

Systematically Cultivating Excellent Administrators in Adventist Education

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Leadership is a difficult quality to define yet, without it, organizations will fail. The Adventist educational system is no different; our schools must have excellent leadership in order to thrive. However, more than a few good leaders, we need a system in place that will cultivate exceptional principals so they can help our educational system become a more successful organization.

One may wonder what qualifications I have that authorize me to discuss the various issues in Adventist education. While I have not yet led as a principal, I have taught in both Adventist and public schools for the past five years. In addition to my teaching responsibilities, I facilitated meetings, mediated colleague conflicts, and collaborated in curriculum planning as the leader of the grade nine team. During this time, I earned a Master's degree in Leadership and Administration and am currently working toward a Doctorate in Leadership and Administration, both from La Sierra University. Throughout each of these experiences, I spoke with various individuals, both faculty members and school administrators, discussing the many difficulties that educators face. Furthermore, I interviewed several different principals, with over 20 years of experience in Adventist schools, about our current system. While some of the problems in public versus private education are incomparable, the need for excellent leadership is the same.

### **Our Current System**

Our current system can be both bewildering and overwhelming for beginning administrators. While some principals have prior training through master or doctoral programs, many transition from teacher to principal with little to prepare them. Unless another principal or superintendent takes a special interest in that administrator, he or she often is left to his or her

own devices. According to the principals I interviewed, conferences that provide meetings for first time administrators often concentrate on policies and rarely give practical guidance, which each of them felt made the meetings insubstantial and not really beneficial for beginning principals. Moreover, there is no current mentorship or internship program available to help support and train new principals. Many opt to take classes as a means of helping gain insight and instruction, but as many principals have told me, this can overwhelm most administrators as they have countless tasks to accomplish in a short amount of time.

Presently, while there is a hierarchy, there can often be some confusion about who is the principal's boss. Technically the superintendent oversees the principals in his or her conference, but the school board also has the power to fire an administrator. Therefore, if these two entities oppose each other in goals, who does the administrator ultimately listen to? This turmoil leads to difficulties for the administrator as it can put him or her in the middle of two conflicting sides.

The definition of success for a principal is seldom communicated and usually unclear; moreover, it is scarcely verbalized or written. Most administrators simply have a job description and educational code for a guide. Based on numerous discussions with educators and principals, administrators believe they are considered successful if enrollment is high, finances are in the black, and there are few complaints. Many principals indicated that stated expectations, verbal or otherwise, were rare and said that if they did not hear from the board or anyone at the conference, they were to assume that they were doing an adequate job. As a system, no definitions of success or stated standards are given to administrators to communicate desired goals.

In the current Adventist educational system, the main source of accountability for principals is board meetings. Based on various discussions with different administrators, I have found that typically, principals are held responsible for their actions, or lack thereof, when the board meets to discuss educational issues. Usually, these meetings are the first opportunity for the administrator to discover what concerns—based on fact or fiction—the board has with the principal’s performance. Then, the administrator is generally given time to answer for his or her actions and reasoning. Presently, a board meeting could result in the termination of the administrator’s contract as there is no tenure for school leaders. In our Adventist schools, there is no systematic process for a principal to be held responsible for his or her performance that allows for communication, improvement, and room for mistakes.

### **Flaws in Our Current System**

Our modern institution does not systematically cultivate excellent leaders. Many principals are thrown into their positions with very limited training and are expected to learn on the job. At the same time, we provide leaders little mentorship or margin of error. Many organizations develop leaders through careful observation, testing, and training. For example, once a person is viewed as possessing leadership potential, he or she is often placed in a managerial or leadership role to help develop these qualities and is allowed to test his or her abilities. While this process does occur for some principals, frequently, a teacher steps into an administrative role with no training and even less experience. Currently, our system is more of a sink-or-swim venture rather than a nurturing process for new principals.

Straightforward communication between the conference staff, board members, and school administrator is generally sporadic and ambiguous. Many principals are not given a clear

definition of success or transparent expectations. When I was formally evaluated as a teacher in the public school system, I was given clear, written standards that my evaluator was looking for when visiting my classroom. After every observation, we sat down and discussed the classroom visit and my job performance in comparison to the expected standards. As educators, we are trained to always give clear, measurable standards when teaching students. Why are we doing less for our principals? In any job, in order to meet the expectations of the employer, employees must be given definite standards so they can meet them; otherwise, we are setting up administrators for failure.

All the administrators I talked to about their experiences said they were never given a clear definition of what constituted success as a principal. They said that based on their background, higher enrollment and minimal complaints from the community were paramount. While these are important, they should not be the only indicators of success for administrators. In fact, the Pacific Union Conference states in the *Education Code* (2009) that “the evaluation of school personnel is a major responsibility of the principal”, (p. 60) yet based on the administrators I talked to, this expectation is not articulated to new principals and many are not really required to perform it. That is not to say that there are not principals or conferences that make teacher evaluations a priority, but as an entire system, this responsibility is not unequivocally mandated. Therefore, a considerable weakness in our current system is the ambiguity most principals have with the priorities and expectations of their school board and local conference.

Accountability in our current system is heavily flawed; there is no present system that consistently and resolutely holds principals responsible in a process that allows for correction or

improvement. In all the responses and discussions I have had with Adventist administrators, each said that in twenty plus years, they had only one or two evaluations. One stated that he had staff give feedback on his job performance that he found valuable, but this was self-initiated, not a formal evaluation by the board or conference. Another principal added that her evaluation was not by the superintendent or even another principal, but was conducted by the superintendent's wife—another teacher in the conference. While evaluations may occur more frequently in some conferences, as a system, valuable feedback and formal evaluations are rarely conducted consistently for administrators as a means of holding them accountable in their job performance.

Instead, most administrators are called to account for their actions at formal school board meetings in which potentially, they are hearing information for the first time and could lose their job depending on the outcome. Tenured teachers go through a much more intensive process if they make a mistake or become ineffective. The process for principals, however, generally does not involve many steps; as a system, many are not regularly evaluated or receive valuable feedback to know where they need improvements or are doing a good job. Some principals said that when they heard nothing, they thought things were running smoothly only to end up being blindsided by the board because when they were finally given feedback, the situation was beyond repair. This does not allow for administrators to grow and learn on the job as it creates a fail and fire mentality. In addition, principals are less likely to take big risks as it could cost them their job if it is not successful. Without a process of accountability that allows principals to improve and grow, we will lose many promising leaders because there are few incentives to keep them.

### **Creating Change for a Better System**

Cultivating excellent leaders in our schools should be a priority. Without exceptional administrators, our schools will struggle to create environments of superior academic programs with satisfied, effective teachers. We should focus on designing a program that will develop capable school leaders. Only when Adventist educators take a systematic approach to supporting effective principals will our school leadership drastically improve.

The first priority of this system must be the training and support of administrators. In order to truly cultivate excellent leaders throughout Adventist schools, we need mentorship or internship programs for beginning principals. It is not enough just to encourage teachers who transition to principals to take administrative classes; we must create a foundation of support that will help new school leaders in day-to-day challenges. These programs will help ensure that principals are receiving the encouragement and guidance that they require to be successful.

Just like beginning teachers, new administrators need mentors to guide them while they gain experience on the job. Mentors should be successful veteran principals that are paired with starting administrators who can give advice and help them navigate through unfamiliar situations and problems. While prior training is beneficial to administrators, nothing can replace experience. Like many new teachers, principals can burn out when facing difficult circumstances with no encouragement, guidance, or help. Mentors can provide the necessary experience and support to assist administrators' transition while they gain the essential skills and knowledge needed for their success.

Possibly even more beneficial to cultivating leaders than mentorship programs are internship programs. These allow potential up-and-coming leaders to gain experience and

training by providing feedback and mentoring that help them adapt and grow in smaller leadership roles before actually beginning an administrative position. There are leadership appointments available within the infrastructure of a school that would allow promising principals to test their techniques and ideas. These people should become team leaders, committee chairs, department chairs, and vice principals as a means of building knowledge, skills, and practices that will develop their leadership abilities before stepping into an administrative role. These positions should be used as a training ground for potential principals so they are better equipped from the start.

Once an administrator has gained experience and expertise, in order to keep him or her sharp, the Adventist system must institute a process of accountability. The first step in this process is creating a standard by which principals are measured. This is the expectation that the board and local conference has of the administrator and how they define his or her success at that school. These goals should be clearly defined, achievable, and measureable. Once these expectations are set, the administrator should use them when creating his or her purpose and plan for the school.

After clearly communicating the definition used to measure the administrator's success, the next step in this process of accountability is to then use this standard as a way of evaluating the principal's job performance and provide feedback. Every employee needs an indication of his or her progress in the workplace. It allows the employee to continue strengthening superior work and improve in weaker areas. Working without an evaluation or progress report is like painting a wall in the dark—you may succeed in covering the wall, but the likelihood of it looking anything but sloppy is slim to none. Our principals in the Adventist system are the same as those in public

schools; they need to be explicitly told what expectations the board has and receive feedback on their progress. This process should include yearly evaluations performed by the superintendent or associate superintendent and face-to-face meetings in which his or her observations and suggestions are plainly reported. Then, these formal assessments should be passed on to the board. Without these evaluations, many of our principals will continue to flounder without the real hope of improvement.

Within the process of assessment, allowing an administrator time for improvement is vital. Just like teacher evaluations, if a principal is weak in a particular area, it should be clearly expressed and then a plan of action created to help the administrator improve. Regular observations, progress reports, and communications should then be conducted. This process allows the principal to develop new practices or alter current ones to create the change that the board or superintendent is looking for in the school.

In our current system, board meetings are largely the only component of accountability for school administrators. I propose we keep this component, but not as the only means of accountability and certainly not as a surprise element. Board meetings should be used as a check-in for principals and board members. It should be the formal and final report of an administrator's progress, not the first indication of trouble. This means that before walking into the meeting, all parties should have already discussed the administrator's job performance and allowed him or her time for improvement. The board meeting is the final step in the accountability process and demonstrates the culmination of stated standards, assessments, and communication between the conference, board, and principal.

### **Call to Action**

Our current Adventist educational system is in serious need of passionate, proficient principals. Unless we are willing to employ some major adjustments to create an environment in which we develop and support leaders, administrators that show promise may burn out before they even have a chance to succeed. We must support principals by mentoring, giving valuable and constructive feedback, unambiguously communicating our expectations, and holding them accountable through a step-by-step process. If we refuse to rethink our current system, learn from our mistakes, and listen to creative solutions, then our Adventist schools will unnecessarily suffer the consequences. We must consciously and boldly act to establish the systematic change that will cultivate the leadership we so desperately need in our schools. Only then will we begin to satiate the demand for excellent administrators in our Adventist schools.

## References

Pacific Union Conference. (2009). *Education Code*. California, Westlake Village.