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Understanding Schools, Understanding Leadership

An Interview with
Jeff Neall, Ed.S., Principal, and Amber Hall, Ed.S., Assistant Principal
West Middle School
Grand Blanc Community Schools
Grand Blanc, MI

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Jeff Neall is Principal of West Middle School, a new 6-8 grade school of approximately 900 students in Grand Blanc, Michigan. Amber Hall is Assistant Principal of West Middle School. They have just completed their first year as school administrators. The school district, Grand Blanc Schools, is located near Flint, Michigan, in Genesee County, and has served as a bedroom community for the automotive industry. With the changing Michigan economy, the district is undergoing several cultural and demographic shifts. The school district is known for its Standard and Poor's ratings as exceptionally above normal for the state in mathematics and reading and for its excellent core spending practices. Both Mr. Neall and Ms. Hall have recently completed graduate educational leadership degrees and have well-developed ideas about educational reform and educational leadership for this age.

Dr. Flumerfelt:

Thank you, Jeff and Amber, for joining this interview as an administrative team. Since you are both students of mine, I know you have some interesting individually-developed ideas about education reform and that you are also very cohesive philosophically as an administrative team. So, this interview will be conducted in two sections. First, I would like to get an overview from you regarding the state of affairs in education, and your individual and collective thoughts about what needs to be done. Second, I would like to have you explain how you attain leadership excellence.

Section 1

There has been a lot of rhetoric about school reform for the past thirty years. Are there any significant reforms underway at this time that you fully support?

Mr. Neall: One of the school reform efforts that I am in support of is the movement to develop professional learning communities through collective problem identification and problem solving. Although the research for this organizational approach has been around for 30 years, I like that it is receiving attention now. Fundamentally, this process helps professionals build more effective schools. By encouraging more conversation and developing a focus for school improvement, educators begin to generate solutions for school wide problems, thus creating ownership of not only the challenges the school faces but also in the solutions. The idea of professional learning communities has a lot of

merit because it uses data to focus on areas of improvement and then equips professionals to implement those changes. Professional learning communities' approaches have changed the dynamics within and around schools in a positive way.

Ms. Hall: One reform idea I believe in is to use the power and information of the local community to improve schools. In this regard, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation is helpful because it does frame high expectations for all students, not just part of the student body. Because of this, NCLB is an exceptional force for educational reform. It helps the community comprehend and support the idea that the more opportunities and choices we can give students, the better. We need to maintain a variety of learning options to enhance motivation. The varied approaches are good for all learners. This reform legislation does provide a good emphasis on students as learners with achievement expectations.

If you could change one thing in education tomorrow, what would it be and why would you change it?

Mr. Neall: One of the things that I would change is the inequity in school funding and also in providing funding to programs that are successful, rather than reducing funding. For instance, Head Start is a proven program that creates successful learning factors for needy pre-school children. It works. We should not cut its funding, yet we do. We need to be willing to pay for what we say we want. If we say we want "no child left behind," such as with NCLB, then we have to align our practices to that, deliver it and also receive funding for it. It could mean paying teachers in urban or rural areas more or providing more access to technological resources. I wish we could change the practice of saying society supports one thing while it does **NOT** maintain a focus and the finances to support its longevity.

Ms. Hall: Kids deserve equality and opportunity. There are not the same opportunities in all districts. Just in our county, there is great disparity. Even in local districts there are inequities. Some leaders try to address these issues, but it always causes conflict to make these changes. We need to cut the stereotypes and do what is right for kids. We need to provide equality and equality of opportunity.

What is positive about the culture of education at this time? What is most challenging?

Ms. Hall: I think that there are high expectations being promoted for all. This is positive in that this expectation is out there, as it leads to strategies such as differentiated instruction where students are taught in different ways depending on their needs and learning styles. The challenge is to get everyone to buy into what the positives mean. For instance, as far as differentiation of instruction, there may not be a good understanding of how to teach and learn differently given this new idea. It takes a lot of effort to create shared understanding. In addition, another positive I see is that data is being utilized to drive decision-making to a much greater degree. This provides consistency of expectations among schools as well as between grade levels within a school. It also facilitates early intervention for struggling learners.

Mr. Neall: One of the things that is positive is that all educators, with few exceptions, are college educated. Furthermore, we choose to be in education, knowing it doesn't pay a lot. We are in general a very service-bound profession. Educators are largely all here by choice and **AS A RESULT** demonstrate an outstanding commitment to our students. On the other hand, the challenge for school cultures in general is that we tend to go looking for a better mousetrap, rather than defining that for ourselves and then moving forward. There is some challenge in the passivity involved with thinking a better mousetrap will solve our problems. I believe if educators themselves identify things to improve, find solutions and implement solutions the right way, the state of education will turn around. We have to be committed to a few well-founded ideas and then implement them to the highest standards. We are prone to fad thinking sometimes, and while there are some good ideas in those fads, they can be distracting. We just have to pick something well and then do it well.

What kind of difficulties do schools face in terms of mission and business operations?

Mr. Neall: It is easy to pick a mission within a school or district, involve the educators in that process and totally miss what the community expects. It makes no difference how noble the endeavor is, we have to know the community and know how to bring them along as valued stakeholders. The community should be engaged in the process and we should know how to engage them to make the school a better place for our kids. There should be a shared unconditional positive regard for children from the school and community perspectives. In my county, for instance, we are seventy-million dollar businesses and financially, we operate as such. However, where we are not like business is that we are shaping lives, not making widgets. We have to do more than believe in something, we have to think through the details of overcoming the roadblocks that impact students' lives and learning achievements. Businesses build capital; schools help to shape lives--and the two could not be more different.

Ms. Hall: As far as pursuing a common mission and vision for doing what is best for kids, and then tying business operations to it, that is somewhat tricky. There can be excellent strategic plans that occur as a part of site-based decision making, for instance, that don't match the resources or capacity of the district. Instead, it is better to engage in a continuous process of streamlining ideas and operations, being creative about resources, and making solid choices in order to make things happen that are top priorities for students. The business operations and current funding shortfalls certainly force us to prioritize and decide what is vital in this regard.

Section 2

What kind of leadership is needed in schools? Is there a deep commitment to transformative leadership in schools? Or are there expectations for a different type of leader?

Mr. Neall: This is a fun question for Amber and me to consider. There is a lot of rhetoric about transformative leadership in schools. In this district, we have leadership that is supportive of this concept. We try to build toward transformative and servant leadership ideals. Interestingly, there are some employees who don't understand the concept of transformative leadership and just want to be told what to do under a command/control structure. Regardless of the understanding that might or not might exist and regardless of the commitment that is there or is not there, I try to pursue transformational and servant leadership ideals because I think that it is the right thing to do. I decided to become a school administrator because I wanted to make positive changes. By nature I am a fairly positive person and I believe that one quality is universally important in education no matter what your role in the system is. I am blessed to be able to work in an environment with people who share this quality. I believe in the people I work with and I am deeply committed to them. This belief and commitment is what drives me to lead them in positive directions to the best of my ability. I found that as teacher and school counselor I was able to make an impact on students. What I desire to do as an administrator is to impact fundamental change initiatives more broadly benefiting the kids we have committed ourselves to.

Ms. Hall: I believe that leadership requires a positive, supportive, inspirational, deep commitment to people. I believe in building toward an environment of trust and collaboration to get things done and to get them done right. There certainly is a commitment from Jeff and me as a team to facilitate a process based on transformative principles. We want employees and the community to feel comfortable about asking us to do things differently. We need people to think outside the box and join the team. We need to work to make a difference by developing and implementing new and improved ways to accomplish the goals before us. As leaders of the building, we need to set aside time to make that happen and send the message that it is a priority. I think it is easy to carry around the misconception that there is one magic way to do things. As transformative leaders, we know that instead, solutions need to be worked through and that there might be more than one solution.

On a personal/professional note, you have both pursued leadership excellence with great tenacity. Why have you done this?

Ms. Hall: What made me make a leap into administration was a dedication to the field and a strong empathy for educators. The work ethic and commitment for kids in education is incredible. I wanted to do more to facilitate this from an administrative position.

Mr. Neall: You have to live leadership to understand it. I agree with Amber's response wholly. Amber and I do think a lot alike in terms of our commitment to leadership, which I think is positive for us as a team. For me personally, I have always enjoyed working with kids; that is my identity. In this regard, my brain never stops; I am always thinking about school, the students, the teachers, and how to make school a better place. I wanted to become a school administrator so that I could make this little corner of the world a better place for those who are in it. I believe it can be done. I am surrounded by educators with this same desire and strong commitment to kids and their learning, and as idealistic as it sounds, I believe it can be done. Simply stated, I have a strong desire to work to bring out the best in people.

What are your leadership goals? What leadership development strategies work best for you as busy school administrators?

Mr. Neall: This is a critical question and one that Amber and I feel is important to discuss as a leadership team. It is so easy to be overwhelmed by "stuff" and to allow that "stuff" to consume you. But in doing so, as a leader you lose one of the most powerful tools you have in your organization. It is so much better to be out in the building and to be with the students and teachers. It is more than being visible for political reasons. My goal is to be actively and visibly supportive of what the students and teachers are engaged in. It helps to be in classrooms and close to our "core business" as I can then understand areas of strength and target areas of need, facilitate solutions and to enable collaboration to accomplish more.

Ms. Hall: My leadership goal is to keep an eye on the big picture and prioritize accordingly. This was my first year as an administrator. It is incredibly easy to get swept away with all of the "stuff" that must be taken care of. It is essential to be out there, constantly in touch with what is happening in the classrooms, hallways, etc. so that peoples' needs and organizational needs are identified.

What strategies for working as a team can you suggest to our readers?

Ms. Hall: You need to work "out there," as I explained earlier, but then you also need to pull folks together and develop a common vision. That is where the power is, in engaging on all points, in the front office and the classroom, the hallways, the discussions, the meetings, the conversations, the work. The strategy of just getting out there is lacking without this second part of the equation and it requires teamwork to get done.

Mr. Neall: You have to lead by example as a team. You have to be a part of the solution. It is not enough to identify problems and help others facilitate a solution. One of the biggest problems I have had as a new administrator is actually understanding that I am a principal **and** a team member. The team member idea is easier for me to make sense out of because it is more familiar to me. I think one of the things that has given me credibility is that I am not afraid of hard work and in fact I prefer it. What has surprised me about that is that there is sometimes an expectation that principals do not have to engage themselves in the hard work, just oversee it. I just plain don't think that works but I have to be sensitive to that thinking before I can transform it.

Do you have any other comments you wish to make on the topics addressed here?

Mr. Neall: One of the other things I would like to suggest is that it is imperative to understand as a leader that this is not a position, but rather being a leader is a way of thinking and working. In this

sense, there needs to be a comfortable sense of equality. Good teams and good leaders require honesty and the ability to critique each other. It is wonderful to work with a team-oriented person, like Amber. Leaders who want to do it alone, especially leaders new to the position who often think they MUST have all the right answers and be able to do things alone are making a huge mistake in my opinion. Unfortunately, this thinking many times results in leaders alienating themselves from the rest of the team thus diminishing their effectiveness. Surround yourself with good people, people whom you trust and allow free thinking, then most importantly, be able and willing to roll up your sleeves and dig into the hard work ahead, side-by-side with the team. This works and works well!

Ms. Hall: We are fortunate to have a working relationship where we feel free to disagree with each other. When we do, we look at all of the different angles and develop a common viewpoint. In the end, I feel it is essential to completely support all policies and decisions that Jeff makes. That is easy to do when he considers my opinions and we work through issues together.

Thank you, Mr. Neall and Ms. Hall, for sharing your experiences and insights with our readers.

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