

VIEWPOINT

Reflections From A New Principal's First Year

BY SHOLOM FRIED

After working in a private school for several years as a teacher and administrator, I transitioned in 2010 to the New York City Department of Education as an assistant principal in District 75. The five years I experienced there were among the most productive, educational, and valuable of my career, culminating in my earning tenure as assistant principal. I then began to feel that I was ready to lead my own school.

Through our union, The Council for School Supervisors and Administrators, and the Executive Leadership Institute, I feel blessed to have been given the opportunity to participate in ALPAP, the Advanced Leadership Program for Assistant Principals; a year-long professional development experience like none other.

Recognizing the need to help aspiring assistant principals develop the leadership qualities needed for the principalship, ALPAP supported me as I explored the process of becoming a school principal. The components of the program including partnering with a mentor principal, in attending a series of leadership seminars and participating in a myriad of field experiences gave me “tools of the trade” and helped me to realize that I was “ready for the chair.”

I want to thank the program coordinator, Janet Aravena, our lead coach, Linda Gross-Chelotes, my ALPAP Mentor Principal, Ramon Gonzalez, and all of the other mentor principals, as well as my fellow ALPAPians from the 2015-2016 cohort. It is due to your guidance, friendship, ongoing support, and collaboration throughout the program and beyond that has enabled me to successfully transition into my new role.

In June 2016, I became the school principal at 721, a school in Manhattan's West Village. The school serves students with a multitude of cognitive, social-emotional, behavioral and physical challenges. While my assistant principalship had provided me with a sound working knowledge of the functions assigned to the role of a school administrator, it didn't necessarily provide the foundational training necessary to be a successful principal. As assistant principals, we were masters of scheduling, discipline and an entire slew of other skills and responsibilities. Principals, on the other hand, must have all of those skills and more, including strong people skills. Such personal skills include speaking to diverse groups of people, and listening to them as well. You must soothe the inevitable ruffled feathers, solve a wide variety of problems, and mediate. All of those abilities fall under the

heading of leadership.

Principals are charged with being able to expect the unexpected, anticipate problems and solutions, read between the lines, hear hidden messages to determine what is really being said, and so much more. None of the courses I took in graduate school dealt with these required and critical skills.

One key element to which I do lay claim is my love for this work and for my students. Every hour, every difficult day, every long night is worth it. It is all about what we can do to support the students from the moment they first walk through the door, until beyond their exit at graduation.

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For me, a tough part of becoming a first year principal was a lack of confidence. Nothing really prepares someone emotionally, intellectually, or physically for the experience. It doesn't matter what kind of teacher you were, what experience you may have had as an assistant principal, how many hours you might put in, or what type of support network you have.

The job is not something that came naturally. The ability to make unnatural decisions instinctively is something that I believe comes with the passage of time. The ability to build a network of educators who work successfully together in concert

with proper administrative support also comes with experience.

The struggle was real: Some days were better than others. Some justified my move, while others made me question my ability to lead. Overall, my experience as a first year principal was a positive one; learning and developing as much as I have taught and developed, if not more!

With all the ups and downs, celebrations and challenges, I believe that I have experienced a pretty typical first year as a school principal. As hard and challenging as it has often been, my first year only confirmed my belief that being principal is the greatest and most rewarding job in the world, and that I have what it takes to do it effectively.

There is still much for me to learn, but here is what I know. I wanted more than anything to be everything for my teachers and students. I wanted to have all the answers, know how to jump every hurdle, take all the right risks, and avoid all the mistakes. I believe I have done my best, I have fought the good fight, and I hope to continue to do so in the future. Nevertheless, in the end, I have learned a valuable lesson — I cannot do it all; I am only human. As it turns out, there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

Sholom Fried is Principal of 721 in Manhattan.