

Preface

When I worked for the National Association of Secondary School Principals, I worked closely with a group of practicing urban principals and assistant principals who had as one of their challenges the goal of “identifying solutions to the challenges facing urban secondary school administrators.” Over the years, these principals kept returning to the need for a resource document that experienced and neophyte urban principals could use to “take charge” humanistically of a large complex organization. Many of these principals with whom I worked in the late 1990s reflected about their work and are responsible for the key “C’s”—control, caring, change, charisma, communication, curriculum, and courage—that identify the chapters in this book. These dedicated men and women, residing in cities whose populations exceeded 200,000, advocated for policies and publications that could be used by them and their elementary school peers. They repeatedly acknowledged the need for systemic reform, but they also felt that a resource document that spoke to the conditions of urban schools and used the language with which urban school administrations were conversant would be picked up by school administrators and used. They acknowledged the utility of existing generic documents on the principalship, change, and reform, but appealed for their own “little red book,” their own manual for excellence, their own Bible, their own Torah! This book is an answer to their call.

When I first assumed a principalship at an elementary urban school, I inherited an excellent teaching and support staff but no organized set of documents to guide my work. There was no student handbook. There was no faculty and staff handbook. There was no parent and community handbook. There was no school improvement action plan even though there were school district goals and objectives for which each school was held accountable. There was no organized parent, student, and teacher association. The school records, both student and staff records, were not organized. I made a pledge to myself that when I left that elementary school, the principal following me would not be greeted with the same challenges I was. When I left the school seven months later, the new principal had nothing but accolades for me. The transition conference, buttressed by the documents I gave to the new principal, prepared the new principal for the duties he was about to assume.

The second principalship I assumed in the same school district was more difficult than the first for several reasons. The staff I inherited was not as competent, and it was three times larger than the one I left behind. The student body was five times larger. Record keeping and standard

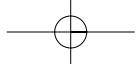
documents, again, were either nonexistent or had not been revised, with faculty and staff input, in eight years. Consequently, the documents did not comply with district, state, and federal guidelines.

I reflected on my second experience and decided to conduct a survey of newly appointed principals in the school district to determine their experiences. To my surprise, less than 20% of the “newly” appointed principals found documents (or were given documents by the outgoing principal) that would facilitate the effective operation of the school.

These three demonstrable reasons coupled with the biased media coverage (some because of proximity) and the uneven academic achievement of urban students, as reported in national achievement data, support the need for urban school principals to have their own “little red book” to inform their instructional and administrative practice. I offer it in the memory of those school administrators who have lost their lives in the line of duty. Unfortunately, in too many of the schools where life has been lost, students felt alienated and they struck out at people nearest them—their peers, their teachers, their guidance counselors, school security, and their principals and assistant principals. There are no guarantees about what will work in any school. Ten years as a principal in two urban schools taught me much. One thing I know is that it is possible to transform a school climate from one of indifference and permissiveness to one of control, communicating, and caring. During my first two years as a principal in the large secondary school (1,400 students), I took loaded guns, knives, metal pipes, metal chains, broken bottles, and other objects used as weapons from angry, violent students. Using the strategies in this book, changed the academic, organizational, social-emotional, and physical climates in the school. The number of student referrals, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions plummeted. Students’ academic achievement increased. Parent and community involvement increased. Funding increased because of the grant writing of staff, parents, and partners. After three years, the school received the Greater Baltimore Committee’s (Chamber of Commerce) Outstanding Middle School of the Year Award. The award was based on these criteria: student academic achievement; student and staff attendance; student discipline records; school climate; and parent, business, and community involvement.

Effective principals are those who have made a commitment to improve their ability to influence and to motivate others. In being expressive and supportive, they make room for their own humanness, continuing to learn and to grow along with the people they work with. They do not always do things perfectly, but they do things. They do not always say profound things, but they say something. They can laugh and be serious; they can be inconsistent and still know how to follow through on important priorities. They can be firm and, at times, flexible. They are able to be effective and realistic.

I would advise school leaders to never let the freedom and challenge to grow become an obligation to be perfect. There is no such thing as a perfect principal. I have “walked in your moccasins,” and I know about the challenges you face. What I remember most about the principalship, however, are the hugs and verbal thanks from students and their extended families; the teacher notes and public pronouncements that working with

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me had contributed to significant professional and personal growth; the active recruitment of my staff by my principal colleagues and some central offices; working with fellow principals who were willing to coach and mentor me during challenging times; and three superintendents (Dr. Roland Patterson, Dr. John Crew, Mrs. Alice Pinderhughes) who understood what it meant to let “a thousand flowers bloom.” I was allowed to lead with grace and dignity. I wish you grace, and I wish you dignity as you lead, lifting you as you climb!

