



## 4 Foundational Components for Early Career Principals

Leaders new to the principalship can build a strong foundation with these strategies as they navigate their new roles.

*By Travis J. Peck*

Reflecting on my first principal position, I recall my mixed emotions. During this transitional time in my career, my emotions ranged from excitement to nervousness. I was excited about the opportunity to lead a school of educators and students, but I was also worried about the uncertainty of the position. Having mixed emotions is common among new and seasoned principals.

As educators, we have instilled a mindset of success and do not want to fail our students and staff or ourselves. However, as we navigate the daily challenges and the unknowns, our confidence grows, and the routines become standard practice.

### **Focus on What You Can Control**

My first principal position encompassed leading a K-4 elementary school when the school district imposed a 5-percent pay reduction for all staff, teacher turnover was high, and the overall climate was poor. While acknowledging these significant challenges, I realized some were out of my control to fix, so I focused on what I could control.

I prioritized meeting with the teachers, school staff, students, and parents. Devoting time to meeting with the staff, students, and families allowed me to understand better the factors influencing the building's current climate. Furthermore, this process helped me realize what impeded the school's success, discover potential teacher leaders, and understand the areas needing attention. The information I gained from these conversations proved invaluable as I embarked on my new leadership role and devised an action plan to move the building in a positive direction.

Early in my career, I learned you cannot do everything alone. An effective leader must establish systems and empower their staff to help them accomplish their daily tasks. I have established several foundational components to assist in the daily tasks principals encounter. Having devoted time to meeting with staff and parents allowed me to develop professional relationships and call upon potential teacher leaders to join essential building teams.

### **Build the Foundation**

During my 11 years as a building principal, I have found these four foundational components beneficial early in my career: systems, communication, relationships, and leadership teams.

1. **Systems:** Principals balance many roles while being instructional leaders and managers. While some might argue these two roles go hand in hand, they are also far apart. An instructional leader empowers their staff by involving them in the decision-making process and having them lead teams. A manager's role is more of a check-and-balance approach to ensure compliance with specific tasks. Principals must establish essential systems to meet the leadership and manager tasks while balancing other tasks they face at any time.
2. **Communication:** It's the cornerstone of a principal's success, whether they are new to the role or seasoned. An effective leader must communicate transparent and pertinent information to key stakeholders. This reduces confusion and uncertainty and fosters a positive school climate. It allows the principal to tell their story and to share the truth and great things occurring with students, staff, and the community. I recommend principals who are early in their careers allocate time to meet with various stakeholders and listen. As principals, we work in a problem-solving mindset to resolve issues that arise. However, I encourage principals to take this opportunity to hear and establish an open form of communication. This will keep you informed and empower you to make informed decisions, thereby reducing uncertainty and confusion.
3. **Relationships:** Relationships are the bedrock of a principal's journey. They can start when someone enters a building or participates in a conversation. I have learned from my experiences that relationships provide valuable information and help with self-care. As an early career principal, you will experience a plethora of emotions. I would describe these emotions as riding a roller coaster; you will have experience moving forward with an initiative, the pauses, the decline, and the low points. However, established relationships can help an administrator navigate these challenges and stay focused on the goal. Furthermore, relationships provide a sense of belonging and an internal motivation to perform at or above their level. They make you feel connected and supported, which is crucial in a leadership role.
4. **Leadership Teams:** A principal cannot accomplish all of the building and district goals alone. A leadership team traditionally consists of a core group of teachers that support the overarching building goals, dissect building data, and devise and assist with implementing initiatives. As an early career principal, I found the leadership teams invaluable to the success of the students and the school in achieving the goals. Furthermore, empowering a core team to complete specific tasks toward a common goal allowed me to oversee the big picture. To be effective in leadership, I encourage early career principals to establish a leadership team for their school. Remember, your school has different needs than your colleagues.

## Tips to Get Started

Based on these foundational components, I've found these tips to be helpful, too. As you develop your leadership style and systems, consider these strategies.

- Establish routines to ensure you are meeting and achieving your set goals.
- Prioritize your tasks in an organized way to help you navigate the daily challenges.
- Assess your communication process and take time to listen.
- Establish relationships with other colleagues. The NAESP Early Career Principal community of practice is a great way to connect.

- Create leadership teams and protocols.
- Empower your staff by delegating roles and responsibilities. You cannot do it all by yourself.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help when you need it.
- Strive for a healthy work-life balance. It's critical to success.
- Unplug. Designate times to check your emails but also time to turn it off.
- Stay focused. Always lead in ways that support your purpose, or your "why."
- Expect the unexpected and be flexible to changes.
- Be visible in your school and community.
- Take time to celebrate the positive milestones.

As a school leader, you've committed to fostering success in your school community. While you will continue to face daily hurdles and uncertainties, these foundational components will boost your confidence as a new leader. With time, what once seemed challenging becomes second nature, and we transform these new practices into our everyday routines.

*Travis J. Peck is principal of Newberry Elementary School in Etters, Pennsylvania. (Via naesp.org)*