



INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS  
OF NEW ZEALAND

257 HANDY HINTS TESTED ON THE JOB  
BY YOUR COLLEAGUES

## SCHOOL

### “MY BEST PIECE OF ADVICE FOR A NEW PRINCIPAL IS:”

- > Encourage an atmosphere of honesty without fear so that issues can be dealt with successfully.
- > Introduce change carefully. Learn and value what currently happens and why, but there is an expectation that change will happen, so don't miss the opportunity.
- > Be as visible and talk to as many members of the school community as possible; students, staff, parents.
- > Visit classrooms every day.
- > Keep communicating, even if you think you're over communicating.
- > Be visible and available to the school community.
- > Listen, watch, acknowledge each school has its own culture and don't rush in with guns blazing. Give it a lag period before implementing wholesale changes and always take senior management with you.
- > Don't commit yourself to any actions at this point – their agenda may not be yours long term.
- > Talk to and listen to representatives for the school's stakeholders.
- > When in doubt, DON'T.
- > Listen – have an open mind and listen to all sides.
- > Seek legal advice before acting on employment issues.

### Planning

- > Remember you have a year's honeymoon so make the most of the possibilities.
- > Try to gain the confidence of the school community right at the start; change will be more easily accepted and expected.
- > Spend the first term collecting the information you need to assess the school.
- > Collect the data in key areas and make it clear to staff you are constructing an overview.

### People

- > Talk to your constituent groups: what do they love about the school, what would they like to see happen in the future. Ask 'why'. Be aware of the disaffected, the pressure groups. Never make a promise!
- > Make sure you know the reason behind your predecessor's decisions before making a change.
- > Never denigrate your predecessor's contribution; it makes you appear ungracious and often alienates people. Find things in your predecessor's legacy to value.

## YOURSELF / MYSELF

### “MY BEST PIECE OF ADVICE FOR A NEW PRINCIPAL IS:”

- > Better to do nothing and look as though you are enjoying it, than be achieving lots and miserable. No-one wants a miserable boss!
- > Cultivate an air of calm.
- > Encourage others to respond calmly.
- > Don't expect to be infallible. It is okay to learn on the job. People are appointed because they have the capacity to do the job not because they know everything.
- > If you have a moment of spare time do that small task you have been saving because spare time may not occur again.
- > Listen to everyone and trust your own judgements. Those with the most to say may have the most to lose. You will make mistakes, be humble and say sorry.
- > Get into the classroom.
- > Make time for people.
- > Be true to your work! Be decisive.
- > Look after your PA.
- > Breathe through your nose before you speak.
- > Don't lose sleep over things/person(s) you can't change; those you follow on from. You are you, they were them, and now they have gone.
- > Live the 'open door' policy. Don't pretend it happens.
- > Have a thorough induction programme, visiting the school whilst it is in operation.
- > Don't be yourself up. You do what you can do.
- > Never send an email in anger.
- > When faced by the unexpected, don't allow people to rush you into decisions.
- > Keep 90 minutes a day with no appointments.
- > Open doors are important, but time for strategic planning is crucial.
- > Set aside a time when your door is not open, when it is understood you are not available, e.g. 8.30am to 10.30am.
- > Stay calm. Don't panic. Situations as they present themselves always feel much worse than they are. Never hesitate to ask advice. But be prepared to make a decision. Stop, Look, Listen.
- > Take things easy.
- > Seek advice, a sounding board.
- > Take time for yourself.
- > Schedule time for exercise, time with your family and friends right from the beginning.
- > Begin as you mean to continue – it's easier than changing in 18 months time.
- > Don't give into the temptation to socialise with parents (outside of school and professional functions) this is especially difficult if you've moved to a new city and don't know anyone else.
- > Enjoy the variety.
- > Know that other Heads have difficulty and that no-one finds this job easy.
- > Choose 2 or 3 crucial projects and focus on implementing them properly.
- > Don't try to change the world overnight.
- > Make sure you walk 10,000 steps a day.
- > Remember you have a family (despite the all encompassing nature of the job).
- > Take heed, when you enter your study in a happy state and whistling – you're being readied for a mini crisis.
- > Have a mentor/supervisor with whom you can openly talk. Schedule times on a regular basis.
- > Be totally rigid about time for yourself, preferably while getting exercise such as a long walk every day.
- > Be mentored with an experienced principal from a similar type school in/outside the area.

## YOURSELF / MYSELF

- > Shadow another/other successful head(s).
- > Be reflective but also decisive.
- > Be consistent.
- > In the first weeks just nod and listen!
- > Be wary of those who want to be your friend.
- > Keep asking 'WHY'?
- > Be careful when clearing out files. Put them aside for a year, you never know what you might need.
- > A smile works wonders.
- > Learn names as early as possible.
- > Visit staff in their workrooms.
- > Make sure you spend time with support staff.
- > Be Prepared – Gather all the facts you can before proceeding to meet with or phone parents/media.
- > Be Patient and Calm – Even when sorely tested.
- > Go to that Conference – Networking is as important as professional development courses and conferences.
- > Take a Break – Get away from the office. Get rejuvenated with a warm climate in short (or long) bursts.
- > You Can't Do It All On Your Own
- > Get a Life Outside of School – whether friends, places or experiences.
- > You need your assistant so try to develop a good working relationship.

## BOARD

### “MY BEST PIECE OF ADVICE FOR A NEW PRINCIPAL IS:”

- > Get to know your Board Members, most importantly the Board Chair.
- > Establish what is really important to them.
- > Make a strong alliance with your Board Chair.
- > Give the Board all the information you can.
- > Meet with your staff and the Board Chair.
- > No Surprises – Keep the Board Chair, key staff, staff etc. informed on major issues.
- > No surprises at Board meetings.
- > Meet regularly with your Board Chair.
- > Ring the Board Chair to keep him/her informed on any major issues, or any which may arise in media/local gossip etc.
- > Ensure you have the Board Chair on side and fully informed on any “difficult issues”.
- > Celebrate with your Board Chair e.g. dinner, drinks etc. with spouses.
- > Keep the Board informed/in touch with curriculum/student achievement/staff achievement.
- > Work with your Board Chair to set up a Board Planning seminar or retreat in the first six months to create a sense of shaded direction.
- > Don't be pressured into writing strategic plans until you have got an accurate overview of the school, the Board and the community.
- > Always read last Board meeting minutes carefully and compile To Do lists. Do them.
- > Ensure Board Reports are available to Board members well before meetings – include a weekend if possible.
- > Make sure you understand the difference between management and governance. Speak immediately to the Board Chair if you think a Board member does not understand the distinction.
- > Make sure the Board Chair seeks your input on Board appointments.

## STAFF

### “MY BEST PIECE OF ADVICE FOR A NEW PRINCIPAL IS:”

- > Watch the agendas. Initially take everyone at face value, but be wary. Workout the really trustworthy staff.
- > Listen, listen and listen. Glean everything you can.
- > Try to see every staff member for 10 minutes to discuss what they can do, where they are going, their goals and how you can help them do their job.
- > Know the strengths of those you work with.
- > Must have trust and confidence in your Management team.
- > Get the right people in the right jobs.
- > Understand where the real value is and put your best people there.
- > Give it 48 hours.
- > Interview all teaching staff in Term 1.
- > Be aware that requesting a ‘two minute’ response from others, may require a whole day’s work from them.
- > Listen to and observe existing management and staff before jumping in with changes. Look carefully at the management team. How can you make changes to fulfil your goals.
- > Work on developing a good management team.
- > Seek advice when in doubt.
- > Invest time in your staff. Professional development and appraisal.
- > Talk with staff group/individuals about what they see as visionary.
- > Believe that you don’t have all the answers.
- > Allow your staff to fail (within reason – you are still responsible), they will be more innovative.
- > Believe in Your Teachers – Trust, delegation with authority. Review.
- > Praise People – A little praise goes a long way and lifts staff and students.
- > Encourage people to respond to situations calmly, especially your deputies.
- > Encourage them not to talk loosely of ‘crises’.
- > Read the school staff discipline policy and procedures very carefully – before you need them.
- > Acquaint yourself with any existing staff discipline issues.
- > Establish contact with the school’s legal advisors – before you need them.

## STUDENTS

“MY BEST PIECE OF ADVICE FOR A NEW PRINCIPAL IS:”

- > Listen, listen and listen. Glean everything you can.
  - > Give it 48 hours.
  - > Get into classrooms early and show your interest in the core activity of the school.
  - > Visit a classroom every day.
  - > Talk to and listen to representatives for the school’s stakeholders.
  - > Put the kids/students first in all things.
  - > Criticise in private, praise in public – a little praise goes a long way.
  - > Go to as many sports/cultural events as you can manage.
  - > Read the school discipline policy and procedures very carefully before you need them.
  - > Review discipline outcomes over the past 2 years to get a feel for the current culture and for precedents.
  - > Ring a Colleague – If in doubt, or to chew over a matter, ring a colleague (out of town).
  - > Have the Wisdom of Solomon – Weigh it all up, then go for it 100%.
- 

## PARENTS

“MY BEST PIECE OF ADVICE FOR A NEW PRINCIPAL IS:”

- > Listen, listen and listen. Glean everything you can.
- > Listen carefully to parents and acknowledge their concerns, anger.
- > When dealing with kids/parents/staff listen to both/all sides before you pass/offer judgement/comments – God gave us two ears and one mouth.
- > Parents don’t want ‘managers’ they want you to know who their child is.
- > Before an interview with a concerned parent, read the child’s file carefully, talk to staff. Make brief notes for the interview as aide-memoirs.
- > When an angry parent comes into your office say “How can I help you? And then listen without interrupting. They will feel much better after this!

## TWO EXPERIENCED PINCIPALS' VIEWS THAT MAY ASSIST IN YOUR SITUATION

“MY BEST PIECE OF ADVICE FOR A NEW PRINCIPAL IS:”

### **School Culture**

- > Your new school has a history.
- > Staff members can assist here, as can the various constituencies of the community.
- > Try to find out why and how decisions have been made in the past.
- > School traditions are deeply valued and you will be expected to espouse them. Keep the good from the past as you move forward.
- > Ask why?
- > Learn school hymn/song/prayer/chapter as soon as possible.

### **Be Visible**

- > Walk around the school as often as you can. Pop into classrooms and offices.
- > Let people know who you are and what you stand for. Explain your philosophy of education, for example.
- > Plan carefully your first meetings. Who you are, philosophy, what qualities you want fostered in human, curriculum and pastoral terms, how you will achieve these etc.
- > Your fist assembly will be an occasion! Make it a showcase for you.
- > Give reasons for the decisions you make.
- > Be wary of those who want to be your friend – you do not have many!
- > Identify key people you will work with and make yourself known.

### **Before You Begin**

- > Try to be as reflective as you can. Keep a journal.
- > Try to get as much material as you can, prospectus, handbooks, strategic plan.
- > Prepare questions for various people you will meet in formal meetings. DP, HOD, Chairman.
- > The timetable will tell you about the school's true priorities!
- > Check the files but do not completely trash until the end of the first year.
- > Do your homework.

### **Board**

- > Read the Board handbook.
- > Learn the names of the Board, their responsibilities. Are they nominees of constituencies?
- > Read past minutes. Are there issues you need to address?
- > Meet with the Chairperson, have your questions ready. Are there priorities for you? What does the Board want to see in your monthly reports?
- > Get a diary of meetings.

### **Staff / Teaching**

- > Is there a staff photo to help you learn names?
- > Read staff handbook to learn names and responsibilities.
- > Read end-of-year reports or similar
- > Have your questions ready for the Middle Manager.
- > Have your first meeting planned to outline your vision, philosophy, aims etc.
- > Identify the power cliques.

### **Non-Teaching Staff**

- > Meet with your assistant, Business Director/Bursar, Office Staff.



## TWO EXPERIENCED PINCIPALS' VIEWS THAT MAY ASSIST IN YOUR SITUATION

- > Arrange to tour the school with the property manager/caretaker of the grounds staff. They usually know more about what is what than anyone else we know!
- > What administration systems are used in the school?

### **Students**

- > Find a way to meet as many students as you can. What do they like or not like about their school?
- > Try to remember the structure of the school day and divide your break time with playground duty and staff!
- > Diary visits to classrooms.
- > Meet with the Director of Sport (or similar): Which sports teams should you watch?
- > How are assemblies organised? Have a series of homilies partly written before you arrive.
- > If 'speech' writing does not come naturally ask your colleagues for samples, buy sets; there are lots available on the internet.

### **Parents**

- > Be wary about accepting social invitations to individual homes.
- > Meet with the Chair of the parents' groups and the committees. Remember you do not report to them but it is useful to have amicable relationships!
- > Have a newsletter ready to be sent as soon as you get your feet under the desk. Watch the tone of this publication as parents will make judgements about you and what you hold important.
- > Try to attend parent group meetings.

## WHAT I WISHED I'D KNOWN BEFORE I BEGAN AS A HEAD

- > How to 'manage' a Board – successful tips.
- > Board dynamics – the runnings.
- > 'Imposter Syndrome' is common and natural – i.e. that my feelings that the Board had made the wrong choice, that I couldn't really do the job – were totally normal and had been felt by people I regarded as amazingly competent and confident principals.
- > Detailed information on staff – strength / weaknesses / any baggage.
- > That in-spite of the crowded curriculum, the happiness and purposefulness of staff and touchstone of student achievement; your family relationships should be elevated up the list as much as possible.
- > The politics – greater understanding of the politics comes with time.
- > Not to feel guilty about personal time and to keep fit.
- > Accurate information on school roll for year end budget.
- > Many staff members wanted a number of changes to the place quite quickly – they were ready for changes.
- > How political the job is.
- > Interpersonal skills are very important.
- > How the primary function is building relationships.
- > The staff resistance would quickly fade.
- > That it doesn't get any easier but you get better at dealing with issues – more confident in your abilities.
- > That today's crisis (well-handled) is tomorrow's fish and chip wrapping.
- > What would happen on the first day – who would I meet and who would introduce me to others.
- > Support network.
- > You will be 'Johnny-no-mates'.
- > You can't do everything on your first day.
- > Legal stuff.
- > More about the school I came to – history / actual facts / people and personalities (it is often hard to find and things come out in time).
- > What a resource other colleagues were, e.g. SMT / AHIS etc.
- > Excellent specialist teachers are hard to find – if one walks in the gate, hire them and find a job later.

FINALLY .....

WHAT I DID DO (or should have done) AT THE BEGINNING THAT (would have) REALLY HELPED, or REFLECTIONS FROM THE HEART TO THINK ABOUT:

- > Read everything about the school that I could lay my hands on.
- > Had outside mentorship/advice.
- > Changed communications, newsletters, magazines, website.
- > I went to the meetings of every Faculty, listened to what was working for them and what was not.
- > Developed a 10 year plan.
- > Espoused the notion and principle of 'our' school instead of 'me' and 'my' school.
- > Spent time watching and asking questions.
- > Got to know many of the key stakeholders.
- > Spent more time in classes.
- > Talked one on one with all members of staff so that individual opinions/thoughts/aspirations could be expressed unaffected by group mentality.
- > Stood back and observed before being 'too hasty' in making changes; even though a number of them were in definite need of change and quite obvious.
- > Be involved in the community – be visible.
- > Spoken individually to staff who were resistant to change.
- > Had a mentor – not feel that to ask for help was a weakness.
- > Reserved an hour a day as 'uninterrupted' work time.
- > Schedule planning time well in advance.
- > Staff interviews worked extremely well, despite the heavy workload.
- > I had one to one interviews with every employee – teachers, clerical, cleaners, and I listened – it was invaluable.
- > Get to know the admin staff.
- > Know / no hidden agendas!
- > Clearly establish boundaries of Governance and Management.
- > Got each staff member to fill in a sheet including name / title / role / year goals / aims / needs etc. Then meet with each one and discuss.
- > Be aware the time for innovation is short – don't be afraid to push through the change – you won't win everyone over.
- > My wife cooked dinner parties for all the staff (4 at a time plus partners), 2 per week, during the first term. Got to know all the 'other halves' and staff got to know each other.
- > Sometimes 'sleeping on a decision' is necessary to avoid knee jerk reactions – few issues are that important.
- > Avoid knee jerk reactions at all costs – do not be panicked.
- > Listen to your 'gut feelings' or intuition – it's mostly a matter of knowing what is right.
- > Build 'thinking time' into your weekly schedule.
- > Build a regular exercise programme into your week.
- > Have many friends outside education.
- > Take a decent holiday and don't feel guilty about it.
- > Book an overseas holiday in term break. It is the only way you will really get away. A week in Fiji etc.
- > Spend as much time as possible at sports games and other activities. This is the best way to get to know your students and equally importantly, parents.
- > Watch out for the red flags and take note of them.
- > Nothing can prepare you for the ownership of the role (the buck stops with you).
- > Don't stop saying thank you.
- > If you speak you say only what you know – when you listen you learn something new.
- > Maintain balance in life – not to feel guilty about having recreation time.
- > It's OK to make mistakes and gain advice.

FINALLY .....

WHAT I DID DO (or should have done) AT THE BEGINNING THAT (would have) REALLY HELPED, or REFLECTIONS FROM THE HEART TO THINK ABOUT:

- > Be open to suggestions (and even criticism).
- > Be consultative with staff and then look to implement change.
- > PRIDE – Personal Responsibility for Individual Daily Effort.
- > TEAM – Together Everyone Achieves More.
- > A ‘star team’ achieves more than a ‘team of stars’.
- > Read everything relating to the school.
- > Try to understand what makes the school tick.
- > Make sure that the rest of the day (after unavailable time set aside each morning) is available for staff but insist they make appointments and say, in brief, what it is they want to talk about.
- > Give concise, honest feedback.
- > Do not be ‘panicked’ into knee jerk decisions – few issues are that urgent.
- > Understand that if people aren’t grizzling somewhere, you are not doing enough!
- > Mentorship / support network.
- > Treasure your PA.
- > Value your senior management team. They’re your brains trust – think tank.
- > Always put on a brave face, put your best foot forward.
- > Keep smiling, remain calm even when the world is falling apart.
- > Always have time for people. Put your pen down – stop the keyboard.
- > Listening must be followed by actions.