

Preface

I conducted my first “research” on the role of principals in the fall of 1984. My superintendent was revising the principals’ job description and wanted to know what I did all day. I had been on the job for just a year, and there *were* many days that I didn’t seem to accomplish much of anything—at least not anything concrete I could cross off a list at the end of the day. I spent most of my time walking and talking—talking with teachers, wandering in and out of classrooms, meeting with parents in my office, and chatting with students on the playground and in the cafeteria, but I wasn’t sure these activities sounded impressive enough for a job description.

I needed something more substantive and decided to ask the 364 students in Grades 1 through 6 what *they* thought I did all day. They took on the assignment with unexpected enthusiasm and wrote short “essays” describing my job as the principal of Lincoln School. Some eager beavers even illustrated their compositions.

There were many astute observers. A fifth grade student laid out this comprehensive job description: “She must be able to talk and listen to children. She must be able to make decisions that are good for the school. She has to learn to manage a school. She should participate in all big school events. She has to have patience with children who are sent to the office and she must deal with problems” (McEwan, 1985, p. 17). I forwarded it to the superintendent immediately. I was amused by the many references to me having coffee and “chit-chatting” with teachers. The students obviously did not understand that I was consulting, mentoring, coaching, and facilitating!

What made me feel particularly good about the responses was that the students were aware of me as an individual. They had perceptions of my involvement in the entire building, and they also noted that my job was the fragmented, multifaceted one that more sophisticated observers have noted (Wolcott, 1973). The students were also able to articulate many of the characteristics needed by effective administrators—patience, intelligence, and flexibility. They even had insights into the stress of being a career woman, wife, and mother.

xiv • Ten Traits of Highly Effective Principals

My fascination with what it takes to be an effective principal has not diminished in the nearly twenty years since I did that simple exercise with my students. Now I have a more global perspective, however. During my travels as a consultant, I listen to principals talk about what is working in their schools. They are eager to share the news of rising test scores, empowered teachers, and revitalized learning communities. I also work with principals who are discouraged and frustrated by the demands of the job. As one principal observed, “When I started in this business, my job was to manage the school and keep the parents and teachers happy. Now, to be considered effective, I need to get results.” What kind of principal is able to get results with scarce resources, raise achievement and maintain it while building a supportive and caring culture, nurture and mentor novice teachers, energize experienced staff members, and simultaneously leap tall buildings in a single bound? This question motivated me to examine the principalship once again—this time, with the goal of defining the top ten traits of highly effective principals in the age of accountability.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

I have written *Ten Traits of Highly Effective Principals: From Good to Great Performance* for the following audiences:

- Principals at every level who want to notch up their personal effectiveness as well as feel affirmed for what they are already doing well
- Administrative teams who are engaged in study and reflection regarding the role of the principal in improving school performance
- Central office administrators who hire, supervise, mentor, and coach principals
- Teams of teachers who participate in the screening and hiring of principals for their schools
- Educators who aspire to the principalship and are looking for outstanding role models
- College and university educators who train principals

OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS

If you are wondering about the origin of the ten traits of highly effective principals, be sure to read the Introduction. It describes in detail the multistep process that I used to identify them. Following the Introduction, you will find ten easy-to-read and highly inspiring chapters—one for each of the following traits:

1. The Communicator
2. The Educator
3. The Envisioner
4. The Facilitator
5. The Change Master
6. The Culture Builder
7. The Activator
8. The Producer
9. The Character Builder
10. The Contributor

Each chapter contains the following features:

- Vignettes describing highly effective principals—true stories from the trenches for each of the ten traits
- A set of behaviors and habits for each of the traits—benchmarks, if you will—to guide and inspire you as you seek to increase your own effectiveness
- Ideas, reflections, and advice regarding each of the traits in the words of more than thirty highly effective principals
- Pearls of wisdom, epigrams, and aphorisms from a wide variety of noted thinkers, theorists, and philosophers regarding the ten traits

Reading the *Ten Traits of Highly Effective Principals* could be compared (if you use your imagination) to attending a week-long seminar with numerous successful principals from every level and kind of school—men and women from across the country who have turned around low-performing schools, helped good schools become great, and raised the standards of excellence in their highly successful schools even higher. At this imaginary seminar, you will have the opportunity to hear keynote addresses as well as participate in numerous small group sessions. You will also be able to ask questions and get honest answers from individuals who have been there and done it with distinction and excellence. There will be occasional drop-in visits from well-known experts and famous people, but the highly effective principals are the stars of this book.

Although each principal whose voice is heard in the following chapters is unique, they do share a number of traits in common—ten, to be precise. Of course, reading about the ten traits as demonstrated in the

xvi • Ten Traits of Highly Effective Principals

lives of these inspiring role models won't provide you with a ready-made roadmap to success. In fact, all of the contributing principals would tell you that, as successful as they might seem, they are still works in progress. They see the principalship as an ongoing journey, filled with detours and potholes as well as freeways and straightaways. Although your destination is likely to be similar to theirs, the roadblocks and construction zones that *you* encounter on your journey will be unique to the school in which you work. However, an understanding of the traits, as seen in the lives of these role models, will expand your thinking regarding the variety and quantity of possible itineraries for your trip, enlarge your vision to include a far more expansive horizon, and reveal multiple strategies for finding your way more effectively. My goal is to enable you to pack your briefcase and set out immediately on your own personal journey to becoming a highly effective principal.

When you have finished reading Chapters 1 through 10, you will find two additional features in the Resource section that will make this book useful as a desk reference: (1) a checklist of the nearly 100 benchmarks that define the ten traits and (2) a brand-new Corwin Press feature making its debut in *Ten Traits of Highly Effective Principals*—a facilitator's guide. You can spot the guide very quickly because it is printed on shaded paper for your convenience. The companion to this book, *Ten Traits of Highly Effective Teachers* (McEwan, 2002), has been widely used in graduate classes, study groups, and districtwide staff development courses. I hope that the addition of a facilitator's guide to this book will enhance the ease with which group leaders and teachers can plan their activities and lessons.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the input of nearly 150 individuals—principals, teachers, central office administrators, school board members, university professors, and parents. They took time from more pressing matters to communicate with me via E-mail, snail mail, voice mail, and telephone interviews. I am most appreciative of each of them.

I am especially grateful to the thirty-seven highly effective principals who completed questionnaires, participated in lengthy interviews, or did both. Their names appear here in alphabetical order. You will meet them throughout the book as they share their insights and observations on the ten traits of highly effective principals: Sandra Ahola, Terry Beasley, Sharon Beitel, Regina Birdsell, Kathie Dobberteen, Larry Fieber, Gabe