

## Becoming a Beginning Principal of an Independent School



KEYS TO AN  
EFFECTIVE  
TRANSITION

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## FOREWORD

By Brad Adams

Schools are often marvellous and even magical places: what better job could there be than to lead a community where children learn and grow? But the reality of school leadership is often bleak. Schools are increasingly complex institutions, and the burdens of leadership can overwhelm: compare the cognitive load on schools and school leaders today compared to even twenty years ago. Small wonder becoming a principal can be so confounding. While we memorialise long-serving headmasters, the truth is that the survival rate of newly appointed principals is surprisingly low.

In this CSM Ideas, psychologist Steve Bagi focuses on the trials and tribulations of newly minted principals taking on their first headship. He looks at both the practical challenges – how heads can prepare for the handover – and the emotional and physical challenges – how they can manage the inevitable stress that comes with the spike in the intensity of responsibility. Like it or not, principals are always in a fishbowl, and the flat-out “emotional labour” required to keep everyone energised, on task and working together takes a heavy toll. **For those getting underway, *Becoming a Beginning Principal* is an excellent and indispensable review and checklist for reflection and action.**

**Bagi’s work is also a succinct wake-up call to selection committees and boards in their stewardship of leadership succession.** Too often, their focus dissipates once the new head’s contract is signed and the good news shared. Properly understood, the real work continues and intensifies as the personal and organisational foundations for a successful transition over the first two years of the new headship are consolidated. Very few boards do this as well as they should.

**While focusing on beginning principals, this work also provides valuable insight for school people stepping up into new leadership responsibilities.** While the intensity and scope of a new role may not be as taxing as for a new principal, new and unfamiliar demands and expectations create uncertainty and stress, and call for new skills and judgement. **CIRCLE’s postgraduate program in school leadership, offered in partnership with the University of Tasmania, provides just such a theoretically oriented but very practical and hands-on approach to developing this leadership capability in schools. Emerging leaders will also benefit by the perspective and practical advice provided in *Becoming a Beginning Principal*.**

This work also reminds us of how important leadership, in all its manifestations, is to the quality of our schools. Global research increasingly emphasises that schools need to become “leadership cultures” with strong strategic direction and an ethos of shared or distributed responsibility and decision-making. In such a culture, teachers need to be “teacher leaders” who work collaboratively and proactively to improve outcomes for all students. In this paradigm shift, the onus of leadership is not owned and exercised only at the top. **The research also tells us that the quality of learning and student well-being is enhanced when the adults in the building model such collaborative leadership.**

Steve Bagi’s focus on the self-care of beginning principals and on the institutional support for their successful transition is best seen as part of this more capacious vision for leadership in our schools. He also reminds us that the new principals he followed for this research actually love their job and find joy in it. Julian Stern, Dean of the Faculty of Education and Theology at York St John University, invites us into such an imaginative space. He writes: “the spirited school is an inclusive community with magnanimous leadership that enables friendship through dialogue in order to create and evaluate valuable or beautiful meanings, valuable or beautiful things, and good people.”<sup>1</sup> This definition may be aspirational, but parts of it echo with just about everybody. We need to ensure that the leadership culture we develop in schools never loses touch with the heart of the matter. Steve Bagi’s research certainly helps to put the leadership challenge in its most human and personal dimension. Anyone interested in the quality of our schools should pay attention to his advice.

1. Stern, J, *The Spirit of the School* (London, 2009) p. 161

# BECOMING A BEGINNING PRINCIPAL OF AN INDEPENDENT SCHOOL:

**Keys to an Effective Transition** – Steve Bagi

What is it like to take on the role of principal for the first time? This question has been at the heart of the research that I have conducted for my PhD thesis over the past few years. My interest in this topic came from a concern that I have had for some time for the wellbeing of principals and a desire to understand the stresses of this challenging role. Over the years, in my consulting work as a psychologist I have, sat with principals and listened to their experiences. I often heard stories of the personal struggles and intense challenges that come with the role and the way that these challenges were impacting on their wellbeing and personal relationships. I began to wonder what it was like for those stepping into the role for the first time and how beginning principals could be helped to make this transition easier.

My research project studied the experiences of beginning principals of independent schools. Although there has been considerable research undertaken examining the experiences of principals and beginning principals in general, the experiences of beginning principals in Australian Independent schools has received very little research attention. For this research:

- data was collected through an online survey;
- one-off interviews were conducted with principals in their first two years in the role; and
- a series of interviews were carried out with eight principals from around Australia who were in their first year of being a principal.

Through a pre-commencement interview and four subsequent interviews throughout their first year, I was able to look at what factors had helped them prepare for the role and enabled them to make a strong start. I was also able to gain a firsthand snapshot of their joys and challenges in taking on such a demanding role. In this study, I will highlight the main findings from the research in these three areas;

1. **Keys to helping beginning principals make a strong start;**
2. **Understanding the greatest challenges faced by beginning principals; and,**
3. **Developing strategies that encourage personal and professional development and support.**

## 1) Keys to helping beginning principals make a strong start

Athletes are always keen to make a strong start in their event. Their ability to start well is shaped by their skills, many years of training and preparation, and their focus on the race ahead of them. The start is also influenced by track conditions and other external factors. Similarly, when a beginning principal starts in the role, their ability to adjust, navigate and perform effectively will be a reflection of their abilities, preparation, training, focus and the context in which they are starting.

Overall, the beginning principals in the study were well prepared to make a strong start in the role. **Fifteen of the sixteen principals that were interviewed reported a high level of preparedness when they took on the role. This is an encouraging contrast to much of the literature** regarding beginning principals in general, which has shown a prevailing feeling of unpreparedness (Belmonte & Cranston, 2009; Bright & Ware, 2003; Lattuca, 2012). The data showed that there were four major keys that helped the beginning principals to make a strong start in the role. These were:



**Effective preparation and training;**



**Pre-commencement experiences at the school;**



**A well planned welcome, induction and formal commissioning into the role; and,**



**Strong support from the school board, independent school associations and mentors.**

## Effective preparation and training

Effective preparation for principalship involves formal and informal training, experiences in various school leadership roles and guidance and support from others (Webber & Scott, 2013). Looking specifically at the principals who were studied more closely throughout their first year, seven out of the eight had masters degrees with two also having doctoral qualifications. **The value of having a masters level qualification as part of effective preparation for the role of principal was highlighted in research carried out in the UK (Sieber, 2002), and is argued by Brundrett, Fitzgerald, and Sommefeldt (2007) as being appropriate as the principal is leading a team of professionals with graduate level education.** This research also noted the significance of having an emphasis on business management and leadership for the postgraduate study undertaken. This is important for aspiring principals to consider, as this research indicated that the financial and overall organisational management was one of the steepest learning curves that beginning principals experienced. **As well as these formal channels, the beginning principals had benefitted greatly from their participation in leadership development programs.**

Effective preparation for principals also involves the benefits gained from previous experiences in school leadership. Those taking on principalship have usually previously fulfilled executive team school leadership positions. **Often they have been a deputy principal and this experience has helped to prepare them to be a principal (Bloom & Krovetz, 2001; Johnson-Taylor & Martin, 2007). Previous leadership roles, which have afforded the leader a diversity of leadership responsibilities and experience, were shown to be the most effective preparation for principalship (Sieber, 2002).**

This type of high level leadership exposure can be contrasted to the experience of some in positions in which they only fulfil a narrow band of responsibilities. One of the beginning principals, after sharing her observations that many deputy principals are kept busy with "organising pixifotos" and non-strategic issues, went on to share her positive experience as a deputy principal.

*I was given a lot of autonomy in my role as deputy where I really was standing alongside the principal a lot. People might see that as a waste of time and resources, but it wasn't; it was really for preparing me as an apprentice.*

The deputy principal role can be an effective introduction to the role of principal, if it is wide ranging and also provides some opportunities for the deputy to sit in the driver's seat while serving as acting principal from time to time (Grant, 2013). It is this combination of training and wide ranging experience that can really help to prepare leaders for the role of principal. The results also showed the great benefit that can be gained from pre-commencement experiences at the school.

## Pre-commencement experiences at the school

We all know how difficult the first day in a new job can be! There are new people to get to know, a new community culture to understand and operational procedures to become familiarised with. **This research clearly demonstrated that beginning principals are helped to start well if their transition process begins earlier than their official first day in the office.** Although there are many variables that can influence how much exposure the incoming principal can be given to his/her new school, this research showed that these experiences can help the beginning principal to start developing relationships with the school board, leaders, staff and wider school community. As the trust that people have in their leader plays such an important part in shaping their effectiveness (Rath & Conchie, 2008), it follows that if the beginning principal can start gaining the trust of the staff before they commence in the role this will enable them to hit the ground running.

The principals in this research enjoyed different levels of exposure to their new school which ranged from social events, meetings with the school leaders and staff, active involvement in decision making right through to spending significant periods of time at the school and working with the outgoing principal. The greatest benefits of this pre-commencement time at the school were reported by two

of the principals who were given opportunities to spend extended time at the school. One had spent one week per month at the new school in the months preceding her official start and the other had been given the opportunity to spend an entire term full time at the school with considerable time spent shadowing the principal. Shadowing can enable the preparing principal to gain a wealth of practical information and insight about the school (Walker, Bryant, & Lee, 2013). For this principal, opportunities were also given for him to shadow twelve other principals;

*I'm shadowing the current principal, or outgoing principal for that time. Probably in reality about 30% of the time I shadow him. The other time I used to do a variety of things, meet with key staff and I've visited a number of other principals and shadowed them... So, I feel very well prepared because of what I've done. I think that shadowing twelve different Heads for a day, or two days in some cases, has been wonderfully good preparation.*

Both this principal and the other, who had spent one week each month with the outgoing principal, expressed the great advantage that these experiences had given them in starting well. **Both started in the role knowing the names of all of the staff and having a strong relational foundation with the new community.**

Although the importance of succession planning and transitioning is well accepted and researched in the business sector, in the school context it is largely unexplored (Steyn, 2013). Garchinsky (2008) argued that succession in the school context is often focused on the incoming leader, whereas in the business sector the role of the outgoing leaders is emphasised as it helps to create a smooth transition.

For those in the process of becoming a beginning principal and for the boards and existing principals of these schools, there is a great opportunity afforded by pro-actively planning pre-commencement time at the school. This time can significantly help the beginning principal to become accustomed to the new context as well as helping the school transition smoothly to a new senior leader.

## A well planned and effective welcome, induction and commissioning into the role

The commencement of a new principal is an exciting time for the principal and the whole school community. **The psychological importance of the welcoming process and formal commissioning service should not be underestimated. For these principals and their families it is a time of celebration and validation of the journey thus far, and a conferral of trust for their future leadership.**

Formal commissioning services provide an opportunity to publically welcome the beginning principal and show the school's support and excitement about their appointment. As approximately 84% of Independent schools in Australia are associated with a religious denomination or church, predominantly from the Christian faith (Caldwell, 2010), these commissioning events can be quite large and significant. These formal services or events should not be seen as simply perfunctory but an important part of a strong start in the new position.

One aspect that can sometimes be overlooked is the practical induction process for the beginning principal. **Although the welcoming process went well for the principals that were interviewed, some experienced frustrations because of a "here are the keys" approach to induction.** It can be frustrating when inadequate induction is given to the practical workings of the school or there are no support staff available when the principal starts.

*No one thinks about the induction of a principal. I would have liked more; it would have been nice even for a couple of the board members to come in. The only people here when I started were the maintenance guys and they were fantastic... I could sense very early that there wasn't anything in place that should have been in place. Even keys, computers, all of those little things; I should have had a number of staff there when I started to take me through instead of having to find out for myself.*

The welcoming of a new principal involves announcements, events as well as much needed practical orientation of the school community and facilities.

### **Strong support from the school board, Independent school associations and mentors**

**The role of the school board in helping a beginning principal to start well and continue to function effectively emerged as one of the most consistent themes in this research project.**

School boards play a vital role in the healthy governance of Independent schools. Strong boards comprised of individuals who have a high degree of independence, competence and commitment (Monks & Minow, 2011).

The effectiveness of the board is also influenced by the health of the relationships within the board and between the board and the beginning principal. Unhealthy relationships between the board and the principal can cause the beginning principal considerable angst and lead to a diminished sense of care and support (Dewa (et al), 2009; Gannell, 2004). In particular, the relationship between the beginning principal and the board chair is crucial, as a mutually respectful and productive relationship between these two individuals provides encouragement and support for the principal and helps build healthy dynamics within the board itself (Guerrero, Lapalme, & Seguin, 2014). As one of the principals shared:

*In Independent schools, your Chair at Council is probably your only real friend. And that person can actually sack you. In my case, with a weeks' notice, you can go and just be fired... Of course, the council hired me and they can sack me. [Laughs] It's a pretty important relationship to have right.*

**In all but one instance, the beginning principals who were interviewed enjoyed a positive and productive relationship with their boards, an essential ingredient to making a strong start in the role.** The influence of the school board on the beginning principal's wellbeing and confidence was demonstrated in the case of one of the principals who had a strained relationship with his board chair and with the board during his first year. Instead of receiving encouragement and support, conflict with the board chair in particular had a detrimental impact on his experience. This principal openly shared his frustrations and disappointments that he had concerning his relationship with the board chair.

*His key role shouldn't be to control, it should be to lead. When he's leading, he would be asking how I am going, he would be concerned about my wellbeing and looking to strategically utilise my skills rather than trying to run his own agenda.*

In light of the tremendous impact that the school board can have on the functioning of the beginning principal, it encourages a commitment to recruiting board members with adequate expertise and to building healthy, functional team dynamics within the board and between the board and the beginning principal.

The beginning principals were also helped to make a strong start through the help of Independent school associations. **The principals in the study spoke very highly of the support that they had received from various associations of Independent schools. Independent school associations can provide the beginning principals with access to professionals who can offer much needed advice and support on various aspects of school functioning.** One principal described this relationship as a "phone a friend" lifeline, and all principals in the study shared very positive feedback about their state associations. One shared this about their state Independent school association:

*ISV (Independent Schools Victoria) are fantastic. I've rung them to speak to different staff members, to get their opinion, or their advice; so they've been terrific. So I don't feel like I'm isolated, but I do think that if I didn't have those connections it would be a terribly isolating job. I think it's really important to have a network of people that you can call on.*

**There was an overwhelming appreciation expressed by the principals that were interviewed relating to the high level of professional support that they had received from these organisations,** the training courses on offer and help that they had been given in linking up with a mentor. Independent school associations offer vital support and guidance which helps beginning principals to make a strong start in the role.

**Another vital area of support for beginning principals is through the friendship and mentoring offered by other principals. Mentoring can assist the beginning principal in the development of their professional identity and leadership skills, while providing personal support** (Daresh, 2004; Parylo, Zepeda, & Bengston, 2012). Mentors can help the beginning principal as they can understand the challenges that they are facing, as reflected in this comment:

*There are few people who know what the job looks like, what the opportunities in it are, and can sympathise with you on the whole pressure of it.*

For beginning principals to start well, it is also important that they understand and successfully navigate through the challenges that come with the role. In this next section, I will share the findings regarding the most challenging aspects of being a beginning principal.

## **2) Understanding the greatest challenges faced by beginning principals**

Becoming a principal is both an exciting and daunting experience. There is general consensus in the literature that the role of principal has become increasingly challenging in recent decades. With new tasks, responsibilities and accountabilities being added to the role while seemingly nothing is being removed, the role of principal has become increasingly complex and demanding (Eckman, 2006; Fink, 2010). The increasing accountability for educational outcomes, the growing marketisation of education, increased responsibilities in legal compliance, risk management and the challenges of technology leadership have been just some of the drivers resulting in the intensification of the principal role (Butland, 2008; Lock & Lummis, 2014; Styron & Styron, 2011). Although there has been a concerted push to encourage the distribution of leadership within schools, there is still a prevailing expectation of the "super principal" who is seen as the focal leader charged with leading the school into a brighter future (Eckman & Kelber, 2010; Garrick, 2010; Mulford, 2008).

There is a growing concern for the impact of these challenges on the wellbeing of principals. In Australia, the *Principal Health and Wellbeing* longitudinal research project has been examining the wellbeing of principals and deputy principals and has found that;

*"...collectively principals and deputy/assistant principals score less than the general population on all positive measures (self-rated health; happiness; mental health; coping; relationships; self-worth; personal wellbeing index) and higher on all negative measures (burnout; stress; sleeping troubles; depressive symptoms; somatic stress symptoms; cognitive stress symptoms)." (Riley, 2014a, p 14).*

These results are consistent with other literature that has examined the deleterious effects of the stresses and challenges of the role on the wellbeing and personal relationships of principals (Green, Malcolm, Greenwood, Small, & Murphy, 2001; Phillips, Sen, & McNamee, 2007). The challenging nature of the role of principal could be discouraging other school leaders to aspire to this role (Oplatka & Tamir, 2009; Thomson & Blackmore, 2006).

As beginning principals transition into the role, they accept responsibilities in both pedagogical and organisation leadership right from day one. It is not surprising to find that beginning principals can find the transitioning process quite stressful and possibly traumatic (Garcia-Garduno, Slater, & Lopez-Gorosave, 2011; Weindling & Dimmock, 2006). There has been considerable research effort placed on attempting to identify the key challenges that beginning principals face.

In a systematic review of the literature in this area, Earley (et al) (2013) found that beginning principals from around the world experience similar challenges. The list of these challenges is quite daunting. For the survey component of this research, I gathered together many of the challenges that had been reported in previous research. There were 51 items which the respondents were asked to rate in terms of how challenging they had found them. In addition to the 51 items, another 30 were identified in the interviews. Even this list of 81 items is not an exhaustive list of the challenges faced by beginning principals, although it is exhausting to contemplate. One of the aims of this research was to identify the most common challenges faced by the principals in the study.

### The data showed that the most challenging aspects of being a beginning principal were:

1. The intensity of the role;
2. Staffing issues and the development of a strong executive team;
3. Understanding the culture of the school community;
4. Enrolments and finances; and,
5. Dealing with critical incidents.

In the following sections, I will focus on highlighting the results regarding the first two of these challenges as they were clearly shown to be the most challenging aspects faced by the research participants.

### The Intensity of the Role

This research project showed that the greatest challenge faced by beginning principals is the sheer magnitude and intensity of the role. This finding was consistently present in all phases of the research project. The main contributing factors leading to this intensity were the extremely demanding workload of being a principal, the weight of responsibility and the challenges that come from being a public figure.

### The demanding workload

Beginning principals can be challenged by the volume, diversity and unpredictable nature of their role (Spillane & Lee, 2014). One aspect of the workload is the long hours that principals need to work (MacBeath, 2011; J. Walker, 2009). Although the beginning principals in the study had been exposed to long work hours through their previous leadership roles, some concerns over these work hours did emerge. **One concern was that of sustainability.**

***That will be fourteen weeks straight at work; perhaps somewhere between sixty-five and seventy hours a week. So there have been some public holidays that I have worked. I need to take a break for personal health and also for family relationships and the like. I think for me, personally, workload issues are a significant issue this term. The workload is not sustainable.***

Another principal commented ***I'd be hard pressed to get it lower than 70. I can't maintain it at this level.*** The long work hours and demands placed on principals is leading to deleterious effects on their wellbeing (Riley, 2014b). **There is a real risk that for some of the beginning principals these work hours will not be sustainable and possibly lead to burnout in the long**

**term.** For some of the beginning principals the main concern was not with the hours that they worked but the sense that even with those hours they had not completed the work that had to be done. The following comments highlight this frustration.

***I'm okay to work 75 hours a week if I think I could sort of complete the work, but I have over 700 emails sitting in my inbox. I've read them all – and I trash and delete as I go – so that's 700 that I've had to keep in order to either remind me to do something; or I've got to ask a question. I think it's a simplistic view to talk about hours because there are a lot of hours in the job, but you can't complete it within those hours. So if I could go home and say "I've done 70 hours this week, but I'm up-to-date with my emails, I'm up-to-date with this, I've done the reading, I've been to all of these events, fantastic", I think that would be much more do-able.***

“More than the number of hours worked, the intensity of the workload was fuelled by the emotional and physical energy that it exacted from the beginning principals.”

More than the number of hours worked, the intensity of the workload was fuelled by the emotional and physical energy that it exacted from the beginning principals. The work is emotionally taxing. As one of the principals comments ***I don't think you can prepare for the emotional side of it.*** There is an emotional component to most of the decisions and problems that the principal is required to deal with on a day to day basis. With each interaction the principal needs to tune into the person and issues at hand and respond appropriately. Another principal commented ***Stress is just immense, it's just sickening sometimes. There are moments when you cannot breathe because it's so stressful.*** And another shared this sentiment; ***I think burn out can actually come from emotional anxiety and strain as much as the workload.***

The emotional nature of the role is heightened at times when a critical incident occurs within the school. Thankfully these are infrequent but when they do occur they can take an enormous emotional toll on the principal. One principal commented on the effect of such an incident on his wellbeing;

***It's been tough. Probably the last four weeks have been horrendous. It has knocked me around enormously in terms of sleep, in terms of anxiety; I haven't been exercising anywhere near as much as I was. I really feel beaten around the ears at the moment.***

Working through critical incidents means that the principal is communicating with students, staff, the school community and often the media (Barron Ausbrooks, 2010). Principals, while dealing with their own emotional response to the incident, are expected to take on a leading role as the school processes and recovers from the events (Tarrant, 2014).

**For principals it is not only the types of issues that they deal with that can be emotionally draining, but also the effort required to maintain appropriate emotional responses to students, staff and parents.** The term “emotional labour” was coined by Hochschild over 30 years ago and refers to labour that

"requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others." (Hochschild, 2012, p 7).

**Certainly this type of emotional labour reflects the role of principal as they are often required to suppress their real feelings and to present an acceptable response to whoever they are speaking with.**

As well as being emotionally draining, being a principal is also physically draining. The principals talked about the sheer physicality of the role which requires great stamina and could leave them feeling "absolutely exhausted".

### The weight of responsibility

The intensity of the role was also influenced by the great sense of responsibility that the beginning principals felt from day one. Although all of the principals that were interviewed throughout their first year reported, supported and practiced some form of distributed leadership, there was still a great sense of the "buck stops with me" as reflected in these two comments;

***I think that the biggest challenge is everything; the "buck stops with you" with everything. So, no matter what is happening across the whole school, if something goes wrong it's going to impact on you as a principal.***

***I think the biggest challenge is having a good overall oversight of the entire school, and this is a school with three campuses. I knew it would be hard. I mean, it's just that you've got the weight of the world on your shoulder sometimes and you worry about things and how things are going to work out.***

**There is constant pressure that is always there. You are the one that is responsible in the end for the final decision, and it is relentless.**

In a recent study of beginning principals in Chicago, Spillane and Lee (2014) found that the deep sense of responsibility was the major challenge faced by beginning principals and that:

"with their sense of ultimate responsibility came increased stress, a constant alertness to what might go wrong, and an inability to leave the job behind even on weekends. This stress was manifest in novices' reports of things such as sleep loss, physical exhaustion, frustration, nervousness, and constant worrying." (p 444)

Principals are responsible for the organisational and educational leadership of a large school community. One principal shared of the added responsibility that the principal has when compared to a company CEO:

***I think the biggest challenge – is as a leader, you're like a CEO. It's a 26 million dollar business; you're running the business. You have got all the things that happen when you're a CEO, but as a principal you've actually got another form of leadership; so you're doing transformational leadership and you've got something called instructional leadership. I'm meant to lead the education process in this school.***

This overarching sense of responsibility can create an ongoing pressure in the life of the beginning principal and can also lead to them being excessively worried about things happening in the school that they don't even know about or have much direct control over. This sense of responsibility is also exacerbated by the public nature of the role that they occupy.



### Being a public figure

The third contributor to the intensity of the role was the public nature of being the public figure of the school community. As the public face of the school, the principal's life is very much in the public view. They are a role model to others and open to scrutiny. As one principal shared:

***Everything is public. I guess had you had a more anonymous job, you'd be able to deal with things differently. Especially when I have just been put up as a particular package. You need to protect the integrity of the office because, whether you like it or not, you are a role model and these people bought the package.***

In schools with a religious affiliation, the principal is also called to demonstrate "faith leadership", which for many is a real privilege, but also can bring its own pressures and expectations. This public leadership also places pressure on the beginning principals to be circumspect with their words, as some felt that every comment they made was taken as a "dictum of law".

Ironically in senior leadership positions, although the leader interacts with a huge number of people, the nature of their role can leave them feeling lonely and very isolated (Izgar, 2009).

***I have had a couple of moments where that feeling has been quite overwhelming ... I think probably the most confronting thing of all is; early in term two is just the reality of how isolated you really are in the position.***

This sense of loneliness and isolation is not confined to principals as it is also well documented in the corporate world (Saporito, 2012). Research has shown that beginning CEOs can be the most susceptible and that this has a negative effect on their overall performance (RHR International, 2012). This sense of loneliness is another reason why the support and mentoring from other principals is so crucial.

***"This sense of loneliness is another reason why the support and mentoring from other principals is so crucial."***

With the combined influence of the workload, the sense of responsibility and the challenges that come from being in a senior leadership position, the intensity of the role is by far the most challenging aspect of being a beginning principal. This research identified another aspect of the role that the beginning principals found very challenging. This was dealing with staff issues and building leadership teams.

### Staffing issues and the development of a strong executive team

Beginning principals face the challenge of leading their staff team which can often be quite large. This involves getting to know staff members, showing care and support, helping them to resolve conflict, facilitating staff development and being involved in performance management issues. In particular, beginning principals are faced with the stress of being involved in dealing with underperforming staff. It can be challenging working with underperforming staff, as this principal shared when referring to the greatest challenge that he was facing;

***The most ongoing one I'm dealing with that's difficult is underperforming staff. I think that's definitely at the top and speaking to other principals in their first year, they would probably say the same.***

Dealing with performance issues can be more challenging if the school has not previously had appraisal systems in place, as one of the principals shared **part of the structural issue is that we haven't had an appraisal system operating; people are not used to being held accountable.**

In addition to performance issues, beginning principals find themselves spending time and emotional energy involved in the conflicts between staff members and responding appropriately to staff members that may be opposing the beginning principal's change initiatives.

The school's executive leadership team play an important role in the leadership of the school and in distributing the weight of leadership responsibilities from the beginning principal. When beginning principals start in the role, they start with an existing executive leadership team. One of the challenges that they face is ensuring that the executive team was comprised of leaders who are functioning effectively. One principal shared his frustration with this process;

**Staff management is the big one. It's particularly the executive staff leadership. [sigh] You step into a team that you haven't built, but they're the ones that you have to work with while trying to establish a relationship, trying to work out where people's respective strengths and weaknesses are; trying to come to understand the various histories and networks and connections that are there in the background. It takes time to get into that head-space.**

This challenge is similarly faced by CEOs of corporate organisations, as research has demonstrated that new CEOs are often hesitant to make changes in their senior leadership team and often simply accept that the team members will continue in their role (Wageman, Nunes, Burruss, & Hackman, 2008). **In light of the great need that the principal has for an effective and cohesive leadership team, the beginning principals did struggle at times to create a strategy and the timing needed to deal with executive team members that they considered to be underperforming.**

These challenges can be difficult to navigate. On one hand, the beginning principal is in a phase in which they are seeking to build strong relationships with their staff. On the other, at times, they can very quickly see that the quality of the leadership of some team members is holding the school back from reaching its potential.

As well as the intensity of the role and dealing with staffing issues, **the beginning principals also reported the challenges involved in understanding the culture of the school community, enrolment and finance challenges and responding to critical incidents.** It is important for aspiring principals, beginning principals and their boards to understand the challenging nature of this role and to put in place strategies to help the beginning principals to successfully navigate through these issues. The following section will look at some strategies that can help beginning principals face these challenges and to thrive in the role.

### 3. Developing strategies that encourage personal and professional development and support

It is clear from this research that becoming a beginning principal can be a very challenging experience. It is important to ask, what are some strategies that could be put in place to foster continued growth and development in beginning principals? Overviewing the results of this research, seven strategies come to light.

#### Beginning principals to:

1. Keep the rewarding nature of the role in focus;
2. Work towards being an effective principal rather than a "super principal";
3. Develop a greater level of resilience;
4. Build a personal support structure through mentoring, coaching and the friendship of other principals; and,
5. Fully utilise support structures, courses and conferences that are on offer through Independent school associations.

#### School boards can also help if they;

6. Emphasise the importance of a healthy board – principal relationship and become more aware of the challenges faced by beginning principals. Then, in conjunction with their beginning principal, create additional support in the areas that are particularly challenging for the principal.

#### There is also a wider call for education systems, governments and the wider community to;

7. Understand the drivers for the intensification of the role and find ways of reducing these external pressures.

#### Keeping the rewarding nature of the role in focus

**This research project found that despite the challenges, beginning principals were greatly encouraged and strengthened by the rewarding aspects of the role.** All of the principals that were interviewed commented on the many rewarding aspects of the role and that the diverse and demanding nature of the role was something that they really appreciated. The following comments are representative of all the principals that were interviewed;

*Professionally, even though this job is so terribly difficult, it's challenging and it changes every day and I really like that, so I don't imagine myself doing any other job. I really love this job.*

*Is this the best job I've ever had? I'd say, Yes it is. I couldn't be happier.*

*I just love the job. If you said to me today that I could never do this job again, I would be devastated.*

*The job is fabulous and I am not sorry I took it for a minute ... best job in the world.*

Previous research projects have also shown that, despite the difficulties, principals in general experience a high level of job satisfaction (Darmody & Smyth, 2011; Soho & Barnett, 2010). For instance, research encompassing over a thousand Victorian secondary school principals found that 90% reported a high sense of job satisfaction and considered it a great privilege to be a principal (Saulwick & Muller, 2004).

**The results of this current project showed that the greatest rewards from being a beginning principal were found in the opportunities to build relationships with students and seeing them grow, working with the school staff and helping them to develop and being able to make significant decisions and influence the vision of the school.**

Making an impact on the lives of students emerged as the most rewarding aspect of being a beginning principal. This has also been found consistently in other research (Bass, 2006; Saulwick & Muller, 2004; Shoho & Barnett, 2010). **In contrast to a classroom teacher, the beginning principal has more opportunities to interact and influence students from all grades of the school.** It is this interaction and influence on students, albeit often indirectly, that can give the principal a great sense of purpose and satisfaction.

*Working with the kids is fantastic; anything to do with them is great and just things that they are involved in. The best things are when the kids have performed or done something and I've been able to go and watch. The school play, music soiree, those sorts of things... they're the best things, when you actually see the kids in action. That's when you really feel good. The best thing is the relationships I have formed with the kids.*

Beginning principals also greatly appreciated the opportunity to work with their staff teams and to play a part in their professional development. Of particular encouragement was seeing staff that they had appointed doing well in their roles.

*The people that I have employed, I've just been tickled pink that they're absolutely the right kind of people, and that's exciting because you just feel that it's helping the other staff that they're working with; it's lifted the expectations of the school; it's meant that the teaching is happening to a higher degree, which means that I feel confident that the children are learning, so those things are the sorts of things that make me happy.*

The third reward that the principals reported was that they enjoyed being in a position in which they could make significant decisions and influence the shaping of the school's vision. This sentiment is typified in this comment;

*Feeling like you have got the influence and the capacity to make things happen. I think that has been probably the highlight of it all. So, really working hard to build a strategic plan and starting to see some of those goals come to fruition as well.*

In the midst of the challenges, beginning principals have many rewarding experiences from which to draw strength and inspiration. **Beginning principals would be served well by keeping these rewarding aspects in focus and maximising their time in these areas.** As Pink (2010) argues, noble purposes serve as the greatest long term motivating force and

**“so the noble purpose of education and making a difference in the lives of students, staff and families can serve as the fuel to sustain the beginning principal.”**

**Working towards being an effective principal rather than a “super principal”**

Beginning principals should be encouraged to reach their potential and be comfortable with their own leadership style rather than feel pressured into fulfilling the “super principal” persona.



I believe that the elements that can help principals to be effective are:



Each principal will serve in the role reflecting their strengths, abilities and pedagogical preferences. **Instead of expecting them to be all-rounders, and be totally talented in every aspect of school leadership, they should be encouraged to understand and utilise their strengths and leadership style** (Rath & Conchie, 2008). As well as the pressure of the expectations of others, we can also place a great deal of stress on ourselves with the expectations that we create for our own performance. **Beginning principals should be encouraged to have realistic expectations of themselves and, just as they often tell their students, to be happy that they have done their best.** Also, with a job that will never be 100% complete, it is important to learn to live with that tension and develop greater skills in task prioritisation, ensuring that the most important aspects of their work are covered.

In this day and age of increasingly organisational complexities, senior leaders of any type of organisation will need to work hard at developing strong teams. As Wageman (et al), (2008) rightly suggests;

“The demands on those who occupy the top roles of contemporary organizations are rapidly outdistancing the capabilities of any single person, no matter how talented”.

These attitudes and ways of working will help the principal to not succumb to the unrealistic pressures and expectations placed on them by the outside world and often by themselves.

#### Developing a greater level of resilience

Resilience is one of the most important leadership attributes that a principal can have (Notman, 2012). From the following comment on the nature of resilience by Steward (2014, p 54), it is easy to see why resilience is essential for beginning principals to develop.

“Definitions of resilience include references to persisting in the face of difficulty; maintaining hope against the odds; being optimistic; being courageous; having inner resourcefulness; showing the capacity to recover quickly from setbacks; having moral purpose.”

Resilience helps the leader to learn from, as well as survive, the challenges that they will invariably face (Patterson & Patterson, 2009). Unfortunately, very little research has been conducted which explores how principals can actually develop a greater degree of resilience (Lazaridou & Beka, 2014). Although resilience can reflect existing personal traits, there is **also a sense that it can be developed through life experiences, self-reflection, mentoring and training courses** (Cameron & Brownie, 2010; Notman, 2012).

“Resilience is one of the most important leadership attributes that a principal can have”



### Building a personal support structure through mentoring, coaching and developing friendships with other principals

As mentoring has been shown to help support, encourage and provide guidance for beginning principals, it should be seen as a priority and a necessary part of being in the role. **In addition to mentoring, many beginning principals would benefit from coaching which is more goal specific and performance oriented and can be offered by professional coaches rather than experienced principals who are mentors** (Bloom, Castagna & Warren, 2003). Coaching can help the beginning principals navigate through the greatest developmental challenges that they are facing. **This research has also shown that networking and developing friendships with other principals are highly beneficial.** As the position can be lonely and isolating, beginning principals should develop and maintain these personal support structures.



### Fully utilise support structures, courses and conferences that are on offer through Independent school associations

The role of Associations of Independent schools in the support of the beginning principal should not be underestimated. To their credit, these organisations are performing a much appreciated and vital function in providing professional advice, training courses, conferences and assistance connecting with mentors. **There was an unanimous sense of gratitude for these organisations and all beginning principals should be encouraged to fully utilise the assistance offered by these associations.**

### The School board role

**The board can emphasise the importance of a healthy board and principal relationship, and become more aware of the challenges faced by beginning principals. Then, in conjunction with their beginning principal, create additional support in the areas that are particularly challenging for the principal.**

School boards have a legal and moral obligation to function effectively and provide support to the beginning principal. The board has a duty of care to empower and assist the principal and to respond to the struggles that he/she is facing. **There should be a strong and consistent emphasis on the board developing healthy team functioning, an awareness of the challenges faced by the beginning principals and willingness to assist and create support for them.** The school board can be one of the greatest helps or hindrances to the effective functioning and wellbeing of beginning principals. **Boards are perfectly placed to offer immediate and effective support in the particular challenges that they are facing. Boards can increase their supporting impact by familiarising themselves**

**with the common challenges, making sure that someone is watching out for the principal and their family and creating an authentic atmosphere in which the principal can be honest and open about their struggles.**

**“This is a big picture problem which will need to involve education systems, the government, parents and the greater community striving together to make the role of principal more do-able and sustainable.”**

**For education systems, governments and the wider community need to understand the drivers for the intensification of the role and find ways of reducing these external pressures.**

The intensification of the role of principal is something that is driven by many external forces. In the context of an awareness of the negative impact of the challenges faced by principals, there is a growing call for action to be taken to respond to the excessive work demands placed on them (Riley, 2014a). It would be easy to simply normalise the workload and stresses as “par for the course” for any principal, however, this would mean that the situation will only grow worse and initiatives designed to de-intensify the role would not be forthcoming. **Considering that we are talking about the wellbeing of principals and their family relationships, the status quo is unreasonable.** This is a big picture problem which will need to involve education systems, the government, parents and the greater community striving together to make the role of principal more do-able and sustainable.

## 4. Final words

Becoming a principal is an extremely rewarding and challenging experience. A smooth transition into becoming a principal is built on the foundation of many years of preparation through courses and gaining a wide range of leadership experience within schools. The skills and knowledge gained through this preparation can be supplemented by ongoing training, mentoring and support from Independent school organisations. There is also a vital role that the school board can play in enabling the principal to make a strong start and continue to feel supported and encouraged through the years ahead. All that can be done to support beginning principals should be done as they play such an important role in the education of our youth. We can all ask ourselves, What are we doing to encourage and support the principal of our school?

## 5. Checklist

- Plan to maximise pre-commencement opportunities.
- Arrange to shadow a couple of principals for one or two days.
- Communicate to the school board your preferences and needs regarding the welcome, induction and commissioning service.
- Emphasise the importance of a healthy board and principal relationship. Plan some team building and training activities. Be authentic and open about the aspects of the role that you are finding particularly challenging.
- Build an effective support network of contacts with Independent School organisations and other principals.
- Take part in training courses and conferences where you can develop friendships with other principals.
- Link up with someone who can be your mentor.
- Keep a journal in which you record your greatest joys, challenges, and lessons learnt.
- Keep the rewarding nature of the role in focus by allocating time to interact with students and watch their performances. Also, make sure that you make time to engage in other activities which you find energising.
- Set limits to your workload and make sure to spend quality time with your family.
- Work to strengthen your general health, fitness and resilience.
- Have a strategy for responding to staff and school leaders who may have performance issues.
- Understand and fully utilise your greatest strengths and realise that you do not have to be a super principal.

## Afterword: Managing the Political Context of Principal Transition by Dr Philip SA Cummins

Steve Bagi makes a number of key recommendations for ways in which Principals might manage their own affairs in the process of transition. **The management of self is a key component to the leadership of a school as we learn to manage the possible while aspiring for the ideal.** He concludes his article by asking an excellent question: "what are we doing to encourage and support the Principal of our school?"

At CIRCLE – The Centre for Innovation, Research, Creativity and Leadership in Education, our work with clients in a wide variety of schools places us in a unique position to observe the ways in which schools attempt to support their principals with varying degrees of success. **From our experience, we can make a number of suggestions about how members of a school community can support a starting principal from the time of transition through to a position of successful tenure.**

It starts with understanding the cycle of appointment and tenure. The first year or two of a Principal's tenure is often described as the "honeymoon". Every school community views the appointment and assumption of a new Principal into new responsibilities as a special event. It is natural and normal for people under these circumstances to respond with a degree of excitement and interest.

**As the gloss of this initial phase wears off and people start to recognise that the Principal is not in fact a "Super Principal" but is in fact a mere mortal with different areas of strength and weakness,** the Principal will be confronted with the almost inevitable task of unfreezing the structures and cultural norms of the organisation to enable new ideas and initiatives to take root, grow and flourish, even when many existing practices continue to have or at least have had considerable merit.

At the same time, some **staff movement** will have already started to occur, including that which is prompted by disaffection and under-performance. Little of this will be received with initial approbation by the staff. Nervousness and uncertainty will often congeal into dissatisfaction, some of which most likely will be picked up on by community members – including students, parents, staff and Board members – who may view this as a failure of leadership without appreciating the circumstances behind staff movement and the context in which it has actually taken place.

**The task of change management** may have been defined broadly during the initial period of the Principal's employment and the hard work of making change work well is often under-estimated; we see the contradictory brief of "make visionary and far-reaching change but do not upset anyone along the way" too frequently.

As the Principal rapidly approaches the point of contractual renewal – usually around 3-4 years into tenure prior to a potential reappointment at the 5 year mark – the pressure to have resolved issues of School and Chief Executive performance too often collides with the reality that further time is needed to gel the team and make the significant changes. Organisational behaviour changes and cultural transformation often take between 7-10 years to cement coherently and with full benefit into the fabric of a school's life.

Key support groups will have formed – and so will the corresponding groups of detractors and cynics. Like it or not, every new Principal will be seen as an automatic agent of change and those whose own positions, dispositions, or both, incline them towards change-averse behaviours can be expected to exhibit these in a range of ways, constructive or otherwise.

While the work of winning over a community is inherent to the challenge of new leadership and it is normal to expect leaders to “earn their stripes”, it is also more than reasonable for leaders to be given the benefit of the doubt. In a conservative institution such as a school, a preponderance of skeptical and traditionalised stakeholders among staff, parent and student bodies can mean that optimism about difference, especially that which seeks to address perceived weaknesses, rapidly dissipates.

**Persuasive leadership and community engagement are hard work at the best of times.** They require focus, energy and empathy. Over-expenditure in each of these areas can be both personally draining for the Principal and can also be dangerously distracting when the Principal’s work crosses a line from organisational development into the management of political infighting and even disloyalty.

We would observe too that often **the worst offenders in this respect come from those whose roles are most closely associated with the success of the Principal: the Board and the Executive.** We hear too often that it is not the parents, students or even staff who are of greatest concern. Instead, it is the actions of members of the governance and leadership team who wish to pursue their own agenda.

Potential points of difference fail to be resolved adequately and often drag out into the open or continue on as muted conflict for months and even years. Processes for resolution are often ill-defined and ignored as factions form, each of which seeks to act in what it perceives to be the best interests of the school. Public statements that purport to express concern for the students mask private motivations.

“It is the politics of the role that transcend the educational aspirations as opposed to the converse and infinitely more preferable situation.”

In the middle of all of this sits the Principal, who was hired to do a demanding job that too often and too quickly does not resemble the model of visionary and instructional leadership that underpins the theory of contemporary principalship. In other words, it is the politics of the role that transcend the educational aspirations as opposed to the converse and infinitely more preferable situation.

Different school stakeholders all have critical roles to play in assisting the new leader of an educational community move into their role and provide the strategic, relational and educational leadership required to steer a large, complex and dynamic organisation through times of change. At the end of the day, perhaps the one thing that we all might bear in mind is that the primary concern of a school is the educational experience of its students.

We ask Principals to take on the leadership of schools at a time when we demand greater value and performance for fewer resources utilised to a higher degree of execution. **All of us in schools, therefore, need to remain cognisant of our own responsibilities when we seek to answer the question: “what are we doing to encourage and support the Principal of our school?”**

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