

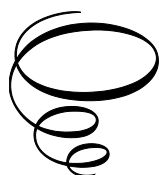
The Principal Education Coach

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By

Christopher Cook

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For those who love me beyond my work:

For my wife—we've been leaning into our beliefs about the power of education for nearly 25 years. You have always been the steadying and steering force in my personal and professional life. You continue to be the most important educator in my life. This small note cannot even begin to describe your impact at each step of my journey. Your presence is the single common thread. We walk together! I love you.

For my children—I'm reaching into the world with this book because I believe there's something important to say, something that I hope one day you'll be proud of. My greatest wish is that, in some way, it influences your lives positively. Whether or not you ever read a single word, know that all the good things I do are, in part, for you.

For my mom—your unwavering love, encouragement, and belief in me have been my foundation. The values you instilled in me continue to guide my work every day, and I'm forever grateful.

For my dad—your care for the details and the nuances of people and systems have monumentally influenced my approach to leadership. Our conversations are among my most treasured memories.

For my sisters—you are rock stars. Your strength, support, and love have been a constant source of motivation, and I'm proud to be your brother. I am here. Always.

For those who have truly seen me:

For my extended family...

For my students...

For my colleagues...

For my coaches...

For my teachers...

For my mentors... I've been incredibly fortunate! I hope you see your influence on me and this book!

To anyone reading this, my sincerest hope is that this book inspires meaningful improvement. *The Principal Education Coach* is not just my book; it reflects the influence of so many incredible people. I am forever grateful and indebted.

“Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient season. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year.”

—W. E. B. Du Bois

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Preface

I was tossing and turning at two in the morning in the middle of a school vacation week. I was a young father, but it wasn't my toddler son keeping me up. I was also a novice principal trying to bring meaningful growth to a charter school, but work stress was not the reason I couldn't sleep. No, what kept me awake was a small piece of metal in my eye, an injury I'd sustained earlier that night while installing a ladder to the attic of my family's home, and I would soon be on my way to the ER.

It is true, however, that I thought constantly about how to be both the best new dad and the best principal I could be. A balance I struggled with. Our school, a touted and diverse charter-public school in the middle of Cambridge, MA, was full of bright students, dedicated teachers, and incredible potential. We were grappling with some serious challenges, particularly trying to strike a balance between maintaining high academic standards and making the school a place where students genuinely wanted to be. The previous year's graduating class, among the school's first, had featured just 20 of the original 75 students who'd entered 9th grade. Though I didn't know it when I walked through the hospital doors, I would leave the ER with not only a metal free eye but a vision for how our school could realize its potential and retain its students throughout the entirety of their school journey.

What caused me to experience my early morning epiphany was watching how nurses, doctors, and the hospital staff worked together. I was blown away by how the staff talked to each other so seldom yet knew all the ins and outs of my case when they arrived to talk with me. I sat for hours recovering from having a drill inserted into my eye and noticed their diligent adherence to data entry and patient interaction protocols. In real time, in one of the world's best hospitals, I saw how systems thinking, when properly executed and combined with personal understanding, translated to better care.

It was suddenly so clear: a process-focused school needs to work a lot like an emergency room. Effective and consistent processes elevate everyone. From that moment on, I was driven to use new communication strategies and information exchange systems in the service of making a meaningful impact on students. I resolved to bring systems thinking into the service of students. I began to develop and deploy processes that emphasized

collaboration and leveraged data to identify and proactively support students' needs. As we implemented them, my belief in their potential to improve the educational experience of every student increased. But in order for them to work, I learned, students and teachers alike must understand each other as individuals and commit to supporting each other. They also need to commit to following standard protocols, believing in the power of data, and coordinating intervention when necessary. A process-focused school needs to work a lot like an emergency room, with more smiles, joyous motivational statements and fist bumps.

Every principal knows there's a huge difference between theory and practice. Explaining processes is a lot easier than getting them to work across a school. As a first-time principal, I faced understandable skepticism from teachers, parents, and students themselves. What's more, it's incredibly difficult to engineer any kind of systemic change when emergencies and unexpected challenges arise daily—even though unexpected challenges are part of the job. Yet principals are called, even in the midst of rapid and unforeseen change, to guide their schools toward a brighter future, to be consistent and work towards long-term goals even if the short term is all anyone else can think about. During my time in Cambridge, alongside incredible students and teammates, we managed to make significant improvements. I took the lessons I learned at my first stop as a principal with me on a journey to my second and third principal roles. That journey took me back to a wonderful school in Boston, and to a large public IB World School on Long Island, NY. Along the way, I have always focused on supporting my teammates and our students.

Coaching school leaders has been integral to my experience as a principal since I first became one myself. Early in my time as a school leader, prospective principals shadowed me and met with me one-on-one as part of their preparation for a new career. In many respects, I took a coaching approach to these relationships, but my main goal was to help them form their own ideas about how they would best approach the job. On the spectrum between abstract and concrete, my coaching approach tried to land in the middle. I wanted trainees to see everything: difficult meetings and efficient meetings, moments of crisis and moments of triumph, students experiencing adversity and, then, overcoming it. My philosophy as a coach was to open my own heart and mind and let trainees pick out what works for them. Staying in touch with *why* their work is important matters as much or more than learning anything specific about *what* to do.

I bring the same dedication to coaching to all of my positions, and as many mentees as I reasonably can. At each step, I tried to improve myself as a performer, coach and mentor, attempting to pay forward the incredible

coaching and mentoring I've received. I remained committed to providing tools rather than dictums and helping people develop their own beliefs instead of forcing mine upon them. Along my ongoing journey, I recorded insights from my conversations and reflections. I began sharing these insights with the people I trained—again, not so they would do things my way, but to help them refine their own approach to the role of principal. They were kept in a document on my computer, which I added to only when I felt I'd stumbled upon something that could be useful. Often, that meant I had made a mistake and, upon reflection, realized how I could have avoided it. I thought of them as principles: succinct precepts that I felt could help any principal looking for guidance.

Slowly, I organized the principles into sections, devised exercises to help hone the skills I felt were most important to succeeding as a principal. Now, after many years, that document has evolved into the book you're holding in your hand. I see this book as an extension of the training I received and provided throughout my career as a principal, and my hope is that as you read, the book will begin to **feel like a conversation with a coach**. I have included stories that highlighted the stakes of the approach I wanted to communicate. In these pages, I often get specific, in the interest of providing concrete and actionable advice. But it's far more important that you use this book to get more deeply in touch with who *you* are as a principal—and help you progress towards the principal you aspire to be.

The Book is a Coach

The stories in this book are drawn from my own experiences, but are written as thematic reflections, weaving together moments from multiple schools, colleagues, and contexts to highlight broader lessons of leadership. They are not about any one individual or location; rather, they combine experiences to capture the essence of each principle. Names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of colleagues, friends, students, families, and mentors.

The Principal Education Coach contains 180 individual principles, each of them geared towards a singular goal: helping you, current or emerging school principals, become better at preparing students for the future. 180 principles are divided into 40 chapters that emphasize how you might build your craft. The book is formatted so that you can begin reading it just before the school year starts, as preparation begins in earnest, and then start with Principle #1 on the first day of school. After that, there is essentially one principle for each school day throughout the year. Or, if you manage your tasks on a weekly basis, each chapter provides you with an

area of focus for each week of the school year. Some principles and some chapters are very concrete and specific, whereas others have been written to give new life to the ideals that inspired us to become principals in the first place. There are exercises spread throughout to ensure that you can translate even abstract concepts into action.

Each chapter references the word *build*. After all, at each turn of your work, you are building. During my time as a principal, I often felt like there was a dearth of comprehensive guidance for doing the job. It could feel at times like most people expected me to figure out how to do it on my own. Despite the wonderful mentorship I received—and without which I could not have succeeded—I really could have used a written guide that spoke to the experience of being a principal and provided a framework to help me build toward my goals. Years later, I hope I have created one.

There's one more thing I've added to this book, though not without significant hesitation: parts of my own story. For a long time, I felt like my presence in this book would be an intrusion. After all, it's not about me. It's about you, the reader, the principal who cares about nothing so much as doing the best job you can, to whom nothing matters more than how well students are prepared for the world when they graduate from your school.

Yet the power of narrative is immediately apparent to anyone who has ever tried to transmit information, advocate for a cause, or convince a group of people to act. You'll see from this book that I believe wholeheartedly in the inspirational capacities of storytelling. Stories can serve as vehicles of inclusion, elucidation, and motivation. Stories provide credibility by illustrating the context of the information they contain. One of the most challenging parts of the principalship is learning how to balance conflicting demands and succeed in an environment of paradox. The first two principles in the book are, respectively, "Embrace Change" and "Remain Steady." Stories teach us how it's possible, even necessary, to hold two—or three, or four, or seventeen—ideas in our head at once.

What's more, I don't expect you to lend me your ear simply because of my credentials. The principalship requires every element of our humanity; when you pick up a book that aims to help you succeed as a principal, you're beginning a relationship with the author. When I realized that our relationship would be richer if you got to know me first, I decided to explain my path to—and through—the principalship. The introduction provides information about how I was built into a principal. I don't mean to suggest that I was the most principled principal or that, by incorporating these principles into your practice, you'd be following me in some way. In fact, I suspect that my former colleagues could think of myriad occasions when I failed to follow my own advice. As principals, we are—and always

will be—works in progress. This book is an effort to help us work together in the interest of those who matter most: students.

Though *The Principal Education Coach* is designed to be read along the calendar of the school year, its thematic organization means that some principles come up slightly outside of their place in the annual cycle. For example, some sections contain advice about what to do at the beginning of the year, but if you read it in order, you'll encounter the first 'operations' principle near the holiday season. I organized it this way because I sought to align it with your growth as a principal and enable you to read it within the length of the school year. As principals, we are constantly managing both timelines. My hope is that, even after you've owned this book through one school year, it will be useful to pick up—perhaps when you feel like the format of your faculty meetings needs an update, or when you're beginning a new relationship with a mentor (or mentee). In those moments, my wager is that you'll be glad it's organized into focus areas. If you find yourself reviewing the first section, for instance, it could indicate that it's a good time to take another look at the fundamentals, that your next big leap forward may require you to look within yourself. But if the principles about community resonate more strongly, it might be time to get out there and rededicate yourself to connecting with parents and local leaders.

Between some chapters, you will find a letter from a key constituency that the chapter addresses. They're writing to you from the future, at the conclusion of a successful year. The gist of the letters is positive—'*here's how you were able to execute in a way that benefited us*'—though they do not ignore the unique challenges presented in each domain of the principalship. Their optimism and gratitude echoes core tenets of a successful principalship; you'll see my belief in the power of optimism echoed throughout the entire book.

The subtitle of this entire book could, in fact, be *Helping Students Build Their Future*. Whether you're working on your mindset, meeting with a parent-advisory committee, or empowering your front office staff to be Directors of First Impressions, each of your actions should pass this core litmus test: how does what I am doing help students?

Throughout the book, you'll notice an emphasis on consistent and clear processes. In many ways, culture and operations are inextricable from each other: they reflect each other in the same way the physical presentation of a school reflects the morale of the people that work and learn inside of it. In one letter, your staff writes, "Adopting new processes—and sticking with them—took work...But it helped that we were doing it together." The safety, health, and morale of your school depends upon nothing so much as the sturdiness of the processes you've set up to maintain and improve a

school's mode of operation. Successfully adopting processes, of course, takes an entire team of people. There are more than a few principles that focus on your team, personnel management, the hiring process, and running meetings. As important as your own mindset and habits are, you cannot do the job alone.

You will not succeed if you do not inspire others to be their best. In helping others achieve their best, you are building community. My hope is that these portions will aid you in placing your school within the context of the community it serves. It also strives to remind you that the school itself is a community, and that its function goes well beyond the propagation of academic excellence. In essence, each section is about building the future, because each section is about how to enable students to thrive. But it's worth it, I think, and I concluded with an emphasis on the simple fact that your success is determined by the lives of the students once they leave your school. You're preparing them for the first day they're no longer your student. As a whole, the book is relentlessly future-focused; its final section aims to leave you in a forward-looking frame of mind.

Appropriately, the final principle is "Write Your Own." The purpose of this book is not to be didactic or to ask you to conform to some rigid notion of how best to be a principal. It's to stoke thought and help you develop your own tools to become the best version of the principal your school needs. I hope it challenges you and opens new avenues of thinking. I hope it resonates not just while you're reading it, but when you're walking in the halls of your school, when you're speaking with parents and teachers, when you're taking a moment of reflection in your office to figure out how best to handle the latest challenge that's been dropped on your desk. Most of all, I hope it makes a difference in the lives of the students you serve.

For my part, I'm incredibly grateful that I was able to develop principles that helped me create and sustain positive change in the schools I led. I'm sharing them in the hope they can do the same for you, perhaps helping you to build and sustain an incredible school for students. Look at these principles as the beginnings of conversations whose aim is for you to help form your own. They come not just from my time as a principal, but from my entire life as a teacher, as a coach, as a partner, as a parent, as a student, as a son. It is important to acknowledge that as a white male, my identities shape how I approach these principles—and that what has worked for me may not resonate for everyone. My journey, of course, didn't start in Cambridge, MA, as a principal, and it didn't start in the emergency room either. It began where most things do: in childhood. I grew up in an eastern Long Island town, where the suburbs give way to farms.

Introduction: Experience Builds

Built with Care and in Community

My mother taught fifth grade and my father was a retail leader for some of the largest stores in America. In many ways, a classroom leader mom and store leader dad combined to provide me with the disposition and desire to be a school principal. Growing up in small school community afforded me the opportunity to view how systems co-evolve with their environments. Buoyed by subsidies and economic activity connected to the town's nuclear power plant, the school district's budget peaked in the early 90s, when I was in elementary school. Of course, I wasn't thinking too hard about school budgets as an eight-year-old. I was reaping the benefits of being in a well-funded district by participating in arts and music programs, taking part in science workshops coordinated by the school and community, and benefiting from the focus on small, personalized learning environments pioneered in the district by innovative educators. But by the time I entered high school in 1998, the district was losing its way. During my time in high school, we had three different principals and the school board cycled through three different superintendents.

Far more transformative and tragic was an event that occurred in the spring of eighth grade. With the encouragement of my classmate, I branched out from athletics and academics and went out for the school play. She was very special to me; I had recently worked up the confidence to ask her out, actually, and she'd said yes. In the spring, after we'd gone out to eat appetizers and ice cream with our friends and fellow cast members to celebrate the success of the play, she was hit by a car while crossing the street. The accident was fatal.

As most people who have experienced such a tragedy will tell you, using words to capture its devastating impact will always be impossible. I do know that I went into a tailspin, only some of which was visible to my parents and friends. I can't pinpoint a moment when I necessarily recovered from the loss—can one ever truly recover from something like that?—but our town came together in the wake of the accident, and I was astonished

by the love and support that emerged. It wouldn't be the last time I was confronted with the importance of community.

Through high school, I often felt as if I was living two different lives. As one person, I was a high school student in emotional distress who exhibited consistently reckless behavior, behavior that would likely result in an intervention today. Another extreme tragedy during my senior year, a friend died by suicide, exacerbated my destructive tendencies and drove my two selves farther apart. Privately, I wondered if it wasn't a coincidence that two people with whom I was so close had died before I turned eighteen, if death was following me in some way. And yet, as another person, I was a high-performing individual who eagerly engaged with the people around him. Even as I struggled immensely on the inside, I served as president of National Honor Society, wrote for the school paper along with community papers, captained two sports teams, and developed a wonderful, diverse group of friends.

I was incredibly fortunate to have the support of strong and compassionate coaches and mentors. Most of all, the support of my parents—who took my behavior very seriously but were always willing to give me a fresh start—kept me afloat during this time. My two sisters, both younger, also believed in me enough to never let my Hyde ruin my Jekyll (they are both now incredible educators). My life would have turned out very differently if not for the strength and patience of my parents and family.

I also relied on the discipline, focus, and group dynamic of team sports. In particular, the sport of lacrosse gave me the principles I needed to navigate high school. My experiences on the lacrosse team both on and off the field would set me on a trajectory toward school leadership and provide a bedrock for the beliefs that shape who I am as a father, husband, educator, and community member today. It taught me the power of solidarity, organization, and working as a team on and off the field. It instilled in me the value of leadership. It's no exaggeration to say that lacrosse set me on the path to becoming a principal, though I didn't know it at the time.

Starting when I was in fourth grade, a coalition of adults—led by our high school varsity head coach, along with my father and many of my friends' parents—began developing a youth lacrosse program in our school district. Every year, we improved our individual skills as well as our ability to work together as a team. By the time my classmates and I were ready to begin our senior season, we felt we had what it took to win a state championship. There was just one problem: our head coach and our assistant coach had effectively been released by the school board. The allegations were specious, and parents and players alike knew that it boiled down to

one thing: a decision our coaches had made previously, in the interest of winning, to bench the son of a former town official.

It's difficult to overstate how important our coaches were to our team. Over 20 years later, I still regularly connect with them. For one thing, the resume they built in the past two decades speaks for itself: four New York state championships, five Long Island championships, 10 Suffolk County championships, three Long Island Coach of the Year awards, national coach of the year awards, a gold medal at the U-19 World Championships, two Hall of Fame inductions, and much more. While leading our defensive strategy, more importantly, our head coach was a steady leader who gave a lot to the team and community, and he demanded a lot in return. Our assistant coach was our offensive genius who mentored those who listened about the importance of principled leadership, and he cultivated a deep appreciation of preparing with intentionality. Together, they were tough but fair, held themselves and their players accountable, and believed that demanding excellence meant that everyone performed their best. In short, they were early models for how I wanted to conduct myself as a coach and principal. Heading into our senior season, they were being tarnished for sticking by their convictions. The whole team and their families were paying the price. When we should have been focusing on how to capitalize on years of hard work and realize our collective dream, we were instead staring at the possibility of losing it all before we even stepped onto the field.

What we did next is well-captured in the documentary *Senior Year*, which features interviews with my teammates, our parents, me, and our coaches. With my teammates backing me up, I attended every school board meeting and spoke passionately, but with respect and purpose, about what was at stake. With our parents, we coordinated local awareness campaigns and encouraged community members to write letters to decision-makers, ensuring the school board knew exactly where we stood and what was at stake. The community looked to me to represent our team, and I tried to reward their faith in me each time I got the opportunity. I remember preparing to deliver speeches at the school board; even then, I was aware that any charisma I possessed was only helpful if my arguments were built upon sound principles and supported by the people to whom it mattered. In the leadup to the spring lacrosse season, I learned how navigating school districts can be frustrating and political while simultaneously invigorating and, ultimately, rewarding. A few days before the season started, our coaches were reinstated.

Four months later, we won the New York state championship.

The lessons imparted by my experience as a student-athlete have stuck with me. I would go on to become a coach myself, in lacrosse,

basketball and track, and the principles of fairness, hard work, and accountability became cornerstones of my approach to being a principal. So did the lessons I learned when speaking to the school board as an advocate for change, fighting battles in a system that wasn't fair.

At the same time, I was a white kid in an overwhelmingly white school district that, despite its tumult, was still comparatively safe, well-funded, and full of opportunity. In college, I would learn about an entirely new scale of challenges, those powered by societal inequality on a city-wide, statewide, and nationwide level. My eyes would be opened, my values would be tested, and by the time I graduated, I would be more determined than ever to make a real-world impact.

Built in College, Co-Ops and Classrooms

On the first day of a Northeastern University class called Sociology of Boston, my classmates and I followed the professor down Massachusetts Avenue toward the intersection with Columbus Avenue. There, he pointed out that the physical crossroads also acted as a dividing line between different levels of opportunity: to the north and west lay gentrified neighborhoods, elite private colleges, and some of the top hospitals in the world, while to the south stood Roxbury, Dorchester, and Mattapan, historically impoverished neighborhoods populated predominantly by people of color. Though all were Bostonians, my professor explained, children born on one side of the street grew up in a different city from children born on the other. The moment was a wake-up call for me that catalyzed my desire to provide equitable and accessible learning opportunities. I began to build a framework for how I would spend my undergraduate years and beyond.

Northeastern University pioneered a type of experiential learning centered upon “co-ops,” periods of time where undergraduates work full-time in a position closely related to their field of study. Today, as an administrator at Northeastern, I spend my time creating and scaling learning programs that result in meaningful career advancement, along with greater financial stability, all while doing so through in-demand fields. Back then, I leapt at the real-world training offered by the co-op, first as an Access Counselor at Bottom Line, a leading nonprofit in college access, then at the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, and finishing off in a student services position at the university.

Prior to college graduation, I passed both of the Massachusetts exams required to teach history at the secondary level. After I graduated from Northeastern, I found a position as the first full-time substitute teacher at an emerging 6th-8th grade charter school in Boston, MA. The school was

dedicated to preparing students, nearly all of whom identify as Black or Hispanic, for four-year colleges. I started at the school in the fall of 2007, when its first 9th graders arrived. I would teach and lead there through those 9th graders' high school graduation. The majority of them hailed from the very neighborhoods my professor had pointed out on the first day of Sociology in Boston. I feel very fortunate to have started my school-based career here. It was a privilege to be trusted and welcomed.

Those first years of teaching were exhilarating. Through August and September, I observed and taught in nearly every class in the school. By October, I was teaching English and Language Arts to 6th graders. By November, I was coaching middle school basketball. Days started at 4:00 AM and finished at 6:00 PM, sometimes later. The colleagues I worked with, most of whom were extraordinary personalities and teachers, were incredible mentors to me. The school's leadership was exemplary. I learned that being a great educator required developing deep connections with all students, which meant leaning into the relationships with students who were struggling the most, or who challenged you the most.

My experience at this first school also reinforced my understanding that holding students to high expectations was a way to demonstrate love and belief. The school employed a system where standards-driven instruction was combined with strict discipline. All efforts were centered around the dual mission of preparing students for their academic futures and fostering ethical development. I developed incredible relationships with students, gained perspective, and was regularly humbled. Teachers and students alike abided by the five core values of Courage, Responsibility, Integrity, Perseverance and Respect. Everything from lesson plans to community meetings was standardized. With each other, teachers were collegial and supportive while being competitive, eager to push the envelope while never losing sight of the quality of education they could provide. I quickly noticed that the most successful teachers were those who built strong relationships with students and each other while maintaining fair, high standards. Most of the people I looked up to the most—my fellow teachers, our school's leaders, the educational and political leaders I'd met during my co-op, my coaches—were individuals who demanded excellence from those around them. Mostly by intention, but partially by instinct, I was emulating them.

Of course, the school wasn't perfect. And, I also knew that I needed to keep raising the standards I set for myself. After four years—a time during which I taught full inclusion classes from 6th through 10th grade and, as basketball coach, engineered a turnaround from a 3-15 win-loss record to 14-2 and a state championship loss at the buzzer—I was accepted

into the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where I would receive my Master's in Education in School Leadership. I'd decided I could make the most impact as a school principal, and in order to do so, I needed coaching.

Built in Collaboration and with Communication

This has probably come across already—I haven't always been the best at balance. In truth, moments of quiet or calm can scare me. I have always been more willing to grind and keep pushing forward than to sit and reflect. Sometimes this has hurt my ability to be maximally effective as a leader, partner, or friend, and when I speak with principals, I always stress the importance of taking a breath and slowing down when necessary. If I could go back in time and talk to myself during the year I was enrolled at Harvard—while my wife was pregnant with our first child, I was designing an idea for a new charter and presenting it to a local CMO on numerous occasions, conducting 15 different independent teacher evaluations, putting in 10-hour days each Saturday as a coach in a teacher training program, taking part in our cohort's steering committee, organizing workshop sessions to discuss how to work across differences, coordinating visits to local schools, and completing a 20-hour weekly internship—I might offer that same advice. My past self might not have taken it, however: he was looking ahead, eager to be a father and determined to start the next academic year as a school principal.

Accordingly, in the spring of 2012, I interviewed to become principal of a school in Cambridge, MA. I will never forget asking the school's leader, "What is your theory of action?" I was a real Harvard student.

He laughed a bit before saying, simply: "get shit done."

I giggled. I instantly appreciated the reminder to keep my focus on the real world and remember that action is always more important than theory. That leader became one of the most important mentors of my career. As he offered me the role, he said, "I don't think you are afraid to disappoint people." Shortly thereafter, I was introduced as the school's principal.

At 27 years old, I was stepping in to lead a team of incredibly educated, driven people. The school is located in the Kendall Square area of Cambridge. At that time, about half our students traveled on the Red Line from Boston, emerging from the MBTA into the incredible biotech hub. Other students walked or took the bus from diverse pockets of Cambridge. Many of the teachers came from places like Harvard and MIT. I wondered how they would get along with a rookie principal who had a Sociology degree from Northeastern; and who had worked at a place that was probably

a bit more “no excuses.” I knew I would have to balance my ambitions for the school with a heavy dose of humility if I was going to get everyone to work together as a team. At the same time, the school was facing a retention crisis, and there was no doubt that I’d been hired to address that.

Understanding that it was important to take decisive action, I spent the July before staff arrived back having coffee with any future teammates that were willing. I implemented processes that emphasized structure and consistency. Crucially, I empowered teachers to communicate with each other about their approaches with particular classes or students, and we looked deeply across our student body asking the question, “who is not engaged?” Eventually, we standardized the mode of communication across the board with the help of technology. This not only enabled our teachers to coordinate with each other in real time, but allowed us to build a record of improvement over time. When we had to make a big decision, we now had historical data to consult. It wasn’t an easy change—many teachers were used to acting independently and were understandably skeptical of shifting towards a more team-focused environment—but it began to pay dividends.

Already, our school was recognized as a national leader in terms of supporting students’ academic growth. Under our leadership, academic and engagement indicators saw steady or improved performance. 10th-grade Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) results continued to rank the school among the state’s top performers, while the numbers of students graduating and matriculating to four-year colleges increased dramatically. Beyond academic achievements, we forged connections within Cambridge, across education and non-profit arenas, and fostered partnerships with technology and biotech companies. My dedication to engaging students’ families, evident through active involvement in school events and activities, strengthened the bond between our school and our students and their families.

With students, I adopted a firm yet compassionate approach, balancing expectations with unwavering support. This balance was essential in cultivating a culture of mutual respect and adherence to our school-wide code of conduct. The kids probably thought I was intense. They might have wondered about my deep involvement in their lives, why I seemed to be constantly monitoring their actions, and why I was always urging them to improve. If anyone visited our school, they’d see me standing at the front shaking every student’s hands, they’d likely hear me in the hallway, offering reminders like, “Get to class, your education awaits you,” or “Get it together—we’re expecting big things out of you.” My words were backed up by action: I issued demerits and detentions when necessary. But I never forgot the support I’d received during my own school struggles and how

crucial it had been for my parents to give me a fresh start when I needed one. If a student was suspended, they'd return to school to find me greeting them at the front entrance to shake their hand and let them know I was rooting for them to succeed today, tomorrow, and the day after.

My motivation to be deeply enmeshed with students came from a profound belief in the transformative power of support for young people. I knew firsthand the impact a supportive community could have during difficult times. Moreover, I deeply believed in the ideals of our country, particularly the notion that every individual should have equal access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Education, to me, was the cornerstone of ensuring these rights. At school, our focus on graduation and college matriculation drove us to sweat the details and push our students towards academic excellence. Yet beyond the rigorous curriculum and disciplinary measures lay a fundamental belief that what we were doing would truly make a difference in our students' lives. Every member of our faculty and staff shared this conviction, waking up each day with the hope of guiding our students towards successful, fulfilling futures.

It was hard work. By December of 2014, almost three years in, I had started to worry that I would not be able to keep pace with the work. Over December break, a time many educators conduct deep reflection, I concluded that I needed to try something else. I let my mentor and the school leader know I would not return in the fall. I didn't have another job lined up at the time, but I was eventually convinced to take a leadership role at a place both familiar and dear to me: the school in Boston where I first taught.

At the time, the Boston charter had moved to a coalition model of school governance in which the position of Principal did not exist, and the school was led by a series of Directors. Upon returning in July, I was responsible for supporting our 6th-12th grade student discipline team, coaching some directors, building the basics of a tiered intervention system, and supporting our Health and Counseling team, while also optimizing the process students underwent when they transitioned from 8th to 9th grade, and then 9th to 10th grade. In a city, particularly in the charter school system, 8th through 10th grade can be filled with confusion. This confusion makes for a difficult educational path for at-risk students, made exponentially more challenging by the fact that they're much more likely to jump from school to school. They're made to say goodbye to teachers, friends, and study partners; left searching for the continuity and consistency so essential to student success.

As we looked to steady the school, it was clear that the coalition model of governance was quickly revealing itself to be unsustainable. By November of my first year back in Boston, I'd agreed to become the High

School Principal and I spent the rest of the year assessing and designing, while also building our team, community and buy-in.

Built through Challenge and Complexity

During my tenure as the high school principal in Boston, I spearheaded numerous initiatives that significantly impacted the institution's trajectory. With an intense focus on human connection and personal interaction, we implemented data-driven strategies, deploying myriad frameworks and utilizing innovative tools like personalized 'learner profiles' to improve the support we gave students. Notably, I played a role on the leadership team during a substantial capital and school expansion campaign that culminated in the construction of a state-of-the-art facility, providing more students with an enriched learning environment conducive to academic success. We experienced a remarkable surge in enrollment applications, positioning the school as one of the most sought-after open enrollment schools in the Boston area. Through strategic hiring practices, we appointed seven alumni to staff positions during the 2017-2018 academic year, fostering a sense of community and continuity within the school. Each of these staff members had been students when I first taught at the school. Those students were now college graduates, teachers, and emerging school leaders! Our graduates secured 100% college acceptance rates each year, with over 90% matriculating to four-year institutions. In 2017, our school in Boston was awarded the state's final 300 charter seats, specifically designated for high school expansion, a testament to our commitment to the culture of educational excellence we'd developed. Student culture and buy-in to the school improved dramatically.

2017-2018 was my final year as a principal in the Boston area. In the fall of 2017, my wife and I moved back to Long Island, NY, where both of our families still lived. My children, who now numbered three, could get to know their grandparents. Perhaps their grandparents could help me and my wife, who had inspiringly earned her PhD and given birth to three children in the same time span I went from building substitute to high school principal. She is a force, and she is my steadying presence.

Starting in October, I left Boston every Friday night to travel to New York to be with my family, returning every Sunday night to be a principal in Boston. By the end of the school year, after dancing with a few positions outside of education, I'd accepted the position of Principal at a large suburban and public IB World school on Long Island.

Now in my third principalship, I leaned on my experience to get off to a strong start and ensure students, parents, teachers and staff that they