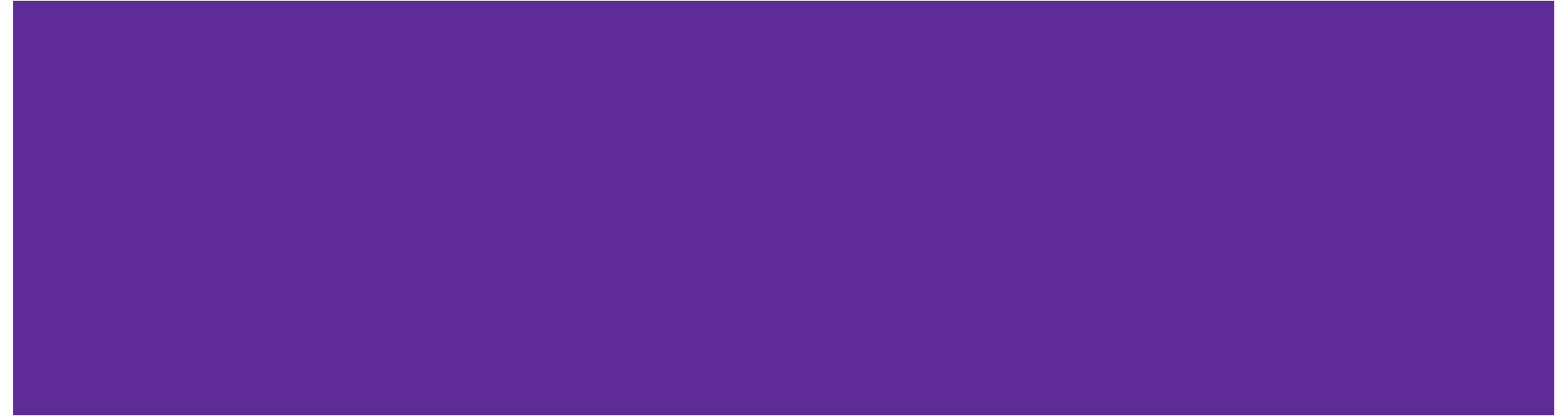


Principal Photo-Voice Project

Joel Besancon



Tell me about your journey to becoming a leader in a school community.

CM: It was started by a principal planting a seed when I taught kindergarten and moved to third grade to get a well-rounded experience in elementary education to help my journey.

KD: My journey to becoming a school leader has been a marathon, not a sprint. Early on in my career I had people suggest administration, however, I was not ready to leave the classroom. As I continued in my journey, I willingly took on leadership roles through various committees and was the team leader for my teaching team. I was ready to move beyond the classroom to make a difference in the lives of teachers.

JP: I was teaching music for 10 years under the same principal in my first job and she unexpectedly left. The new principal came and in her 3 or 4th week she said I need to become an administrator. She shared in her 33 years of teaching/admin work she only told 4 people that. I sat on it for 2 1/2 years before I moved on it. My first class I was hooked and I knew it was what I needed in my career. Class after class my professors were encouraging and would affirm this was a good move for me. I had applied for 3 years and never got an interview until this year. I had two. I was a final candidate for both. Dalton was a good fit. Love the work!

DD: I always had interest in becoming an administrator. It was a very natural path for me. I enjoyed my time in the classroom, but I love making an impact in students' lives and working with teachers. NES is a great place to be and I wouldn't choose to be anywhere else in the world.

How does a leader know that they have a positive impact on a school community?

CM: I think that data or a survey of our population to show what thoughts parents and community has about our elementary school and how we could possible do things differently. Attendance at events outside of the school day is a good indication of how you're doing and the feedback that you get at those events. Data to show progress monitoring is also helpful.

KD: A leader knows she has had a positive impact on a school community by the way her staff reacts to new initiatives and the positive attitudes exhibited to all stakeholders.

JP: In my short experience as an administrator, you really get a sense from people's body language, discussions with you and other forms of feedback if there is a positive impact. People make it clear when you are not making a positive impact. There can be false positive impact as well. If you listen to the staff, they will respond and you will know.

DD: I think you can see this every day on kids' faces. You know when you see them if they enjoy being at school and if they are happy to see you. I also love to celebrate both current and former students for their successes, both in and out of school. Showing school spirit and pride is very important to me.

What are you most proud of as a leader?

CM: I would say I'm most proud of my relationships with my students. I feel like I am able to connect with them and that helps me to see things from their point of view. I also make an effort to connect with my staff. I am most proud of my ability to build relationships.

KD: I am most proud of how I treat others.

JP: Even though you can't please everyone, you can make a difference. I took a chance on putting out a end of the year survey to see how my leadership overall is this year and how I could better serve the teachers. I was well pleased with the results. There were 5 people who took the opportunity to just stick it to me because I have made people accountable. The many others were good constructive feedback to me. I was very happy to see people noticed the climate change and how they wanted to have a better climate of working. What I am most proud of though is to hear the children share positive things to me about how I serve them. Kids are why we do what we do. Overall, the teachers do a great job. We have great families so the kids are great. BUT, when I hear kids say they feel like they matter or thank you for listening or parents sharing how their kids know I care for them -this is the direction I want to go. I don't want to leave anyone behind - and while we know how some kids struggle, why can't I instill in them how absolutely wonderful they are, they are destined for greatness and they are cared for - the rest will come into play. Will this change? No - every child matters. We will do all the educating we need to do and pressing forward with them but it will be with a deep concern for them.

DD: I am most proud of the community connections that I have made as an administrator. I am present at many school events from elementary through high school. Being visible in the community has made me be a successful administrator.

Walk me through one of your most recent challenges. Where are you now in overcoming this challenge?

CM: The most recent challenge was that a sexual harassment case was filed by a parent on behalf of their child toward another student. I had never had a formal complaint of that magnitude before. It was very time consuming. There were three students involved and I was communicating with all three parents that had their own point of view and frustrations. It was hard to balance all of the information and come up with a plan to benefit all students to support their needs. It was very overwhelming and time consuming.

KD: One of my most recent challenges was a discipline issue. I struggled with making the right decision and looking at all sides of the issue. I am now more confident in my decision-making and realize that people will be upset with you, but ultimately you need to make the best decision for the students.

Walk me through one of your most recent challenges. Where are you now in overcoming this challenge?

JP: I have a team of teachers that are chronic complainers and nothing makes them happy but to be left alone to do as they please. They have made it clear in a survey I did to see how I could better serve the staff. Instead of being constructive, they made it personal. The good news is the curriculum director and spec ed director's experiences are less than stellar with the same group. It is a challenge because they do not fully understand they serve children and their families. There is an entitlement that they do not need to provide what is asked of them beyond a "typical student plan" for their subject concentration. The overcoming will not fully happen until the team is split away from each other. I am good with it, but kids lose out when adults do not serve students.

DD: One of the most recent challenges we have had is related to curriculum. We had been using Everyday Math for almost 10 years, and decided it was time to move in a different direction. K-2 piloted the My Math program and 3-5 piloted Go Math. It was difficult for teachers to come to a consensus as they used different programs. It took a lot of time to mediate conversations about which program would benefit our school the most. There were several teachers who did not agree with the decision that was made. We have utilized professional development to aid teachers in their planning and to provide individual support as needed so that each teacher feels prepared to use these materials with fidelity.

How do you balance work, personal health, and family, friends, or community connections?

CM: I really try to establish boundaries. I wake up and complete a devotional and read the bible. I also read on the elliptical. I have several routines in place. I have a great family and supportive friends really try to make an effort not to read my e-mail at home. Boundaries are very important.

KD: Not very well... This is an area that I need to learn to balance better. I am learning to unplug when I am home on the weekends to build relationships and have experiences with my family, as well as make time for my friends. I try to walk regularly, but again, I fail at this because of my work commitments.

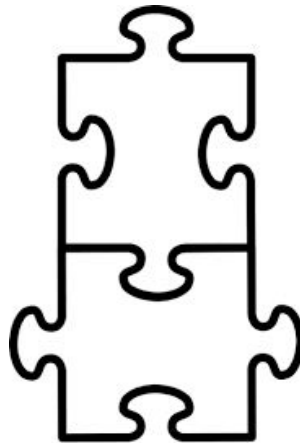
How do you balance work, personal health, and family, friends, or community connections?

JP: As a new guy with a K-8 grade building I must be honest and tell you I could not do it because it is a lot to take in and learn two buildings. I was hired 2 weeks before school. While I am a quick learner, this forced me to spend hours beyond the day and one weekend day here. I just started going to the gym 5 weeks ago and eating better. That is helping. Family, friends and community... I see them a lot less now that I am a principal. I would imagine it will be 3 years to get fully set. I have noticed many young teachers getting administrative degrees and I really think there should be a minimum of 10 years teaching now before being an administrator. There is a lot of educational maturity needed to become someone's supervisor in education. Young teachers will be giving up great years with their kids to become a principal and I have seen 5 years of teaching go into being a principal and they were struggling to be authoritative - in a good way - to their peers with much more experience. Having a balance is needed. When your boss tells you that there is a deadline or something that needs done, you do it as well. That can lead to an imbalance. I think for most it is an adjustment period you go through. I am learning what I will do next year to not have the same imbalance. I am fortunate that my kids are grown, my wife and I knew this would be a big undertaking and life would change. The expectations were right on so I was not surprised when the imbalance came.

DD: I made the decision to have my sons enroll in our school district. Throughout their time here, it allowed me to “double dip” because I could be at their school activities to support them, yet still be present as an administrator. It takes time to find a balance that works for you as an individual and you can make decisions that are best for you at that particular point in time to make you successful.

CM

1. The plant represents the seed that was planted to start the growth toward becoming an administrator. Who planted your seed?
2. The puzzle pieces represent working together.
3. The cones represent setting boundaries to take care of yourself and give yourself time and space to devote to your family and friends.
4. The watch represents the time that sometimes needs to be devoted to specific situations that arise unexpectedly.



Click the purple box for Audio Files.

KD

1. The light bulb represents being open-minded to new thoughts and ideas.
2. The book over her eyes represents her “by the book” mindset and vision.
3. The marathon number represents her path to administration. It was not a sprint. She spent plenty of time as a classroom teacher prior to becoming a principal.
4. The unplugged extension cord shows her commitment to remaining “unplugged” from all school responsibilities at home or with friends and family.

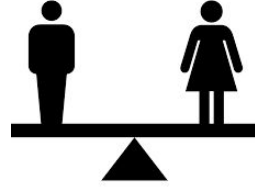
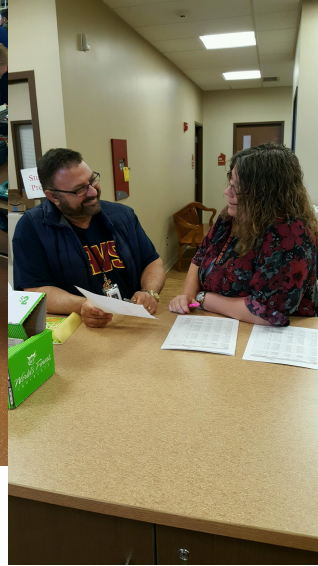
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JP

1. The empty timeline represents the time he feels is needed in the classroom before a teacher becomes an administrator.
2. The hourglass represents his time looking for an administrative position. He was then a finalist for two positions at the same time!
3. The scale represents his fairness and equality.
4. The silhouettes represent his ability to read body language to know if he's an effective leader.
5. The transition of photos from top to bottom as a stair model shows the priorities of JP.

Click the purple box for Audio Files.



DD

1. These pictures represent his dedication to celebrating student success.
2. The hearts represent his love and concern for the students and families of the school district.
3. The honor etching from a memorial shows his commitment to the respect and honor of tradition, whether at the local, state, or national, or international level.



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What did you learn about each of these principals?

I found that all of the principals have a vision of what's best for students and keep students at the center of their jobs. They all have systems in place to help balance work, personal health, and family, friends, or community connections.

How do their leadership visions compare to one another?

All four of the principals seem to have leadership skills that best fit their school communities. I saw them interact with students and staff in a variety of ways that demonstrated their leadership visions. KD maintains a very professional relationship with students and staff, as she transitioned from a teacher to an administrator within the same school district. JP has a different leadership vision as he is very new to his school district. DD is a very active member of his school community, as his children have gone through the school district. CM is very focused on children and families and how decisions affect them.

How do they compare to you and your leadership vision?

I think that each of the principals that I interviewed display strong leadership characteristics in different ways. Each has a clear vision for their schools, yet they have different ways of attaining their vision. It was very powerful to see how each school leader has evolved to be the best leader that they can be for their school community. I think it's very important for me to realize that my vision may need to be flexible based on the school community that I will serve.

**What message
are you
attempting to
portray in your
photos? How
did you do that?**

I think that each of the principals provided strong metaphors and symbols that made it easy for me to create a photo collage. Specific examples are explained in each individual collage. The common themes are time management, both as an administrator and the span of time over their careers to becoming an administrator, and the relationships and connections that they make with staff, students, parents, and other school community members.

What messages are you attempting to share in your collage? What does each symbol mean to this leader and why did you choose to place the symbols where you did?

CM: The watering can represents the metaphor of “planting a seed” and how CM has blossomed as an administrator. The cones are in the bottom left corner, because sometimes our boundaries become stretched or challenged.

KD: The symbols included in KD’s collage are very powerful. Sometimes it can be difficult to have a “by the book” mentality and it has to be a focused priority to a school leader to act with fidelity.

JP: The progression of pictures represents how JP views his job. He is present with students, works well with staff, and also completes his individual responsibilities.

DD: The pictures are three different examples of when DD was able to celebrate honor, tradition and success of both current and former students.

**What do we
need to take
away after
learning and
listening to
these
principals?**

I think the greatest thing that I learned throughout the interviews is how each administrator has positioned themselves perfectly into their school community. They aren't "ruling" as a figure of authority, but "leading" as a member of the school community. It's important for aspiring administrators to know and understand the role they will play in their school community to earn the respect and trust of all school community members.
