Foreword

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When the superintendent and the school board have appointed the new principal you can almost hear the sigh of relief. The decision has been made and the problem solved.

Well, for them maybe. But not for the beginning principal! One parent–teacher selection committee drew up the following list of characteristics of their sought after new principal. It conveys a sense of the incredible—and impossible—expectations that the beginning school leader must now confront:

Ability to see another’s point of view
Trust in teachers’ judgments
Supportive
Relaxed and flexible
Knowledgeable about curriculum areas
Experienced in school administration
Decisive
Strength in one's convictions
Self-confident
Ability to distinguish the important from the unimportant
Sense of security
Ability to set goals
Ability to provide guidance for teacher growth
Ability to promote staff communication
Personal warmth
Understanding of human differences
Ability to deal with pressure groups
Offers strong leadership
Add to these the expectations from the central office, the state department of education . . . and No Child Left Behind. And then add the myriad duties the principal will soon be responsible for. Among them:

- The safe passage of students from their homes to school
- Ensuring that the sidewalks are plowed of snow
- The physical condition of the plant
- The security of its occupants
- Health education
- Sex education
- Moral education
- Teaching children to evacuate school buses
- Teaching them to ride their bikes safely
- Lunch programs and then breakfast programs
- Students' achievement of high standards at each grade level
- Children with special needs
- Those who are gifted and for those who are neither
- Administering tests and ensuring that all children score above average

None of these responsibilities is backbreaking in itself, but taken collectively they present an enormous burden few are capable of assuming let alone sustaining.

Small wonder that many experienced principals are dropping out. And small wonder that the line forming to replace them is getting shorter and shorter. And that so many beginning principals flounder or wash out. I know. I have never felt as vulnerable, so much at risk, so clueless, and as innocent as I did that first year as principal . . . after which I was fired! And things in the principal's office are much tougher now than then.

One would suppose that fellow principals would come to the aid of their new brethren. Alas, there seems to be a taboo in our profession against both disclosing our problems to others and giving assistance to others who have problems. Too often one is, as one school leader put it, “forbidden not to know.” And competition with others leads to a situation where “the worse you look the better I look; the better you look, the worse I look.”

This leaves the beginning principal to suffer under impossible expectations with little help from within the schoolhouse or without.

Susan Villani also served as principal for many years. It is her belief that novice principals need not rely solely upon the school of hard knocks to educate them. The good news is that in this volume her heart and her head go out to those who are taking on this critical work. This is her gift to her colleagues . . . and her legacy to the profession.

And a valuable and generous gift it is. I see in these pages an astonishing resource for those in universities, school systems, and state departments of education who would assist beginning principals. This is a book about making wise and pervasive use of one of the most powerful means possible for
promoting the learning of the novice leader . . . alignment with a mentor who has “successfully been there and done that.”

I also see here a “self-help” book. For the names, locations, and detailed descriptions of scores of principal mentoring programs is now available for any practitioner to see and make use of as well.

Mentoring is a very difficult and sophisticated art form to perform well. To be done successfully, many conditions must be in place for mentor and the mentored alike. It’s all here.

The purpose of school and of schooling is to promote profound levels of human learning. I believe the real gift that effective mentoring can provide is only in part providing a resource system for the new kid on the block. The more enduring gift mentoring gives the new principal is an immediate opportunity, to reveal him- or herself to the school community as an insatiable learner. The head learner! To the extent principals, through their mentoring activities, will make their learning known and visible to students, teachers, and parents they will model and exemplify the most important business of the schoolhouse . . . learning. And they will thereby telegraph the message that “learning is for important people.” There is no more powerful and more desperately needed message they can convey.

The first year on the job will always be tough. So will the second and third. But thanks to Susan Villani’s words you are about to read I am confident that the next generation of principals will never have to “go it alone.”