administrative leadership team for Kannapolis City Schools. This team includes all the district's principals, assistant principals, and central office staff members. I attended principal meetings as well as curriculum coordinator and staff development meetings. I could recite every single opportunity afforded to me; however, the list is too extensive. To put it simply, I was very well prepared, and my mentors made sure that I experienced as much as possible during this year of learning.

*Tip 3. Gradually increase the responsibilities of the intern.* Each member of the team possesses particular strengths from which the intern can learn. At the beginning, the intern should act primarily as a shadow to the principal and the assistant principals. As the principal begins to feel comfortable, he or she should start to delegate responsibilities to the intern. It is very important for the intern to feel that he or she is a part of the leadership team; however, at the same time, too much should not be thrust upon an intern too early.

During my internship, the principal slowly gave me more and more responsibility while watching me and standing by to "pick up the pieces" if I messed up. His mentoring skills, I believe, made me successful. He encouraged me to use my strengths from the very beginning. One of the first tasks he gave me was to conduct a staff development session for teachers of "Encore" classes (art, business, Bible as literature, health/P.E., shop, life skills, and technology) on how to incorporate reading strategies into their classes. This gave me the opportunity to use my skills from the classroom while building a relationship with some of the teachers. As for other duties and responsibilities, each member of the leadership team stuck close by me at the beginning, providing guidance and advice.

My training reflected the strong emphasis that the leadership team at Kannapolis Middle School places on curriculum and on supervision of teachers. Evaluations are considered important to the

continuous improvement that is expected from all staff members. At the beginning of the year, the principal created a list for each of the administrators on the leadership team. Because I was the principal's shadow, his list was also my list. I went with him to evaluate teachers and scripted notes with him. After an observation, we would sit down together to discuss what we had seen. I also accompanied the two assistant principals on their observations. This gave me a good perspective on teacher evaluation, and I picked up tips for improving the process of data collection. Eventually, I wrote up my own evaluation, and then the principal read my final product and gave me feedback for improvement. Ultimately, I was observing on my own and writing the final product. However, the leadership team continued to give me good critical feedback for improvement.

*Tip 4. Provide time for continuous evaluation.* One of the most critical components of the internship program is the communication between the intern, the principal, and the other members of the leadership team. Time needs to be scheduled daily for discussing and evaluating what has occurred during the school day. The intern should feel comfortable asking any questions and receiving criticism.

Communication can easily be inhibited by any number of factors, and so it is always an area for improvement in any organization. However, one of the strongest assets of the members of the leadership team at Kannapolis Middle School was their incredible willingness to talk to me and help me work through my beliefs and improve my weaknesses. At least once a day, and usually much more often, I had the opportunity to converse with one or more of the administrators. In addition, I knew their doors were open any time I needed help or assistance. The leadership team made me feel that no question was too stupid to ask and no situation too insignificant to discuss. This support gave me the room to repeatedly question my beliefs and ideas concerning students, learning, and interacting with the staff.

*Tip 5. Rely on the university supervisor when problems arise.* At the university a supervisor should be in place who organizes the internships and provides support to both interns and their mentors. This component is important to the success of the internship. Clear communication should exist between this supervisor and the principal mentor so that each knows the other's expectations. Although I believe that the principal and the intern should create the vision for the internship, the supervisor should approve this vision and monitor the intern's progress. Because all school cultures are different, all internships – like all student teaching experiences – will be different. However, the one universal is the expectation that, when the intern leaves the internship, he or she will be prepared with entry-level competencies to carry out the role of an assistant principal or a principal.

The supervisor should also be looked upon by the principal and intern as a third party who can address any problem that may arise during the internship. Based on the experiences of some of my colleagues, I realize that all internships will not be as successful as mine. When there are problems, they often stem from the culture and climate of the school or from a personality conflict between the principal and the intern. If the latter circumstance arises during an internship, a third party needs to assess the situation and provide some advice on what the intern should do.

One strategy that would help alleviate such conflicts of culture or personality is for the supervisor to develop a strong relationship with area superintendents and principals. The hope is that, during the process of placing interns, university supervisors and school officials will work closely together to try to create appropriate matches. Many factors need to be taken into account, including the success of the present administration of the school and the strength of the curriculum within the school.

## **Concluding Comments**

My internship was wonderful, and I believe that it helped me develop invaluable skills that will one day make me an extremely successful principal. I cannot imagine what it would have been like

venturing into the position of assistant principal or principal without this experience. However, I realize that there are many individuals across the nation participating in school administration programs that do not require internships. To me, this is the greatest injustice that we do to aspiring leaders of our schools. Learning is best when it is hands-on, whether you are a child or an adult. One can read and study all the books and journals available; however, the ultimate test comes when the individual is actually in the trenches doing what must be done. Principal internships can equip interns with the skills and experience that are necessary to have a successful first year in any administrative position.