

Introduction

Any principal can fill a bookshelf with books about educational leadership. Any principal can study lists of guidelines, standards, principles, and theories. The best administrators and the worst administrators can ace exams in their graduate classes. The difference between more effective principals and their less effective colleagues is not what they know. It is what they do.

This book is about *what great principals do* that sets them apart. Clarifying what the best leaders do, and then practicing it ourselves, can move us into their ranks.

The book flows from three different perspectives. I have participated in five research studies, each grounded in visits to schools with more effective principals and schools with less effective leaders. This approach allowed us to determine what great principals do that other principals do not. Also, every year I work with more than fifty schools as a consultant. Observing in these schools, visiting with principals, faculty, students, and staff, I have gained insight into the practices that lead to success. The third perspective is very personal: I write about the core beliefs that have guided my own work as a principal.

This book is not meant to prescribe a narrow set of instructions. Instead, it frames the landscape of school from the perspective of great principals. What do they see when they view their schools and the people in them? Where do they focus their attention? How do they spend their time and energy? What guides their decisions? How can we gain the same advantages?

There is no one answer; if there were, surely we'd all have it by now. Education is extremely complex, and so is school leadership. But we can work toward understanding what the best principals do. We can gain insight into how effective we are as leaders. Most of all, we can continue to refine our skills. All of

us have this in common with the best principals: No matter how good we are, we still want to be better.

The format of this book is straightforward. An introductory chapter provides context on the importance of learning from the most effective principals. A concluding chapter asks us to center on our own core beliefs. And in between are fifteen chapters—one dedicated to each of the fifteen things that great principals do differently. Each of us can do everything described in this book—everything the best principals do.