

The First 90 Days Matter Most: Building Trust, Culture, and Connection as a New Principal

by Tiffany Wysocki

The first 90 days of a principalship are often described as a learning period — a time to understand systems, meet staff, and observe a building's culture. While that is true, I have found those early months are something much more powerful. They are the foundation for trust, relationships, and long-term staff and family engagement.

When I transitioned from a middle school assistant principal to a Pre-K through second elementary principal within the same district, I brought a unique perspective. Having worked closely with adolescents, I had a clear understanding of where gaps often begin long before students reach middle school. I could see where students needed the most support socially, academically, and

behaviorally at the elementary level, and that lens shaped how I entered my new role.

One of my first priorities was strengthening collaboration across buildings, especially between our elementary principals and grade spans. I worked closely with the principal of our third through fifth grade elementary building to bridge the gap between second and third grade teachers. Together, we created intentional time for teachers to meet and collaborate around state testing expectations, instructional alignment, and student readiness in reading, writing, and math. These conversations helped us focus on continuity rather than isolation and ensured students experience smoother transitions across grades.

Even though I was transitioning within the same district, I did not know the staff in my new elementary building. I was hired in the summer, which meant I had to build relationships quickly and intentionally. I made it a priority to call every teacher personally. I introduced myself, expressed excitement about joining the community, and invited each grade-level team into the building for a breakfast before the school year began. I coordinated the event, provided food, and used that time to listen and learn about the people I would be serving. Those early conversations set the tone for trust and connection before the first day of school.

As the year began, I continued to focus on building culture through small, meaningful actions. Culture is not created by one initiative. It is built through consistent moments that communicate value and belonging. I made it a priority to bring staff together in ways that felt genuine and supportive. We started the year with a staff breakfast, created a Valentine's Day breakfast and appreciation spread in the faculty room, and built new traditions following our holiday break to help staff reconnect and reset. I also made sure to attend school events regularly, not as an obligation, but as a visible and engaged member of the community.

These actions may seem small, but they send a powerful message. You matter here. Staff culture is shaped in the everyday experiences of feeling seen, supported, and appreciated.

Another important lens I brought from my middle school experience was the understanding that families often form lasting impressions of school early in a child's academic career. At the middle school level, I often worked with families who had already developed strong beliefs about school systems based on earlier experiences, some positive and some negative. That perspective stayed with me as I moved into elementary leadership.

I knew that Pre-K through second grade is often the first formal experience families have with schools. That means we are not just educating students, we are shaping how families will view education for years to come. Because of this, family engagement became a top priority from day one.

We implemented a monthly newsletter to ensure consistent communication with families. We also made it a priority to



invite families into the building at least once a month for school events, many of which were made accessible and free through the support of our PTA. These events were intentionally designed to help families feel welcomed, included, and connected to the school community.

Creating these opportunities was not about increasing attendance at events, it was about building trust. When families feel informed and included early, they are more likely to remain engaged and supportive throughout their child's educational journey, even when challenges arise.

Throughout my first year, I also focused heavily on visibility and presence. Leadership is not only about decisions made in an office. It is about being present in the spaces where learning and relationships happen. I made it a priority to be in hallways, classrooms, arrival and dismissal areas, and at school events. Presence builds familiarity, and familiarity builds trust. Over time, that consistency helps create a sense of stability for both staff and families.

What I learned most from those first 90 days and beyond is that leadership transitions are not just about learning a building, they are about shaping it. Every interaction, every communication, and every intentional action contributes to the culture being built.

When leaders prioritize relationships over systems, create early wins that build confidence, and establish clarity in communication and expectations, they lay the foundation for a school culture where people feel valued and supported.

Strong school leadership is not defined by a title or position, it is defined by trust. Trust is built in the earliest moments of connection, consistency, and care. In a time when recruitment and retention are ongoing challenges in education, those first 90 days may be the most important opportunity a leader has to make a lasting impact.

In addition to these foundational actions, I also placed a strong emphasis on creating structures that supported teachers in feeling connected to one another and to shared instructional priorities. One of the challenges I observed, even within a district with strong communication, was that grade levels and buildings often operated in silos.

Teachers were working hard but not always given consistent opportunities to collaborate across grade spans or buildings. I worked to intentionally change that by protecting time for meaningful collaboration rather than allowing it to remain informal or inconsistent.

These collaborative spaces were not simply meetings. They were designed conversations focused on student learning, assessment data, and instructional alignment. Teachers engaged in discussions about where students were in relation to grade-level expectations and what supports were needed to ensure success as students transitioned from one grade to the next. This was especially important between second and third grade, where state testing expectations begin to shift and instructional demands increase. By creating structured time for these conversations, we were able to reduce the disconnect that sometimes exists between elementary and intermediate levels.

Another key focus during my first months was ensuring that new and existing staff felt supported not only professionally but personally. Transition periods can create uncertainty, even in familiar districts. I recognized that trust is not automatic simply because people know your name or your previous role. Trust must be rebuilt in each new context. That meant being consistent, approachable, and intentional in every interaction. I made a point to be visible without being intrusive, available without being overwhelming, and present while keeping relationships at the center of my leadership.

I also learned quickly that small gestures often have a disproportionate impact on school culture. A shared breakfast, a handwritten note, or an unexpected moment of appreciation can shift the emotional tone of a building. These actions are not about recognition alone. They are about noticing and valuing the work that staff do everyday. Over time, these small investments build a sense of belonging that cannot be achieved through formal systems alone.

Family engagement remained central to my leadership approach throughout the year.

Beyond newsletters and events, I focused on accessibility and responsiveness. Families needed to feel that communication was not one-directional but a partnership. We worked to ensure that families had multiple entry points into the school community, whether through events, communication platforms, or informal interactions. The goal was not only to inform families but to invite them into the life of the school in meaningful ways.

As I reflect on this transition from middle school assistant principal to elementary principal, I recognize how much that experience shaped my leadership lens. Seeing students at the secondary level gave me clarity about the importance of early intervention and strong foundational instruction. It also reinforced the reality that academic, social, and behavioral success in later years is deeply connected to the experiences students have in their earliest school settings.

Ultimately, the first 90 days of leadership are not about proving expertise, they are about building relationships that create stability and trust. They are about listening deeply, acting intentionally, and ensuring that every stakeholder, staff, and family alike feels valued and included in the work of the school. When those conditions are in place, schools are better positioned not only for immediate success but for sustained

growth and positive culture over time.

This experience continues to shape my leadership approach today as I prioritize visibility, consistency, and relationships as the foundation for all decision making. In a time when schools face increasing demands, I have learned that culture is not an initiative but a daily practice. The first 90 days remain a powerful opportunity to establish that practice and create lasting impact for staff, students, and families across the school community. ■

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