

# THE CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

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## Abstract

**This article describes numerous challenges for school administrators in the new millennium. The greatest concerns of principals are expertly discussed along with positive recommendations. The authors emphasize the necessity for school administrators to keep abreast of modern reforms and new technologies.**

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Principals face new challenges as they enter a new millennium of educating America's youth. These challenges are often merely mutations or manifestations of older and existing problems. They may require innovative approaches or new emphasis, as educators attempt to address them in the context of our rapidly expanding society.

According to one author, strong principals may be the single most important factor in determining the effectiveness of a school. "The principal is the principle, and everything flows from there," said Larry Payne, a director with the University of Houston-based Institute for Urban Education (Markley, 1996).

Traditionally, principals hire the teachers, manage the budget, respond to community and parent concerns, and set the tone on everything from discipline to academic goals. In elementary schools, many times, they are instructional leaders, providing guidance in what they consider the best methodology for teaching the children they have. In high schools, some with multimillion-dollar budgets, principals oversee a complex operation with hundreds of employees and a student body the size of a small city (Markley, 1996).

The National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association of Secondary School Principals compiled a study that suggested that finding men and women willing to accept the challenges of leadership in American education will be difficult. Their survey revealed that 60% of educators believe principals are paid too little for the amount of work involved. Some 32% found the job too stressful. Twenty-seven percent said

the job required too much time. Difficulty in satisfying parents bothered 14% and 13% said societal problems distract from teaching (Asch, 1999).

The most accurate description of the obstacles that face millennium principals can best be derived from contemporary principals themselves. The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) recently conducted a poll of 802 elementary and middle school principals. They were asked to rate 24 issues according to their importance.

Of the 24 issues listed, the issues of greatest concern to the principals were motivating students (97%), involving parents in their children's schoolwork (94%), accommodating, and paying for, increasing numbers of special education children (93%), keeping up with education technology (93%) (Valenza, 1996). The focus of this article is to briefly address a few of the concerns, facing the school principal in the new educational era.

Motivation of students and involvement of parents are esoteric phrases, encompassing a host of issues including school satisfaction, relevance, as well as safety and enthusiasm. In fact the positive perception of students and teachers hinges upon the necessity of school principals providing an environment that is both educationally beneficial and safe in the New World order. This task will become increasingly difficult for new principals as they are faced with increasing school violence and student disassociation.

Recent events have again focused the nation's attention on violence in U.S. public schools, an issue that has generated public concern and directed research for more than two decades. Despite long-standing attention to the problem, there is a growing perception that not all public schools are safe places of learning, and media reports highlight specific school-based violent acts. More than half of U.S. public schools reported experiencing at least one crime incident in school year 1996-97, and 1 in 10 schools reported at least one serious violent crime during that school year. Ten percent of all public schools experienced one or more serious violent crimes (defined as murder, rape or other type of sexual battery, suicide, physical attack or fight with a weapon or robbery) that were reported to police or other law enforcement officials during the 1996-97 school year. (*Violence and Discipline Problems in U.S. Public Schools, 1996-97*) These conditions will have to be addressed and successfully dealt with by all school administrators in the next century.

The siege of public policy concerning the needs of special education has also created several new areas of concerns for school principals. Twenty-second century principals must be willing to redefine and tailor their roles as they alleviate the disparities that exist in the areas of special education and inclusion. An article published by Allington, McGill-Franzel, and Schick (1997) presented the findings of researchers who interviewed principals of elementary schools where large numbers of children were being retained and/or referred to special education. The researchers wanted to learn why so many children had problems at these schools and what the schools were doing to resolve the problems.

According to this study, principals shared the prejudices and stereotypes of mainstream society. Most principals claimed that children with learning problems were "disadvantaged." They believed that "disadvantaged children" were "immature" and "slow learners." The principals confused achievement with ability. They believed that children who entered school with limited educational experiences were also intellectually limited (Wright, 1999). Within the next decade, as researchers, psychologists, and legislatures merge their views and requirements with educational curricula, principals will be called upon to synthesize the theoretical into practicing educational philosophy (Allington et al., 1999).

The new millennium principal will by necessity become consistently metamorphic, as he or she will be required to be knowledgeable, discriminating, and compliant with emerging technology and scientific approaches. Experts say there is a link between administrators' ability to make informed technology decisions and their personal use of technology. Craig Richards, a professor in the graduate program for school administrators at Teachers College, Columbia University, has estimated "that only 5% of principals nationwide are fluent in the basics of word processing, spreadsheets, and presentation software." Richards blames the age

of the administrators; busy schedules; and, for some, “a reluctance to give up the perquisite of having a secretary do the typing.” He indicated that technology in many instances is superior to texts as “a living and changing learning resource.” And he echoes that the current principal will not have to know all of the answers but will at least be aware of the questions that should be asked in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century classroom.

In recent years, a number of high-profile education reformers and organizations have developed comprehensive, replicable models of curriculum and instruction that are meant to transform entire schools. Today, in fact, dozens of models and designs are out there and the modern administrator will be required to sift through the host of reforms in order to find those that are most beneficial and specifically designed to effect positive change in his school system. In the next several years, more and more principals and school districts will be shopping around for the best model for their districts. Faced with the fact that although society may have reached a rough consensus on the need for “more challenging standards” or for “improvements in teacher education,” the reform world is divided by fundamental disagreement. There are important differences of opinion on such pedagogical issues as learning styles, issues of value, what do we mean by an educated citizen, and what are we educating children for? The challenge facing the new school principal will be to make sense of the escalating dilemma (Finn & Traub, 1999).

In conclusion, school principals in the new millennium will add to their list of responsibilities the added duties of finding solutions to 22<sup>nd</sup> century challenges. These challenges include but are not limited to keeping students motivated and safe in a school environment that is increasingly apathetic and violent. The challenge to administer quality education to all students including those with special needs. The necessity for administrators to keep abreast of and implement modern reforms, while filtering in new technologies as they emerge with tried and true educational approaches.

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