



Helping School Leaders Find Life Balance

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I wake up early – too early – and feel the familiar urge to immediately reach for my phone. Does anybody need me? Is everything OK? No crises at school? Then I remind myself it's Sunday morning, two days after Christmas, and I'm on vacation. I attempt to go back to sleep, but the lure of the phone is too powerful.

It wasn't always this way for school leaders. Not too long ago, when a school principal left the office at the end of a long day, the work day was over. No checking email. No vibration from the phone warning of an incoming text. No spam to disturb the quiet of the evening with the family. School problems would wait until the morning.

The Changing Role of School Leaders

The role of school leaders has been transformed over the past generation. School principals used to be plant managers and administrators. They ensured that classrooms were staffed and that buses ran on time. They supported their teachers and even had time to coach athletic teams.

In contrast, today's principal is also responsible for improving classroom instruction for every student. Principals must be

visionaries who create the conditions that facilitate transformational change in their schools. Principals need expertise in language acquisition, math manipulatives and assessment strategies.

Leading the instructional program requires regular visits to classrooms, in-depth conversations with teachers and a keen focus on formative assessments. As a result, today's principal often lacks the time in a regular work day to complete all the new requirements inherent in this changing role while still managing the campus.

Technology only exacerbates the problem. With 24/7 communication, drawing the line between work hours and personal hours becomes nearly impossible. Work invades family time with the children. Date nights with the spouse are interrupted by periodic glances at the phone. Weekends become the best time to respond to the mountain of emails. Each phone call, text or email could be the warning that an emergency situation is just around the corner, so today's school leader is always on alert and always in work mode.

By Jeff Harding



A recent article titled “Churn: The High Cost of Principal Turnover” by the School Leaders Network warned of the impact from this changing role: “The work of the principal is much more than any one leader can appropriately handle.” As new leadership initiatives have been added to the job, tasks have not been taken off the plate. The result: principals with greater demands on their time and higher levels of stress – plus lack of sleep, lack of exercise, lack of family time and a life out of balance.

The challenge to finding life balance is amplified for high school administrators. At large high schools, athletic competitions fill the calendar and many require administrative supervision. Football, basketball, soccer and, in some districts, water polo and volleyball can play havoc on the personal life of our high school leaders. Post-season competition can mean hours of driving to regional contests. Add to this attendance at board meetings, PTA functions, drama performances and music concerts, and the schedule becomes unsustainable.

Patricia Luebke, in her work “High School Principals Who Stay: Stability in a Time of Change,” documents the ways in which principals struggle to find their life balance as work obligations supersede and undermine regular exercise, date nights and family dinners. An unbalanced life can contribute to poor health and can even disrupt a marriage.

The Importance of Finding Life Balance

For many, the amount of work will expand to the amount of time allotted. Regardless of the hours devoted to leading a school, many school leaders still find they never get caught up. There will always be another classroom to visit, another student to counsel, another parent to console, another activity to attend.

The challenge for our school leaders is to find life balance, the sweet-spot in the balance between their work and personal lives. Life balance looks different for each person, depending upon their personal situation and personality. Introverts may require more time to recharge than extroverts. School leaders with small children will need more time at home. But regardless of the individual situation, all school leaders will be happier and

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more effective at work if they find their personal life balance.

Superintendents and assistant superintendents are in the position to send a powerful message about the importance of life balance. School principals can help their assistant principals find balance in their lives. Every school leader has the authority to make decisions that support their staff to find their balance and contribute to their personal wellness.

Ideas to Support Life Balance for Your Leadership Team

If we’re going to retain our effective school leaders, steps must be taken to restructure the leadership role to promote life balance and to build a culture of sustainability. There are myriad ways to help school leaders find balance in their lives. Here are a few ideas:

- Be crystal clear about what’s important and what’s not important: Many of the tasks required of our school leaders are time consuming and not mission-critical. Principals need permission to cruise through the bureaucratic tasks so they have time for the important work. Give explicit direction: “This report needs to be completed, but it doesn’t need to be perfect. Just get it done but don’t spend much time.”

- Budget for extra supervision: Supervision of school events takes a toll on the health of school leaders, particularly high school leaders. In larger schools, the calendar of events and athletic competitions can pull principals and assistant principals away from their family several evenings per week. To provide relief, allocate funds to hire a retired administrator or aspiring teacher to

supervise a series of games. Ask your school leaders to stay home, enjoy their family and get some much-needed sleep.

- Support “come in late” mornings: Evening work obligations can undermine sleep patterns. Supervising night football or basketball games leads directly to sleep deprivation if our school leaders are expected to arrive at school before the first bell the following day. Create a schedule to cover for each other in the morning hours. Tell your school leaders to come in late after they attend an evening event. Give them permission to sleep in and enjoy a morning workout before coming to the office.

- Establish a culture where difficult people are referred to district office staff: Difficult people can drain hours of principal time with little reward. After an initial effort to satisfy a difficult person, give principals the prerogative to refer them to district office staff. Often, the referral to the district office will de-escalate the conflict.

- Travel to the principal: Our days are filled with meetings, many held at the district office. Encourage the district office staff to get in their cars and travel to school campuses to meet with school leaders. When district leaders travel to see principals, it sends the message that the principals’ time is valuable.

- Keep meetings short: The real work of a school leader is done on his or her campus. Long meetings at the district office pull principals away from their students and create a backlog of work when they return to school. Use technology (Google Docs) to refine meeting agendas before meetings.

Instruct meeting facilitators to keep discussions on topic, and most important, limit meeting duration before the meeting begins.

- Create quality collaboration time: Arrange for your leadership team to step away from their work and spend time together at least once a semester. Find a calm, reflective venue to discuss fundamental core values. Eat together and play together. Take the time to build relationships within your leadership team, so your leaders feel the sense of collaboration and support.

- Add flexibility to the work schedule: Writing evaluations or major reports requires focused attention. The school office is no place for deep concentration. Suggest that your school leader take the afternoon to write evaluations or reports from home. Ask another administrator, perhaps someone from the district office, to be available by cell phone while their colleague is home writing. Give the school secretary the alternative administrator's cell phone number and encourage them to call for any reason. They rarely call, but they feel better knowing that someone from the district office is available

when the principal is off-campus.

- Encourage attendance at leadership programs: Our most stellar school leaders need new opportunities for professional growth. Keep them engaged by sending them, at district expense, to one of the many leadership programs available to principals. Two-day and week-long programs are available through ACSA, as well as through many universities. Hire a retired administrator to cover their responsibilities for their absence, if more than a day or two.

- Buffer your principals from demands from the board: Establish clear protocols with the board that they direct all questions to the superintendent rather than contact school leaders directly. Principals tend to focus on requests from trustees at the expense of their many other responsibilities. The district office leaders should field board questions. If additional information from the principal is required, the superintendent can reach out to the principal over the phone or during the next school visit.

- Provide access to a non-evaluative coach: School leaders can feel vulnerable sharing

potential weaknesses with their superintendent. Having access to a non-evaluative coach who can be an advisor when faced with a difficult situation can be a comfort, even if the coach is never called upon. Provide access to a coach for any school leader who might be interested. Enter into an agreement with a coach, often a retired superintendent, for hourly consultation time. This expense will likely be less than the cost of leadership turnover.

Adjust the sequence of the board agenda: In many districts, principals are expected to attend board meetings. Create the board agenda so that board items that relate directly to school principals are discussed first. Defer the business-related items to later in the meeting and provide an opportunity for your principals to leave the meeting. Consider scheduling a short break in the board meeting to signify the transition.

Principal turnover derails school improvement efforts and costs the district an estimated \$75,000 per vacancy. Our collective ability to retain effective school leaders will have a profound impact on our schools and our students. Our challenge is to structure the leadership role to promote life balance. By building a culture that supports life balance for our leaders, we promote sustained improvement in our schools. Failure to take action will only contribute to greater principal turnover and lack of continuity for schools and our students.

Resources

- Hull, Jim (2012). *The Principal Perspective: Full Report*. Center for Public Education: www.centerforpubliceducation.org/principal-perspective.
- Luebke, Patricia Ann (2013). *High School Principals Who Stay: Stability in a Time of Change*. UWM Digital Commons, Theses and Dissertations, Paper 132: <http://dc.uwm.edu/etd/132>.
- School Leaders Network (2014). *Churn: The High Cost of Principal Turnover*: https://connectleadsucceed.org/churn_the_high_cost_of_principal_turnover

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