

Preface

Effective school leaders are learners first. Yet few of us make time every day for reflection and professional growth, particularly in the critical first few years of our tenures as principals, when many of our workday habits take hold. In part, that's because we feel the pressures of time and our expansive commitments, often compounded by the weight of emergencies and the incessant barrage of immediate demands that are inevitable aspects of our role.

Regular use of the Journal is intended to help school leaders develop the practice of reflection—which, given principals' harried schedules, must be deliberately incorporated into their daily and weekly routine. The isolation of the principalship, paired with the constant shortage of time, makes it difficult for school leaders to engage in ongoing professional development or to find convenient access to helpful suggestions from peers or from the research. The Journal is meant as a functional way for principals to begin addressing this problem, building or extending their leadership repertoires. I also hope that the Journal will be used by superintendents and district office leaders as they mentor the principals in their charge.

HOW IS THE JOURNAL DESIGNED TO WORK?

Each month the reflective calendar carries a theme relating to the tasks and events common to that month of the principal's year: Startup activities in August and September, teacher evaluation and testing in the spring months, a mix of planning and self-renewal in the summer, and more. (Some principals whose schools operate on a nontraditional schedule will have to adapt the Journal's planner features to fit the rhythm of their calendar.) For each week, readers will find inspirational quotes that reinforce hopeful attitudes toward schooling and leadership, also useful

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for the principal's newsletter or to set the tone in a faculty meeting. Weekly questions serve as prompts for reflection and journaling. And at the core of the Journal are insights and tips from award-winning elementary, middle, and high school principals, corresponding to the monthly calendar themes.

The Resources section at the end of the book provides additional observations of special interest to prospective or beginning school leaders, mostly gleaned from my own experience in public, private, and international schools over the past two decades.

THE VALUE—AND POWER—OF REFLECTION

Reflection can rejuvenate, inspire, realign; we've all seen teachers who engage in reflective practices, like career ladder programs and National Board Certification, and subsequently exhibit significantly improved professionalism, resourcefulness, engagement, leadership, and even attitudes. The same can be true for principals, as we strive to be proactive rather than reactive leaders, more aware of our aims and motivations and eager to learn better ways of accomplishing our objectives.

The practice of self-evaluation is integral to effective leadership in any organization, but particularly in schools because of the highly affective context of schooling—schools are more like families than businesses, and the emphasis on relationships can make executive functions such as conflict resolution more complex. Overcoming the difficult situations that present themselves in school leadership demands that we make time to actively assess the circumstances as soon as possible, evaluating and planning ahead, taking control rather than being swept along by undercurrents of emotion and competing demands that overtake the best-planned days. Often there seems no time to make time, and consequently we can rush decisions that we discover in hindsight would have been well served by pause and more deliberate analysis.

Even if this means carving out five minutes before turning out the lights and heading home in the evening, or considering reflective questions on the drive to or from work each day, there is always time if the process of reflection is important enough. Veteran school leaders I know have learned to make time to process, evaluate, regroup; and to an individual, they consider it vital in their continuing success and growth in the long term. Immediately, the regular practice of reflection helps principals clarify assumptions and regain or maintain a big-picture perspective, moving them toward more strategic and less reactive decision making.

MAKING REFLECTION WORK FOR YOU

Reflection is useful only if it is applied. Creating time to evaluate one's progress, take stock of challenges and resources, and "return to the balcony" enables refocusing on long-term goals that are otherwise obscured by day-to-day management pressures. All are healthy outcomes of using a deliberate planning tool like this Journal. You might emerge from your work in the Journal with great ideas, but you need to enlist your staff and broader support network to implement them. Consequently, you'll note that many of the reflective questions direct you to consider how you'll engage teachers and colleagues in support of your long-term objectives, which requires dialogue and motivation. (For those of you using the Journal in a mentoring context, the questions provide a mechanism to move from reflection, to brainstorming and sharing, to strategy.)

We all acknowledge that immediate pressures demand a school leader's attention and squeeze time for reflection to a minimum. High-stakes testing, heightened accountability pressures, and increasing competition between and among public, charter, independent, and parochial schools (and home schooling) form an ever-present backdrop to the principal's experience today. Our day-to-day lives can be determined by the constant, unpredictable, unscheduled problems and issues that arise, from facilities concerns like leaking roofs and faltering sound systems and plumbing hassles, to student conduct issues, staff emergencies, personal and health-related issues, and more. Stress, ambiguity, and unpredictability are ever-present aspects of the principal's daily experience that can threaten even the best intentions for reflective thinking and planning.

This is precisely why reflection is crucial for principals who strive to do more than manage external demands; reflection can serve to help school leaders keep a perspective on the scope of their responsibilities beyond today's laser focus on outcomes, and look up and out into the future of the schools they hope to create and serve.

This underscores why *A Reflective Planning Journal for School Leaders* is a valuable resource, because using it regularly, especially in a peer partnership or mentoring relationship, can enable school leaders to make reflective practice a habit. As with so many choices and priorities school leaders must define, we have to *make time* for reflection if we recognize its benefits and believe it's important enough. It certainly has improved my practice and my perspectives on my work as it relates to my values, my own growth as a leader, and the big-picture goals I've set for my school. I sincerely hope new and seasoned principals find the Journal useful as a practical tool for personal and professional development that can help them model—and benefit from—constant learning and growth.