

# Chapter 1

## Becoming

I became a principal at a young age – 28. After four years of teaching, my principal at the time encouraged me to go for my Administrative Services Credential and to start applying for administrative positions. After spending a few weeks considering my options, I went forward and got my Administrative Services Credential and started to apply for positions all over the state. To my surprise, I received an offer to become a middle school assistant principal. That summer, my wife and I packed up our lives and moved from Southern to Northern California.

From the beginning, I knew that this experience would be vastly different from teaching. I was immediately thrust into hiring decisions, fixing the master schedule, preparing classrooms for teachers and students, and meeting community members.

I was lucky enough to work with a veteran principal who was able to guide me during my first year out of the classroom. Calling that first year a bumpy ride would be generous. I felt lost, overwhelmed, and unprepared for the position. One of my first experiences in my new role was the hiring of new teachers, as we still had several vacancies to fill. I was new to this experience. At my former school where I was a teacher, we rarely had a vacancy come up. When we did, it was filled quickly with an amazing teacher. As we were conducting interviews at my new school, I was shocked

by how unprepared most of the candidates were for both the interview process and the potential assignment itself. Sadly, we began the year with two vacancies and long-term substitute teachers.

None of my master's courses prepared me for what it would be like to be a school leader. That first year felt like five. I remember that it seemed like it rained every day. I'm not just talking about the physical act of rain, although we had an abnormally cold and gray winter and spring that year. I am talking more about it raining from the inside. I was lost in my new role. I was new to having parents in my face, disagreeing with every decision I made, as well as teachers banging on my office door, dropping problem after problem on my desk. I'm sure that I quit dozens of times in my head.

From day one, I found myself thrust into contentious parent meetings, disciplinary hearings, suspension and expulsion meetings, and teacher evaluations. Gone were the days where I worked with smiling and eager students. I now began and ended each day patching up huge problems with Band-Aids, dealing with disciplinary issues, and completing endless compliance tasks. The job of a school leader is lonely. Classrooms are filled with noise and the hustle and bustle of learning. An administrator's office is quiet and muted. I felt defeated.

If you are feeling the same way, you are not alone.

As the days turned into weeks and weeks into months, I found myself less overwhelmed and lost. I listened and watched my principal work, solve problems, and create solutions for both teachers and students. As a young assistant principal, I did my best to make a positive impact on the school, knowing that one day I would be standing in the shoes of my principal, leading a school, for better or for worse.

Little did I know that I would get my opportunity sooner rather than later. My principal was on the short list for a director position in the district. After a quick round of interviews, she was given the job and announced that she would accept the offer. The principal job opening at my school was immediately published. I did not apply, nor was asked to apply. Several candidates were interviewed, including a principal from a neighboring district that my principal

had worked with in the past. She was offered the position and took a tour of the school, meeting me along the way. She seemed very competent, friendly, and connected to the community.

She turned down the job the next day.

As the story goes, she did not want to switch districts and was being considered for a principalship at another school. That meant that my school was still without a principal. One afternoon, my principal asked me if I was interested in the position. I said I was, but wasn't sure if I was ready for it. In hindsight, I knew I wasn't ready for it. However, I did not want to pass up the opportunity to make the leap into the principalship. It could be years before the offer would come my way again.

I could tell that conversations were happening behind the scenes. One afternoon, my principal told me to bring a suit to work the next day as I might need it for something. That next day, I was summoned to the superintendent's office. I had only met my superintendent a few times and never spoke with him one-on-one. I quickly changed into my suit in the small bathroom in the office and drove the three miles to the district office. I walked into the building and over to the superintendent's office and told his secretary that he was expecting me. She said that he was waiting for me and that I could go right in.

My superintendent greeted me when I walked in the door and he asked me to have a seat at the conference table.

Then, he asked me if I wanted the job.

I said yes.

At the ripe old age of 28, I became the next principal of my school. I was terrified, excited, and trepidatious all at once – as well as sure that I had made the biggest mistake of my career. There was no way that I was ready for this.

I spent the summer reading leadership books and preparing for the school year. No one knew that I was the new principal. As teachers began to trickle back in at the end of the summer, they all asked who the new principal was. None of them ever considered that it would or could be me. That hurt, but I understood. I was young, inexperienced, and unsure of myself. When it was publicly

announced that I would be the next principal of the school, the news was met with skepticism by both parents and teachers. I knew early on that I would have to establish myself as different from my predecessor, even though she was well liked and respected by everyone.

I couldn't rely on years of experience in administration or my experience in the classroom.

I needed to bring something different to the table.

## What Now?

Making the move to administration can be an overwhelming experience. It is not a decision that should be taken lightly. Talk it through with your spouse, partner, family, and friends. There will be school districts that are only looking for a seasoned veteran administrator or teacher with 20+ years of experience. However, there will be others that are looking for new blood, new ideas, and new perspectives.

Here's how to get started:

1. Connect with district administrators online through LinkedIn and other social media. Respond to their posts as often as possible. This way, they will start to get to know you even before your name comes across on an application.
2. Go down to the district office and say hello to the HR director in person. Most administrative positions get dozens if not hundreds of applications. You want to make yourself stand out in any way possible.
3. If you are already working in the district you want to become an administrator in, sign up for committees, boards, and task groups. This will give you exposure to district administrators and site leaders.