

The page features several stylized, light gray clouds scattered across the background. There are two clouds on the left side, two on the right side, and two at the bottom center. The title text is centered and overlaid on these clouds.

Reclaiming the Principalship

The background of the cover is white with several stylized, grey, rounded cloud shapes scattered across it. The clouds vary in size and are positioned at different heights and widths, creating a light, airy atmosphere.

TOM MARSHALL

Reclaiming
the
Principalship

Instructional Leadership Strategies to Engage
Your School Community and Focus on Learning

Foreword by
Christopher Lehman

HEINEMANN
Portsmouth, NH

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*To Kende, Timi, and Hanga, who
bring such joy to all they learn, and
to my Marta who keeps me learning
through our joy*

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Foreword

Families drop their children off at school each day on the promise and prayer that we will make their children’s lives greater than their own. Every parent, every guardian wants this. As the hands separate and car doors, bus doors, or school doors close, we are given each family’s absolute, greatest gift. We are entrusted with this mighty wish. We become a vessel of hope.

The most talented leaders I know are driven to cultivate this hope and promise across their school community. This work is not simple. It means keeping the transactional duties that grow like invasive weeds at bay. It means focusing the greatest time, patience and fertile soil on growing every classroom, every staff member, every leader, into the greatest versions of themselves.

Ancient forests of Douglas Firs and Redwoods have thrived for hundreds, often thousands, of years because well below the surface, deep within the earth, they form a connected community of nutrient sharing. Emerging research is revealing vast networks of overlapping root systems, fungi, and organic materials that funnel nourishment from tree to tree. When we stand at one of these massive trunks and gaze up at their tremendous height, it is the rich life beneath our feet that allow them to flourish. As the poet, Aimee Nezhukumatathil writes: “The secret of soil is that it is alive.”

Who benefits most from these connections below-the-surface? The saplings.

Growing just inches above the forest floor, largely in shadow, the youngest of these ancient conifers are at the greatest risk of not surviving. So, below the earth, ancient trees hold one another’s outstretched hands. It appears trees connect to one another so they can funnel the greatest percentage of nutrients to their saplings. Across their organic, underground networks, life-sustaining food is passed between adults and out to children. Together, they advance the next generation.

When my friend Tom Marshall first invited me to visit his school in Paramus, NJ, he did so with pride. I think he literally used the words: “I am so proud.” I stopped by after a day with a nearby district and together we walked the halls. As educators do, teachers were still in the building well into the afternoon: planning together, tutoring students, or setting up for the next day. Every room we walked into—every room—Tom gushed:

“Can you show Chris the supply room you advocated for? Chris, this is amazing!”

“Tell Chris about what you’re working on in writing. Chris, you won’t believe this.”

“Chris, this teacher has created a system the rest of the staff can’t stop talking about.”

In turn, teachers talked about their students, their work, and their colleagues with the same awe. I heard in their voices echoes of Tom’s energy. Or maybe, it was in his I heard echoes of theirs:

“I am so proud of this student, you won’t believe what a breakthrough he’s made!”

“My colleague is so brilliant, she came up with this idea and I borrowed it.”

“Tom asked this amazing question and we just took off.”

Tom Marshall is one of those leaders who understands that the full promise of a school building, a school district, and of our profession, is only realized through building deep and lasting connections, well below the surface. Connections that nourish every member of the community.

His ability to create and nurture these networks of possibility is breathtaking. While always purposeful and mission-driven, they appear to grow as organically as a tree line creeps up a mountain side. He has helped develop a thriving school and district community; an ever-growing series of annual Paramus Summer Literacy Institutes that draw speakers and participants from across the country; a network of school leaders focused on improving literacy

called the New Jersey Literacy Leaders' Network. Each is fueled by and filled with the hopes, concerns, learning and beliefs of their members' communities.

Now, through this gift of *Reclaiming the Principalship*, Tom is helping us all build these rich connections across our own communities, ones that can thrive below-the-surface and raise ourselves and our children higher.

Tom writes as he leads, with a full heart, clarity of purpose, and a humble brilliance. As chapters unfold it is clear how tendrils have grown to and through the work in these pages. It is a book grounded in his own deep knowledge of literacy and literacy leadership, polished by long-standing networks of learning with others, and—as Tom always does—one that celebrates, with his infectious joy and wonder, the voices of adults and children.

This is a book I want in every leader's hands. I want it in your hands because yours is a too often solitary, too often weight-of-the-world-heavy role. I want it in your hands because, somehow, despite the struggles and frustrations, you fight every day to get us all to the hope and promise of education. The practices described in *Reclaiming the Principalship* will give energy, hope, and deeper literacy learning to you and your community because they will be made of your community.

Ecology Researcher Dr. Suzanne Simard says of ancient trees' self-organizing networks: "it's those relationships that really build the forest." When a child leaves their family each day and walks through our doors it is our connections to one another—the ways we learn together, think together, grow together—that nurture us so we may see our children, all children, thrive beyond our wildest dreams.

—Christopher Lehman



Introduction

RECLAIM THE PRINCIPALSHIP

The principal is pulled in too many directions . . . essentially, initiative overload. It's hard to become an expert in anything and raise the capacity of your staff in those things if you are asked to become "good enough" at dozens of things requiring your attention.

Keeping teachers' morale and confidence positive as they deal with the pressures of new legislation, while attempting to take risks with teaching practices and implementing new programs with the fear of "doing it wrong [is probably my biggest challenge as a leader]."

I have many more students with ODD [oppositional defiant disorder], OCD [obsessive-compulsive disorder], ADD/ADHD [attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder], and with anxiety than ever before. The issue is that I just do not have the staff to support these growing needs, which falls on me more and more. There are days that are solely devoted to meeting with students, making them feel safe and nurtured, and not addressing any academics all day. It is tough.

My principal when I was a VP [vice-principal] used to have a joke about time management. We were in a K–8 school that was really a management nightmare. He’d say at the end of the day, “So, what did you do to be an instructional leader today?” It was a joke because we were totally stuck on putting out fires and addressing urgent but not-so-important issues all day every day, for the most part.

The comments above are from real principals in real schools.

The early twenty-first century is not an easy time to be a school leader. Changes have swept the educational landscape. The standards movement has evolved into rigorous learning benchmarks that principals must now know quite well to support teachers in their implementation. Changes to teacher and principal evaluation have added new layers of (questionable) accountability for teachers and principals. In some states, 30 percent of a principal’s evaluation depends on standardized test results, often with expectations that might sometimes exceed student ability, and further complicated by the fact that these principals don’t directly teach the students taking the tests. In the age of cutbacks in the name of financial responsibility, support teacher and instructional aide positions are cut, further obstructing student success. Fewer schools have assistant principals to share the administrative load, making the principal’s work even more isolating.

It is, as one of the principals quoted above said, “tough.”

Someone once told me that whenever you gain something new in life, you lose something. When we grow up, we gain the independence of adulthood, but we lose the innocence of childhood. We gain responsibility, but lose the safety nets we may have had as children. When we get married, we gain a new type of family, but we lose the independence of the single life. When our children are born, we gain new little people who want to love us more than anything, but we lose the ability to pick up and go whenever we’d like to on a moment’s notice.

This is true also when we take on leadership in education. We gain new authority, respect, and responsibility. We take on a new mission: to make change on a larger scale for students. However, we lose opportunities for close relationships with our students. We find our time frittered away by things that we know are not central to our mission. We become responsible for factors that can seem beyond our control. We make a trade, gaining greater influence in the school

community as a whole but losing the ability to witness, up close, individual students making long- and short-term strides in their learning—within curriculum and within life. We miss collaborating with our colleagues, because there are fewer leaders in schools, and we find ourselves eating lunch over our keyboards, in solitude. We feel as though our time is not our own.

When we gain something, we lose something. Or do we?

It's true that we give up a great deal when we change roles after years of teaching. However, we don't have to give up everything. We don't have to give up our commitment to learning, or students, or education. We don't have to give up our dedication to teachers or the practices we've embraced.

Roland Barth (1990) of the Harvard Principals' Center coined the phrase *head learner* to describe what the principalship could and should be: school and district leaders making decisions with learning at their heart, leaders who never stop thinking about their learning or that of the students and professionals in their care, leaders who see their primary job as creating an environment where learning will thrive, not *because* they satisfy silly mandates sent to them from outside but *despite* these mandates. Barth's head learner supports learning that is home-grown and authentic, much more powerful than the compliance that school leaders are, more than ever, pressured into today. How prophetic of Roland Barth to have this vision starting in the 1980s, some thirty-plus years before we ever muttered the words *Common Core*.

This book is an invitation to you to be the type of school or district leader who doesn't corner students and teachers into compliance, but creates an environment in which learning is simply a way of life. This book is a road map to help you figure out how to let learning guide the many, many decisions you make each day in your work. This book is a reminder to you about just why you came into teaching in the first place—to inspire others to discover and to better themselves.

It is my hope that this book will help you hold on to being a teacher and a learner, even while you occupy the principal's office.

The Changing Role of the Principalship

From the Colonial period through much of the nineteenth century, schools were run by people called “principal teachers” or “head teachers.” Usually men, these were members of the family who owned the school or were the teachers

favored by school boards. Sometimes they were the only ones in the school who had experience and formalized training in teaching itself or were the only ones who wanted to take on the extra responsibility of running the school. Starting in the late nineteenth century, schools began to take on the administrative structure we know today. That's when the term *principal* changed from being an adjective to being a noun. Its overall meaning also changed when it was separated from the noun it had modified, *teacher*. Principals throughout the twentieth century had less and less direct teaching responsibility and more and more managerial work. It seems that when talented teachers with a call to leadership took on this role, they became further and further removed from the work they truly loved. The further removed they became, the greater the divide became between their understanding of the daily happenings in the classroom and with the teachers in those classrooms. Jim Montesano, the superintendent who first took a chance on me as a principal, often referred to the distinction made by Steven Covey between what is *urgent* and what is *important* as a principal. There are many urgent matters that a principal addresses: safety, student discipline, and other issues that often come out of the blue and have an almost immediate deadline. However, they are not to be confused with important matters, which tend to revolve around the human parts of our work: building relationships, ensuring good learning for students and teachers, staffing our schools, and other projects that usually take quite a long time to take hold. When we remind ourselves that *principal* is an adjective, we can lead our schools as head learners, who create environments of engagement, not simply compliance.

Establishing the Learner's Mindset

We can begin to take on the role of “head learner” and reclaiming the principalship by establishing a learning mindset. This book offers suggestions for how to do that. Each chapter explores a different way of keeping in touch with learning by connecting with others.

Chapter 1 gives options for connecting with other principals and learning alongside them.

Chapter 2 explores ways to connect with teachers in the classroom, teaching alongside them by taking on instructional coaching.

Chapter 3 addresses the connection between learning and the many managerial decisions principals must make.

Chapter 4 connects the professional development and evaluative aspects of the principal's job to get the most out of observation and evaluation.

Chapter 5 discusses how to connect teachers, students, and community members through the use of learning themes and teaching metaphors.

Chapter 6 offers practical ways in which you can connect with and nurture your own learning life.

Each Day . . .

Learning—ours, our students', and our teachers'—touches not only every aspect of our work but every moment of our day. The chapters that follow will take us on a journey together. Before we get into the specifics of networking, coaching, managing, building community, and evaluating, let's consider some daily habits that will help a focus on instruction take root in our work.

Make yourself a witness to learning. I don't know about you, but I find that if I work on administrative tasks for fifteen minutes or six hours, the work is never really done. If we consistently make that work our top priority, it leaves us disconnected from the school. Instead, plan to leave the office and put yourself in the presence of learning every day. Whether it's a kindergartner finally figuring out how to tie a shoe, a middle school student figuring out a new theory about *The Giver*, or a teacher with fifteen years of experience learning a new way to differentiate a very difficult topic in math, make sure you're there to see it happen. Then think about it. The following questions help me to consider both the individual instances of learning as well as larger trends in our school:

- Who did the learning? What was learned?
- What did the learner (or a teacher or a partner) do right before to help make the learning stick?
- How did this experience affect the learner?
- How is this transferrable to other situations?

Gossip productively. When you witness learning, gossip about it—in a positive way. You might say to another teacher, the nurse, anyone who will listen: “I saw Joey finally figure out the nines in multiplication.” “Sadie and Matthew just had the best conversation about their book.” “Lorraine just had the coolest conference with a student.” This spreads excitement and helps teach others about how things are learned. It also helps all of the adults in your school to see that you value learning, not just compliance or orderliness. It sets the scene for the work you’ll be doing as an instructional leader.

Humble yourself. This isn’t the same as embarrassing yourself. It’s just about reminding yourself that you don’t have all the answers and that you shouldn’t put that kind of pressure on yourself. If you’re not humble, you can’t learn. If you can’t learn, you can’t really teach. If you can’t teach, you certainly can’t lead teachers.

Sometimes I think the great recipe for learning leadership is to have a learner’s soul, a teacher’s heart, a staff developer’s mind, and an administrator’s hand. Let’s focus on the learner’s heart: it’s always ready to take in something new, and possibly let go of something old. Being an imperfect, malleable person brings with it the need to be humble, and that can be hard when you’re the leader.

Here are a few ideas on how to remain humble, even as a leader.

- *Repeat a mantra.* Find something that you’ll say each morning as you get ready for work that reminds you how important it is to be humble.
- *Place an artifact of humility in your office.* This might be a picture, a poster, or a word that you will see during the day that will remind you to approach your work with a learner’s mind.
- *Thank others for what you have learned from them.* When you consider all of the ways that you learn in your work, you’ll find that you’re likely learning from everyone in the school: students, teachers, staff, and parents. When you find yourself learning from others, thank them, saying, “Let me tell you what I just learned from you. . . .”
- *Make compliments and thank-yous collaborative.* When someone compliments you or thanks you, they’re offering you an opportunity to build community with them by complimenting or thanking them

back. Rather than simply accepting compliments or thanks, look for places where you can honestly show how something is a collaborative effort. For example, if a teacher compliments you on a good all-school assembly, thank him for the work he did to prepare students for it so that they were ready to join in.

- *Create a question board.* Have a question board in your office, where you'll post something you're trying to learn through your work. When you find the answer, post a new question.
- *When someone says something you disagree with, go with it.* People will undoubtedly say things that you disagree with. Live with the idea for an hour, a day, a week. Try to find what's strong about their idea. You may not change your mind, but this exercise may help you to see others' perspectives more clearly.
- *Set a learning goal each year.* A principal I know once said that he makes a point of learning something new each year. One year, it was skiing. Another year, it was learning Spanish. Setting these types of goals starts with the admission that you don't know everything, which fosters humility.
- *Ask questions.* Ask students, teachers, other staff members to teach you about things. Some of these might be about education, and some might not.
- *Compliment and ask about process.* Say to someone, "I just saw you _____. How did you do that?" You might also ask why, but be careful not to look like you're asking them to justify. Instead, take on a curious tone to convey that you're genuinely interested in learning.
- *Ask teachers (or students) to name what they're thinking.* When we do things with automaticity, we don't stop to think about our thinking. When observing or coaching a teacher, stop after a particularly rich teaching moment, and ask, "What are you thinking right now?" This open-ended reflection can give you and the teacher a learning moment to share.
- *Ask people to teach you how to do things.* My secretary is so adept at technology. She's helped me figure out my GPS, program an iPad, and navigate Google Docs. Think of things you need help with, and find others who can help you figure them out.

Choosing Not to Give It All Up

When I was a staff developer at the Teachers College Reading & Writing Project, I worked with Elizabeth, the principal of a large elementary school in Ohio. Elizabeth was involved. She cared. She had something positive to say about every teacher we discussed. She seemed to know most of the 900 students in her school. She knew the newest picture books. She knew about teaching in a writing workshop. She talked about specific goals she had in mind for her teachers.

I mentioned to her literacy coach that Elizabeth must be great to work with. She nodded, and tears seemed to creep to the corner of her eyes. “Yes,” she said. “She gets it. It’s like having a teacher in the principal’s office.”

She took on leadership, but chose not to give up being a teacher at heart. I worked with Elizabeth for four years, and there were times she told me about how hard it is to keep the teacher in you alive. It’s so easy to be caught up in the administration, the management, the discipline, the politics, all of which she had taken on as a principal, but she made the conscious choice to remember every one of her students’ names, and three things about each of them (yes, all 900 of them!).

This book is an effort to make us all a little bit more like Elizabeth—not ready to give up the teacher inside us, just because we’ve taken on something new. Schools need leaders who make their teachers feel like there’s a teacher in the principal’s office, with just as much love for teaching and learning as they had when they started their careers. Make the word *principal* an adjective again. Join me, Head Learner, on the journey of reclaiming the principalship in the name of learning!