

WHAT ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS THINK

A roundtable discussion of the role's
challenges and opportunities for growth.



Collaboration, administration, discipline, and instructional leadership are just a few terms that come to mind when describing the complex role of an assistant principal in today's educational environment. Balancing the demands of administrative work, motivating teachers, connecting with students, and partnering with families are daily challenges that the assistant principals in this roundtable embrace. Matthew Dansby, who is in his first year as a principal after serving as an assistant principal for four years, is joined by assistant principals Sheilah Jefferson-Isaac, Jennifer Klipp, Stan McMichael, and Amanda Yates to weigh in on the challenges, opportunities, and joys that accompany this demanding role.

What is the biggest challenge assistant principals currently face?

JEFFERSON-ISAAC: The biggest challenge is finding your own leadership voice and style that both allows for a united front with your school principal, as well as gives you the ability to share your own vision and passion within the school organization.

DANSBY: In the context of school discipline, assistant principals are challenged with collecting resources and support to build a comprehensive system where all students can learn, adjust, and sustain behaviors consistent with school expectations. The focus is shifting to a positive approach toward intervention that includes understanding contributing factors to behaviors and the importance of making relevant connections between students' personal lives and school.

McMICHAEL: Time management and balance are a constant struggle, but I find technology like GoogleApps, Class Dojo, Google forms, and Remind to be helpful tools. Each task is a project with steps, and each step must be scheduled to accomplish goals. You must work with the drive

of an entrepreneur starting a new business to efficiently lead a school to success. Balance takes planning and a mission, and then prioritizing each day around school duties, this mission, and personal goals.

Given that there is usually just one assistant principal at a school, how do you connect with your peers to share best practices and collaborate?

KLIPP: Connecting is so important. Social media, forums, and organizations like NAESP are helpful to connect with peers for creative ideas and inspiration from afar, but making a close connection with one fellow assistant principal who serves as a ready resource for immediate support and advice is vital.

YATES: Visiting different schools for walkthroughs and discussions with other assistant principals is a very helpful way to connect. Visiting classes and taking time to talk about feedback that other assistant principals provide allows me to learn more about their school priorities and new ways I can share feedback with my teachers. Twitter is also a great resource for connecting.

Matthew Dansby is principal of Tussing Elementary School in Reynoldsburg, Ohio.

Sheilah Jefferson-Isaac is assistant principal of Northern Parkway School in Uniondale, New York.

Jennifer Klipp is the elementary assistant principal at Bob Jones Academy in Greenville, South Carolina.

Stanley McMichael is assistant principal of Western Elementary School in Newnan, Georgia.

Amanda Yates is associate principal of Frances C. Richmond Middle School in Hanover, New Hampshire.

JEFFERSON-ISAAC: The assistant principals in my district plan four to five breakfast meetings each year with a set agenda, as well as time to catch up on a personal level.

Assistant principals are responsible for a lot of administrative work. How do you balance it with being an instructional leader in your school?

JEFFERSON-ISAAC: Rather than worrying about balancing administrative work and instructional leadership on a daily or even weekly basis, I focus on appreciating the ebb and flow over weeks and even months that creates overall balance.

DANSBY: Collaboration is key. Assistant principals serve an important role as instructional leaders, but the work can seem insurmountable if done in isolation. Establish teams and set a clear focus, leverage experienced teachers and instructional coaches to establish best instructional practices, and have a process in place to monitor and assess the impact of your plan.

KLIPP: I personally enjoy attending pedagogical conferences and workshops with teachers, which provides opportunities to connect on a more informal level and learn together. By leading the way in professional development, learning together has shown to be a successful motivator on both sides of the desk.

How do you make sure that interaction with families is positive and fruitful?

McMICHAEL: All parent conferences start with strengths and end with an action plan for everyone. We share data on topics like reading and computational fluency, and give parents strategies to help their child at home as well as goals and

a plan to meet for further discussion. Take time to listen to parents and encourage teachers to be proactive with all behavior and academic issues.

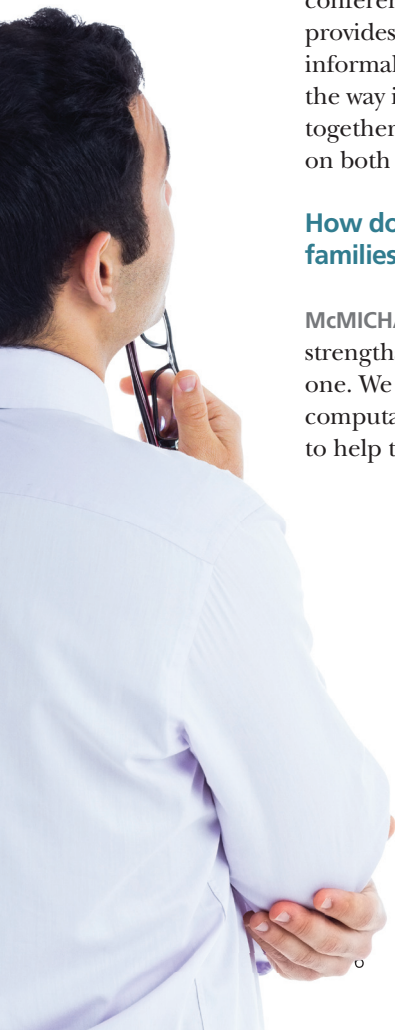
KLIPP: Social media allows families to more freely voice opinions and present dislikes that are unfiltered and that come without warning. It is vital to establish positive relationships with families before potential confrontations occur. It is up to us as administrators to initiate that relationship. For me, working the car line every morning and afternoon is a cornerstone of that relational foundation. When a confrontational experience does arise, this positive relationship does so much to provide credibility and understanding. At that point, my job is to listen and assure them of my continued commitment to what is best for all involved.

DANSBY: Communication with parents must be open, proactive, and consistent. We are in a constant state of trust-building throughout the school year. It is easy to get stuck on interactions pertaining to discipline, but there should also be several conversations focused on student growth and success. Making positive phone calls and reaching out to sustain relationships helps ensure that parents perceive your intentions to help their child as authentic. It also provides an opportunity to better understand family patterns and backgrounds that may support and guide your decision-making with empathy for each family's experiences.

What are the best ways to support teachers as they try to integrate new technology or instructional approaches into their pedagogy?

McMICHAEL: Use the tools yourself. Create risk-free environments for teachers to experiment with new strategies and technology tools. Support

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your teachers in the classroom with lessons or with technology enhancements to their lessons. Show them that we aren't experts and we will probably never be experts with technology. However, the most important piece to new technology implementation is continued support after they jump in.

JEFFERSON-ISAAC: The best way to support teachers in integrating new technology is to approach it as a pilot or trial run. Trials and pilot programs inherently give teachers permission to try something new, knowing that if it doesn't work exactly as planned, they can either implement something different or try it again. During this time period I offer lots of support in order to ensure success.

KLIPP: As an administrator, my actions do far more to set the school's climate than my words do. When I am seen enthusiastically using technology, attending workshops, and doing all I can to support their efforts, teachers catch the excitement and are much more likely to join in. It is vital that I work alongside them and knowledgeably offer practical help and ideas to make their integration as easy and useful as possible. Providing opportunities for development and adequate tools is vital, and recognition of those willing to embrace technology motivates others while subtly setting the standard.

DANSBY: Administrators should look to and learn from those with a strong grasp on school initiatives, collaborating with those showing growth and using those teachers, coaches, and specialists to leverage growth in others. Celebrate growth throughout the school and find ways to promote growth from teachers who struggle to change practice. Dive in and ask what is needed and put supports in place. Most of the time this can be accomplished by setting measurable goals as well as check-points throughout the year to monitor growth and offer additional support.

What are some ways you have found to cope, or even thrive, in the face of the current educational landscape?

YATES: Engaging with students on a daily basis reminds me why I love working at the middle school level. I also invest time in my own personal interests outside of school. These interests and passions help shape who I am as a person and member of our community.

JEFFERSON-ISAAC: My motto is #learningisjoyful. I firmly believe that schools should be places where students have joyful learning experiences. My goal is to spread joy each and every day and remind students and teachers that even when we are faced with challenges, it is our attitude towards those challenges that matters.

What is your ideal working relationship with your school's principal?

YATES: We set out to define our leadership style as a collaborative team approach. We accomplish this by communicating consistently throughout the day, sharing responsibility for specific tasks, and asking for guidance and feedback from each other and our staff.

JEFFERSON-ISAAC: An ideal working relationship is one that values autonomy as much as collaboration. We work together to identify both collective and individual goals, and then meet when needed to support each other in reaching these goals.

DANSBY: The ideal relationship is one built with trust as the foundation. Knowing that my principal can be trusted to give honest, experienced feedback allows me to take risks and explore avenues I might be hesitant to explore if I was the sole decision-maker.

What strategies would you offer other assistant principals to strengthen the leadership team between principal and assistant principal?

JEFFERSON-ISAAC: Finding a way to communicate regularly with your principal is key. However, the nature of our position often leaves little time for face-to-face conversations throughout the day. Using an app called Voxer has been the greatest asset in enhancing communication with my principal in that I can leave messages to plant the seed for honest conversations. We use Voxer for topics ranging from the mundane to those that spark courageous conversations around equity, diversity, and cultural responsible pedagogy.

YATES: Break down barriers of roles. Flexibility within the leadership team sets up a framework for working together. 