

5 Questions You Should Ask Your Leader

August 31, 2014



I was recently asked by a superintendent if I had some questions to ask his principals to start off the year. The questions I gave him were based on the following areas:

- Fostering Effective Relationships
- Instructional Leadership
- Embodying Visionary Leadership
- Developing Leadership Capacity
- Creating Sustainable Change

In my opinion, the principal is probably the most important job in an educational organization. There are many studies that reiterate this, but I think it is that they have the most authority closest to kids. It is not to say that teachers aren't important; they are absolutely vital. But a great principal will help to develop great teachers, and a weak principal will do the opposite. They also tend to push great teachers out of schools, although most of the time unintentionally. Bad leaders tend to drive away great

talent. A great teacher can become even better with a great principal. As the very wise Todd Whitaker says “when the principal sneezes, the whole school gets a cold.”

Even though the questions were developed for superintendents to ask principals, I think that they should be questions any educator, parent, and even student should be able to openly ask their principal.

1. What are some ways that you connect with your school community?

(Fostering Effective Relationships) – When asking a principal this question, it is important to look for answers that go beyond the basic answers like staff meetings, emails, etc. I would look for answers that go above and beyond what is expected. For example, one of the best principals that I knew spent every morning welcoming staff and students to the school at the main doorway. He would ask questions about their family, talk to them about their lives, and get to know them in a much deeper way than what was expected. Although this principal has been retired for a few years, many of his staff refer to him as legendary because of the way that he would go above and beyond connecting with kids and community, before and after school.

2. What are some areas of teaching and learning that you can lead in the school?

(Instructional Leadership) Covey talks about two important areas for leaders; character and credibility. Many principals are great with people, yet really do not understand the art and science of teaching, or have lost touch with what it is like to be in the classroom. Although a leader does not need to be the master of all, they should be able to still be able to walk into a classroom and teach kids. They should also definitely be able to lead the staff in workshops that focus directly on teaching and learning. If teachers understand that a principal understands teaching and learning, any initiatives are more likely to be seen as credible in their eyes.

3. What are you hoping teaching and learning looks like in your school and how do you communicate that vision? (Embodying Visionary Leadership)

– There are many leaders in schools that often communicate a BIG PICTURE of what schools should look like, but can't clearly communicate what it looks like for teachers and students. It is important to be able to discuss elements of learning that you are looking for in the classroom. Not only is important to hold this vision, but to help develop it with staff and be able to communicate it clearly. Many new educators walk into schools thinking that “quiet and order” are the expectations for classrooms, so even though they are doing some powerful work in their classrooms that looks quite messy, they are worried that it does not fit in with the vision of their boss. Due to this, many will often try to tailor their work to look like what *they think* the principal wants because they really don't know what is expected. Having a vision is important but clearly communicating and developing that with staff is also essential.

4. How do you build leadership in your school? (Developing Leadership Capacity)

– Many principals are great at developing followers, but fewer are great at developing more leaders. There has been this notion for years that you do everything

to keep your best talent at all costs, but in reality, it is important to figure out ways to develop people, even if that means they will eventually leave. Great schools have become “leadership” hubs that they are continually losing great people, but they often get a reputation of being places where leadership in all areas is developed, which actually tends to attract some great people. Wouldn't you want to work with someone who is going to try to get the best out of you? There is a great quote that I've shared before (paraphrased) on this exact topic.

Many leaders are scared about developing people and then having them leave. They should be more worried about not developing people and having them stay.

Again, great leaders develop more leaders. What is your plan to make this happen?

5. What will be your “fingerprints” on this building after you leave? (Creating Sustainable Change) This has been a question that was asked of me years ago by my former superintendent, and has been one that has always resonated. What she had shared with me is that she should be able to walk into my school and see the impact that I have had as the leader of the building. This is not to say we throw out what the former leader has done, in fact, quite the opposite. Great leaders will not come into maintain the status quo, but will bring their unique abilities to a school that will help them get to the next level. They will build upon what has been left, but they will work with a community to ensure that their impact on a school lasts long after their time serving the community. This where all of the other questions above truly come together, but it takes time and dedication to make it happen.

The old notion is that teachers and students are accountable to a principal is one that is dying (thankfully). Great principals know that to be truly successful, it is the principal that is accountable and serves the community. They will help create a powerful vision but will also ensure that they do whatever work is needed to be done to help teachers and students become successful. I encourage you to talk to your principal, no matter what your role, and ask her/him their thoughts on some of these questions provided.