

Preface

The assistant principal's day may include intervening in a heated and violent fight between two eighth graders, chairing a curriculum integration task force, and serving as substitute for the ailing chorus director. What motivates someone to take this varied and variable job? How are the jobs and tasks of assistant principals designed and structured? What training and selection prepare them? Are assistant principals really needed, and if so, for what? Can the job with all of its components, variously interpreted in every district, not to mention every school, even be analyzed using any common understandings?

How can districts and state policies improve the assistant principalship? How can assistant principals take charge of their careers and make theirs a satisfying position? Given the dilemmas and demands, who would want the job? Who would stay in the job? How can principals, policymakers, and preparation programs change to provide better support for them?

The assistant is often ignored and sometimes maligned. The old *Encyclopedia of School Administration and Supervision* (Gorton, Schneider, & Fisher, 1988) in its selection of "administrative roles" does not mention the assistant principal at all. Yet the assistant is often the first person to deal with any immediate challenges in a school, whether curricular or disciplinary.

This book truly values the assistant. After we describe what we know about assistants, we explore how to find and retain people for this role. Research focusing on the position—delineating the particular roles, the processes of selection and socialization, the problems, and the opportunities in the assistantship—sets the context. This book pays attention to unique issues: the challenges facing the person in the entry-level position, the "mop-up" nature of the tasks, the assistant as a gateway to upper administrative mobility, the dependency on

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principals and their leadership style, and the particular ambiguities, especially in an era of reform called “accountability,” “teacher empowerment,” and “site-based management.”

Stray comments and observations piqued our interest in the assistant principalship. As a public school teacher, Marshall chuckled over the middle school students’ caricatures of the assistant principal as a gangster, Nazi, or thug, since the roles of chief disciplinarian and hall patroller have traditionally fallen to the assistant. Later, as researchers on educational administration careers, we noted educators’ acceptance of the assistantship as a necessary but often undesirable step up the career ladder (and one that has been difficult for women and minorities to obtain). We have noted the need to support and motivate assistants in their instructional leadership duties and their leadership styles. As authors with duties in preparing, promoting, and supporting new entrants to administrative careers (Marshall as professor of graduate students and Hooley as a district superintendent), we have watched hundreds entering and moving up the administrative career hierarchy. We have had fascinating discussions with educators who described their delight in the work and also their frustration over dilemmas in the assistant principal role. They describe feeling underpaid and unappreciated by the public and feeling a sense of helplessness over seemingly intractable societal problems—family breakups, poverty, poor health and nutrition, racism, drugs, violence—that spill over into the schools. Assistant principals are on the front line dealing with these problems. They know their work is important!

Finally, as scholars reviewing the literature, we noted an abundance of material on superintendents and principals but little on the assistant principal. Yet the assistant principalship is the *beginning* of a career socialization process. Principals and superintendents are the *outcome* of this process. Educators who take on the assistant principal position are in the process of becoming school administrators. As they do their daily tasks, chat with fellow administrators, possibly become protégés of more powerful administrators, attend professional meetings and university classes, and observe “how things are done around here,” they learn what constitutes school administration. They make choices about whether to adopt the values and behaviors that predominate in the professional culture of school administration. This choice-making is a critical process that determines who will become a school leader. At the same time, these individuals are being evaluated: career gatekeepers observe their choices, values,

actions, attitudes, and affiliations. The assistant principalship is an assessment position through which formal and informal district and professional processes are used to decide who should move into high positions of administration.

Yet few scholars devote attention to assistant principals. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) issued a position paper (*Restructuring the Assistant Principal*, 1991a), and a few books are now available. Still, few have noticed the person, the position, and the crucial processes that occur in it. A cursory examination of educational textbook indexes shows that assistant principals get much less mention than athletic programs. The 1992 edition of this book filled that gap, drawing attention to and providing a research base for examining the role. First, it *noticed* the assistant, describing the daily work, the special nature of the position, and its rewards and frustrations. Then, by analyzing the selection and socialization of two assistants, it identified key processes that mold those who become assistants and filter out others. Problems emerged from the research on the assistant's work, position, and role. One chapter described these problems and another presented actual and possible policies, programs, and strategies for creative solutions. Thus the book offered practical insights for the educator plotting career strategy and for the professor, the superintendent, or the state policymaker trying to support excellent school leadership. This new edition has a new subtitle, reflecting a changed emphasis. Thus *The Assistant Principal: Leadership Choices and Challenges*, Second Edition incorporates the new realities of administrator shortage, new licensure and training practices, accountability pressures, and other such stressors. It ends with the exciting possibility of using the assistant position as the launching point for revisioning school leadership.

This book is based on perspectives that arise from administrative theory, career development research, and school administration studies, as well as from current policy trends. It also uses the practical advice of persons invested in various aspects of the public educational endeavor.

We listened to the stories, joys, desires, dilemmas, and regrets of many assistant principals. We demonstrate the need to understand the assistant's role and then show how, by focusing on the assistant, we can uncover problems and identify new solutions for reconceptualizing school leadership. There is no better place to begin than with the assistant principal.