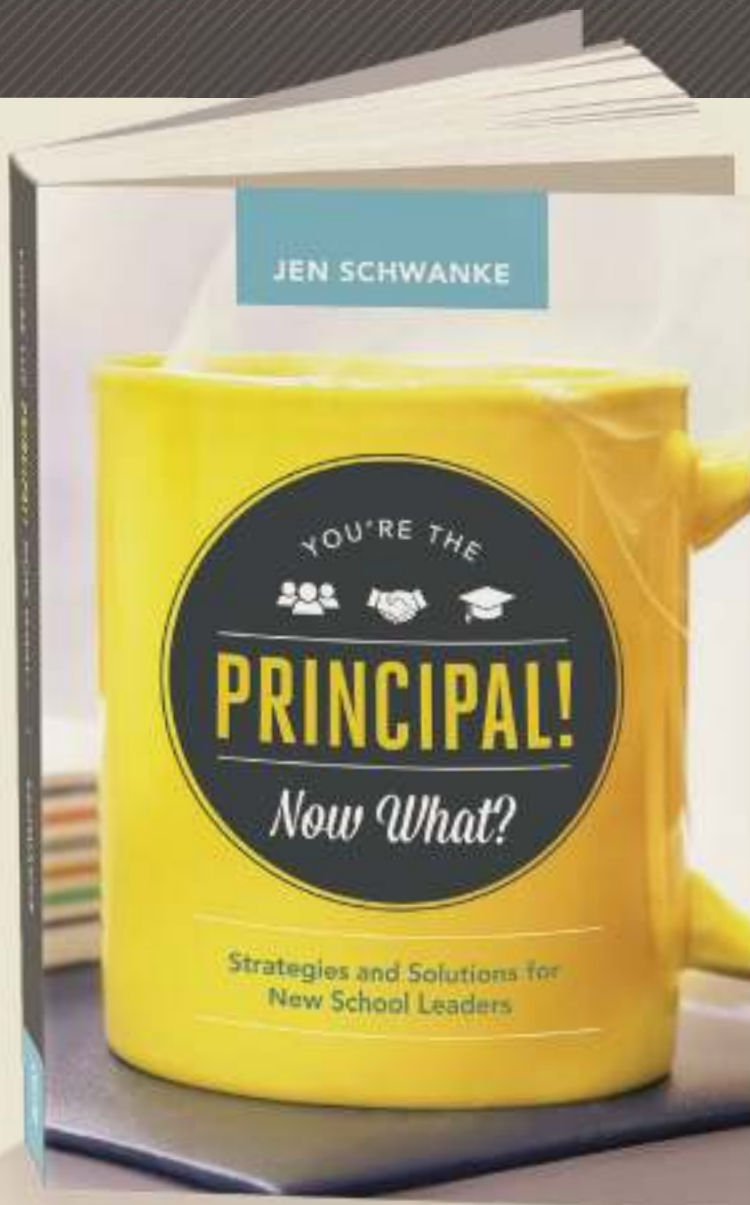


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### Author

**JEN SCHWANKE** began her career as a language arts educator and is currently a principal for the Dublin City School District in Dublin, Ohio. A graduate instructor in educational leadership, she has written frequently for literacy and educational leadership publications and blogs about her experiences at [jenschwanke.com](http://jenschwanke.com). Follow her on Twitter @Jenschwanke

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YOU'RE THE  
**PRINCIPAL!**  
*Now What?*

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# 1

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## Meeting Your Staff, Students, and Parents

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### Scenario 1: The Staff Meeting

*You have been working as a literacy coach in a large elementary school, in which most of your work has been with 4th and 5th grade teachers. When the principal of your school retires, you decide to apply for the job. Many interviews later, you are named as principal. As you think about your new role, you come to a realization: While the teachers with whom you worked closely know you well, most others know you by name only. How should you present yourself so the school is ready—and able—to accept you as their new leader?*

---

### Scenario 2: The Individual Teacher Meeting

*You have just gone through a rigorous interview process for a job as the principal of a middle school. There were interviews with a human resources director; a committee composed of parents, students, and staff; a group of other principals in the district; and, finally, the superintendent. Late on Friday afternoon, you receive a call from the superintendent notifying you that the job is yours. Your first principal job! "Well, you've got your work cut out for you," the superintendent says. "This is a tricky building." Excitement quickly turns to anxiety: What does that mean? And where do you begin?*

---

### Scenario 3: The Aggressive Parent

*After taking over a large high school, you have begun the long process of getting to know the students and their parents. You have just finished your welcoming remarks at the school's annual Open House. You told the*

*attendees a little bit about your experience, your goals as their new principal, and how eager you are to be part of their community. Immediately after you conclude, a parent in the front row seems to bolt toward you. She asks if you have a few moments to talk . . . now. You can tell by her body language that she is an aggressive parent—one with whom you probably need to build a good relationship. What are the wisest first steps?*

When you are hired as a new principal, the buzz throughout the school community will be palpable. Everyone will want to know who you are, what you value, what experience you have, and—above all—what *changes* you will bring to the school. As with most situations, your initial interaction with your staff and community will set the tone for the future. A positive start will create momentum that will carry you through the year.

The strategies and solutions in this chapter are divided into two parts: those focused on managing initial meetings with your staff and those focused on handling initial interactions with parents and students.

## **Strategies and Solutions for Meeting Your Staff**

It's difficult to know who will be more nervous when you first meet your staff—you or them! In my experience, a tiered, two-step approach is the best bet for introductions. The first step is to meet your entire staff as a group and tell them a bit about yourself as a person and as a leader. The second step is to have short meetings with individual staff members. In an extremely large school, this may be difficult, and you may find it more efficient and effective to meet with departments or teams. Regardless, your goal is to get to know a little bit about each of the teachers in your building.

## Step 1: Conduct a Whole-Group Meeting

Once you have been officially named principal of your school, you will need to determine the best time to meet your new staff. It's never a neat process, because there isn't a standard time line in administrator hiring practices. For example, if you are hired in the spring for the upcoming school year, it may not be appropriate to meet your whole staff until months later when they report to start the new school year; similarly, if you are hired in the summer, it may be hard to get your staff together before the start of the year. On the other hand, if you are hired to be a principal in the same building where you are teaching, or for a building within your current district, it may be possible to meet the staff within a few weeks of your official hire date. Consulting with the superintendent may help you determine the best course of action.

In my first year as a principal of an elementary school, it was particularly important that my initial interaction with the staff be a good one. The situation was unconventional: midway through the school year, the current principal had unexpectedly retired, and the superintendent needed someone to step up and fill in for the remainder of the year. He pulled me from the role I held as an assistant principal in a middle school and named me interim principal. He said he hoped I would eventually be named the official principal, but he made it clear that I would have to earn it: "We are still going to post the position, and you will interview like everyone else. The hiring committee will decide who will be the official principal for next year."

He went on to tell me about the staff. "They are in a difficult position," he explained. "Their current principal was often unkind and handled the teachers in a punitive manner. There is very little



trust between him and the staff. Worse, there is a culture in which a small group was 'in' with the principal, while the others felt undervalued and mistreated." He summed it up with his trademark frankness: "The school culture is awful."

With an opening like that, I was quite anxious the day I first met the staff. I walked in with the superintendent, and we headed into the library where the staff had been called to assemble. After a brief introduction, the superintendent turned to me. "Why don't you tell them a bit about yourself?" Sixty pairs of eyes stared at me, wary and suspicious. I tried to relax.

I began by telling them about my qualifications and experience. I told them a bit about my family, my leadership experiences, and my hopes and goals for my future as a leader. I even talked about my weaknesses. "I'll be learning from you," I told them. "It's no secret that I have no elementary experience, so I'll be asking a lot of questions. But I hope you'll find that I am a good listener and a quick learner." I finished by assuring them, "I am here to lead you, not micromanage or make any big unnecessary changes. I want *my* work to support *your* work. With that approach, I think we can make this school into a pretty special place."

Although I am sure the staff was still a bit cautious, I felt a sense of calm settle over the room. The message that I didn't intend to make sweeping, reckless changes was what they needed to hear in order to step back a little and give me a chance.

From the perspective of a school staff, the first exposure to a new principal is a reasonable occasion for anxiety and worry, even when there is not an existing culture of doubt or distrust. Members of a staff want to know what their future holds—and they know your leadership will affect the future environment of their school. There are several things you can do to make the first interaction a success.



**Be yourself.** Don't change your personality or your leadership style to fit a vision of how you feel your first meeting *should* go. Think about the skills you bring to the position, and showcase them for the staff. If you're the calm, serious type, be calm and serious. If you are good-humored and casual, be so. You were hired to be the building's principal because of who you are—so make it your business to be the best possible “you.”

**Outline a verbal résumé.** Give the staff a picture of your journey to this principalship. Where did you go to school, and what degrees do you hold? Where and what did you teach? What led you to administration? Outlining your credentials shows the staff why you are qualified to lead them.

**Don't be afraid to get a little personal.** Tell the staff who you are outside of your work—tell them about your family, your children, your hobbies, and your interests. Creating a richer profile of yourself that goes beyond your résumé will let the staff see you as more than just their new boss, and it will give them some insight into what you value. It will also help create a foundation from which you can build later, when you make a personal connection with each staff member in individual meetings.

**Share your goals.** What do you hope to get out of your time in this school? In what ways do you hope to effect change and growth? Talk briefly about your general goals and vision for your time as their leader.

**Have some fun.** If it fits your personality, don't be afraid to introduce yourself to a staff in a lighthearted, interactive way so as to ease any tension or worry the staff may carry. In the past, I have known new principals to play games with facts about the principal—Three Truths and a Lie, Bingo, Jeopardy, and other guessing games. This will present you as someone who is creative, fun, and willing to add laughter to otherwise tense situations.

However, as noted above, it's most important to be yourself. If you are naturally serious and businesslike, be so—just don't take yourself too seriously. Your staff will want to know that you have the ability to relax and find enjoyment in your work.

**Avoid making promises you can't keep.** I once told a staff I hoped I'd be there "as long as you'll have me." Just four years later, though, I was asked to transfer to another school. Many staff felt betrayed and abandoned, and several even quoted my words from that first meeting. The lesson to remember here is that if you make promises about your plans, you'll be held to those promises.

**Wrap up the meeting by welcoming questions.** When you have finished speaking about yourself, ask, "Is there anything you'd like to know about me—as a person, as an educator, or as a leader?" Give your staff time to think—as every educator knows, wait time is important—and then address any questions they have.

A few notes here. If you are asked something for which you have no answer, it is best to simply be honest. Responding with, "I am not sure about that, but I will find out and get back to you" communicates not only that you can admit when you don't know something, but also that you are willing to seek answers and share what you've learned. Make a note of questions like this right after the meeting, when your memory is fresh, and *be sure you follow through*. Further, if you are asked something about a decision you have not yet had time to make, explain that you are still considering all the details. It is perfectly legitimate and fair to say, "Until I have more information, I'm not comfortable answering just yet. I'll make sure to keep you updated."

**End the meeting in a timely manner.** Your first meeting with your staff should not be a long one for several reasons. First, there is not a staff *anywhere* that enjoys long meetings. Second,

this initial meeting is an opportunity to show your commitment to honoring their time—and demonstrate your ability to run an efficient meeting. Last, the staff will need time to think about what you’ve said to them, to process it with one another, and to generate more questions they would like to ask you.

**Explain the next step.** As you wrap up the meeting, finish by telling them you will reach out to them to set up individual meetings in the next several weeks; then, thank them for their time and wish them a good day.

## Step 2: Conduct Individual Meetings

An individual meeting with a staff member will tell you a lot about each person, but it will also expand your understanding of the school in general. You will discover who your leaders are, who brings a positive—or negative—attitude to your school, and what personalities may work well together. Best of all, these meetings will help you piece together the history and culture of your school. In that sense, these meetings are really a unique combination of a jigsaw puzzle and a history book. The staff will have a lot to tell you about what has happened with previous leadership, the nature of the school’s culture, and what the staff values as a whole. When you put all the pieces together, you’ll get a clearer picture of how to begin as the school’s next leader.

**Find a meeting place that will put staff at ease.** Individual meetings with staff members should take place in a comfortable and nonthreatening environment. If your office has a table where you and the staff member can sit across from one another, use that; if not, meet in a conference room or in a lounge area. I find it is best to avoid sitting at my desk with a staff member across from me; the desk serves as a formidable barrier between me and the teacher

and can make the teacher feel he or she is “in trouble.” After all, no one likes to sit on the other side of a principal’s desk, including—or even especially—adults.

**Show as much flexibility as possible—without overscheduling yourself.** E-mail the staff and offer them several choices for a time to meet with you. Ask them to get back to you—or, in the case of a large staff, get back to your secretary—with a time slot that would work for them. Depending on the size of your staff, you may need to block out several days for these meetings. I find that a 15- to 20-minute meeting is usually sufficient. Remember, though, that after a while, these individual meetings will begin to run together and feel more like a nagging chore than a genuine, authentic, and personal way to connect with your staff. I find that any more than five or six in a day will turn an exciting opportunity into an arduous task.

**Focus on getting to know one another.** After I welcome a staff member with a handshake and a smile, I like to sit down together and begin with a statement of appreciation, such as, “Thank you so much for taking the time to come in today. I have been looking forward to talking with you!” Then, I ask questions to get the staff member to open up a bit. The following questions may serve as a guide.

- Tell me about your role here at the school. Walk me through a typical day in your shoes.
- What other roles have you held before—at this school or in previous schools?
- What other jobs have you held outside of education?
- What brought you to education?
- Tell me about your family, friends, pets—whoever supports you in your life.

- What do you like about this job? What do you dislike?
- What do you think is your biggest challenge on a day-to-day basis?
- Tell me about this school. What are your favorite parts? What do you wish would go away?
- Did you feel good about previous building leadership? Why or why not?
- What do you hope to get out of me as a leader?
- What do you hope I can bring to our school?
- Is there anything else you'd like me to think about as I approach my first year?

I have found that as I work through these questions, the conversation naturally gives me opportunities to talk about myself as well—as a leader, yes, but also as a person with other interests and experiences.

**Find opportunities to share your values.** When talking with teachers, you will find natural places to insert your opinion on instruction and student growth. This is a great way for teachers to get to know what you will value as a leader.

Remember, the main goal of these individual meetings is *connection*. You'll want to look for commonalities and take advantage of any chance to bond with each staff member on a personal level. As you settle into your new role, you can use these connections to build your relationship with each staff member.

## Strategies and Solutions for Meeting Your School Community

Meeting the students who attend your new school and their parents is a very different process from meeting your staff. Fortunately, it is

more spread out over time, and it happens naturally, depending on when and where you first interact with students and their families.

## Meeting the Students

Student interactions are the easy ones. Every day, you have the chance to get to know students. You will speak to them as they come into the building, as you visit classrooms, during lunch or unstructured time, at after-school events, and at extracurricular activities. You will also get to know them because of celebrations of success, as well as disciplinary or social issues that require your intervention. Getting to know them well takes time over the course of many different interactions. There are several ways to facilitate meaningful connections with students in your school.

**Take your time.** You don't need to know every student's name and personal story right away. Quite honestly, it takes a lot of time—and, depending on the size of your school, it is entirely feasible that you will never actually know every child well. Give yourself a break on this one. Recognize that it may take several years before you feel like you truly know all your students.

**Set a goal of “Every student, every day.”** I'll mention this motto several times in this book, because it is such an important goal that I take extra care to meet in my work. As principal, it is my priority that each student sees me every day. I think it clarifies that I'm the *principal*, and that I am committed to being part of each child's world. “Every student, every day” sounds lofty, but it actually isn't difficult to do; I take advantage of occasions that bring many students together in one place. If I attend bus duty or walk through the lunchroom each day, students see me. I use the time to talk to as many of them as possible in a casual and natural manner, learning their names and a few important things about each one as I go.

**Get personal.** A great way to get to know students is to ask them a lot of questions. Students love to talk about themselves, and when they are asked a lot of questions, they share information that makes them memorable. Ask about their families, their interests, and their background. I like to develop nicknames or inside jokes with students—it helps them feel they’ve made a genuine and specific connection with me. I learn a great deal about this from my husband, who is an athletic director and football coach. He is masterful at connecting with students on a personal level. When interacting with students, he asks questions like “What are you doing this weekend?” or, “Hey, your mom told me you went to camp this summer. Tell me about it!” He gives them affectionate nicknames that somehow compliment them: “Money” for a quarterback who rarely miststhrows; “Butter” for a receiver who moves smoothly and effortlessly through plays; “Slick” for the running back who is great at eluding the defense. His athletes love these special, personal references to their individual talents.

## Meeting the Parents

Meeting parents is also a longer and more natural process than meeting your staff, although your experiences will vary depending on individual parents’ philosophies of education. Some parents feel it’s imperative that they meet you *immediately*. They will want to talk to you as soon as possible—about their child, of course, but also about a variety of other issues that they value. Conversely, some parents will be perfectly happy if they never interact with you at all. They expect their child to handle the challenges of school without their intervention; they get their kid to school each day and sign a permission slip every now and then, and that’s where it ends. Quite frankly, this is how I approach the school experience of my own children. I don’t feel a need to connect with the principal



unless there is a problem or I have a question. I respect parents who prefer this hands-off approach.

With that said, you will want to make good connections with parents who want to know you. There are several guidelines to consider while forming these connections.

**Meet the bulldogs.** These are the parents that will call you or e-mail you five minutes after your contract is approved by the Board of Education. Typically, it will be because there is something special the parent needs you to know. *My child is gifted, and I want to know how programming will support my child.* Or, *My child has struggled with bullying, and we need to talk about how to avoid it this year.* Perhaps, *I am your PTO president, and we should meet to discuss ways we can support each other.* I call these parents “bulldogs” because they will bark and growl—pleasantly, of course—until they get some face time with you.

It's best to make connecting with these parents a priority—not only to assuage their worry but also because it's practically a guarantee that your bulldogs are the ones who have a very loud voice in the community. If they have a positive interaction with you, it's a good bet that lots of others will hear a positive report on your potential as the building leader.

**Take your time.** After you've met your bulldogs, relax. Don't rush it. If you attempt to connect with all parents right away, you'll undoubtedly forget names and conversations, which will make you seem like a distracted scatterbrain. It is far better to make meaningful connections with parents slowly and over time. Trust me: You will have countless opportunities to meet them. There will be orientation nights, after-school activities, parent teacher organization (PTO) events, extracurricular activities, parent-teacher conferences, and more—and each one will serve to put you in contact with parents.

**Openly acknowledge your limitations.** When taking over a new school, it's a great idea to tell parents that you intend to get to know them personally, but it's also helpful if you are frank in communicating that this will take time. Because I struggle to remember names unless I have met someone several times, I will even say—with a smile and a rueful laugh—“Let me warn you that I need to hear a name three times before it sticks in my memory.” Then, when I next see that parent and can't recall the name, I can open with, “Remember, you need to tell me your name again. We aren't up to three yet!” It becomes a lighthearted interaction that buys me some time.

**Watch, listen, and lay the groundwork for a parent web.** When initially meeting parents, I try to ask questions to help me build connections in my mind. A good start is a simple, “Do you have any other children in the district? What are their names, and who are their teachers?” Meanwhile, I make mental notes of parents who are friends with one another, work on PTO committees together, or live close to one another. In doing so, I slowly begin to put together a picture of the school community as a whole.

## **Turning Uncertainty into Solidarity: Conversations with a New Staff and School Community**

Members of a school staff often feel hesitant and uncertain when they know there is a new principal at the helm. They don't know whether the new leader will stick with the previous administrator's plans, or whether there will be broad changes (which many staff members abhor). Ideally, your initial conversations will dispel any anxiety, allowing you to begin the process of building trust between you and each member of your staff. In the examples that follow, we

revisit the scenarios outlined in the beginning of the chapter. Each offers some talking points you may want to use when first meeting your whole staff and your individual teachers.

### **Scenario 1: The Staff Meeting**

You've been hired to be the principal after several years as a literacy coach. As a coach, you worked with a small portion of the staff; however, the rest of the staff knows very little about you. You want to speak to everyone before summer break, so the retiring principal has called a meeting for you in the school's library. As the staff members enter, you greet each person at the door with a smile. At the appointed meeting time, you walk to the front of the assembled group and begin.

**You:** *Hello! I am thrilled for the chance to be your leader next school year—and beyond. Some of you already know me, because we've been lucky enough to work as a team for several years. Others probably know very little about me.*

*Let me start by telling you a bit about myself. I was a teacher at the middle school level for eight years. Next, I was given the chance to move down to the elementary level as a literacy coach. I was at Oakstone Elementary for three years and have been here at Rittman Elementary for three additional years.*

*Four years ago, I received my certification in school administration. When I started my career, I didn't think I would ever be a principal; however, when I started working as a coach, I learned how much I loved working with teachers and students in a leadership role. I loved helping teachers learn and grow, and interacting with students in a small-group setting. I also enjoyed working with the principal and learned a great deal about leading a school. I am looking forward to the transition into an official role next year.*

*On a personal level, my husband and I have two children—my daughter is a senior in high school, and my son is a sophomore. I spend a lot of my free time watching them in various theater productions and sporting events. I also love to read—both novels and professional books about instruction and leadership.*

**You've gotten off to a good start by sharing information about yourself. You have included personal details, but have also outlined your professional qualifications.**

**You:** *As we move into the new school year, I am looking forward to developing some goals together. We'll take a look at our current levels of student achievement; think about our school culture as it relates to students, staff, and parents; and make sure all of you are feeling good about the work you are doing each day. These goals will be collaborative, and we'll work through them together by following detailed action steps. I look forward to our work together!*

*Now, in an effort to respect your time, we'll keep this meeting short. However, I'd love to take a few questions from you. Does anyone have something they'd like to ask?*

**Teacher #1:** *I have a question. Will you be working closely with our current principal as you take over?*

**You:** *Yes. As some of you know, he and I work very well together. We plan to spend a lot of time talking about important issues. He can give me a good perspective on where we've been academically and how successful previous school goals have been.*

**Teacher #2:** *Our current Building Leadership Team is made up of teachers who have been in that role for years. Will you be changing the representatives serving on that team?*

**You:** *I have heard that is a concern for some of you, and I understand why. I also see the value in avoiding big changes at the beginning of my year here. For that reason, I haven't yet made a decision on that. I*

*will wait until I speak to all of you individually, weigh all the options, and make a final determination before the year begins. I'm just not comfortable giving a definitive answer until I have more information.*

Here, you're responding honestly to teacher questions, opting for clarity and openness over bland reassurances.

**Teacher #3:** *We heard the district's curriculum director plans to make big changes on the online wiki we use for our main resource. Do you have any information on that?*

**You:** *No, I haven't heard anything about that. I am sure that is a big uncertainty for you, especially because I know many of you access that wiki throughout the summer. I'll ask a few questions and get back to you as soon as possible.*

Here again, you're admitting when you do not know the answer but making a commitment to check in with your district leadership, find that information, and provide it. Remember that it's essential to follow through with promises like this!

**You:** *These are all great questions—thank you! Now, let me tell you about the next step in my transition to this school. My highest priority is getting to know you. To do so, I would like to set up individual meetings to learn more about you. I'll be sending you an e-mail asking for a time that will work for both of us. When we meet, just come prepared to tell me about yourself, your role here at our school, and your personal and professional goals. Until then, though, I'd like to thank you once again for your time and let you get back to your work. I look forward to talking with each of you in the next few weeks!*

The meeting was short and efficient and ended with the message that you value your staff's time.

## Scenario 2: The Individual Teacher Meeting

In this scenario, you are taking over a middle school. You have already had an initial staff meeting in which you introduced yourself and talked briefly about your philosophy as a leader. The meeting went well, although the staff was quiet and reserved as you spoke. You remember your superintendent's warning that the school was a "tricky one." You are now beginning the process of meeting with individual staff members, starting with an 8th grade math teacher, William, who also coaches the track team.

**You:** *Thank you so much for coming in. Why don't we start with the basics? Tell me about yourself.*

**William:** *Well, as you know, I'm William. I live here in town with my wife and two girls; they are 8 and 11. My wife is a teacher at the high school. We really enjoy living here. It's a great place to raise a family.*

**You:** *And what about here at school? What is your role?*

**William:** *I've been at this school for 20 years. I've taught math at all levels, but I've been teaching 8th grade for 15 years now. I'm also in my 20th year coaching track, which I really love.*

**You:** *That's great. I coached for several years and found it extremely fulfilling; I loved being with kids outside of the classroom. Do you see yourself teaching math and coaching for the foreseeable future?*

**William:** *Funny you should ask. No, I don't think so. I'm considering going back to school to get a certificate to be a guidance counselor; I could use a change, and I think I would be good at that.*

**You:** *I remember deciding I needed a change and seeking my administration certificate. It's been a fun and invigorating experience! What is it about being a guidance counselor that you would enjoy?*

Notice how you begin by picking up on a commonality and making a personal connection.

**William:** *Well, my favorite thing about this job is working closely with students. I'd like to support them with some of the big issues they face. Middle school kids are great—complicated, but great.*

**You:** *What do you mean?*

**William:** *Well, they're just in a really tough part of life. For them, everything seems hard. At this age, kids are in a weird transition with their parents, wanting to be independent but still needing the support; friendships are shaky; confidence is hard to come by; and so on. I love working with kids at this stage in life because I get how hard it is. That's why I coach track; I love just hanging out with kids and helping them find success. I like it when I see them feel good about themselves.*

**You:** *I agree; that's why I'm here, too. What is it you don't like about your job?*

**William:** *Can I be honest?*

**You:** *Of course.*

**William:** *I'm not passionate about the math anymore. I've become a little bit tired of teaching the same thing for so long.*

**You:** *I can see how that would be hard. Although some people are very content doing the same thing for decades, others do really well with occasional change. Let me ask you this: What are your favorite parts about working here, beyond the kids? And what is frustrating for you?*

**William:** *Beyond the students? I'd say working with my colleagues on the 8th grade team. We get along well and work well together. There are some cliques on the staff, though, which I hate. Sometimes it seems like we're all working in isolation with our own grade. I don't know; does that make any sense?*

As illustrated here, a simple question about what a teacher likes and dislikes can reveal information about the overall culture of the building. If you hear the same message from others, you'll know it is a problem that you will need to address.



**You:** *Let me see if I understand: You feel connected to your grade-level team but not to the rest of the staff, right? Why might that be? Is there a history of this here?*

**William:** *Well, our previous principal had favorites. He brought in several teachers from his previous school, and from the very beginning they were “his” people and his favorites; the rest of us felt like outsiders. He also came in and made big changes, empowering his own people and making the rest of us feel left out. That first year, he moved a bunch of us around according to his whims—or, at least, he didn’t explain his reasoning to us. I don’t think we’ve ever recovered from that.*

**You:** *I’m glad you shared that perspective. Maybe the threat of sweeping change is what feels so divisive?*

**William:** *Yes. It’s what makes me just want to close my classroom door and teach, and then go coach, and avoid everyone. I hate staff politics.*

Here, your questioning uncovers important information about the history of the school leadership and the reasons staff members may feel nervous about you coming in.

**You:** *Well, I hope we can work together to make you feel more connected to all your colleagues. Cohesiveness within a staff is important to me. Can you tell me what you value in a building leader? Or, to put it another way, what do you hope I’ll bring to this school?*

**William:** *Like you said, cohesiveness would be nice. I don’t know if it’s possible, but I miss it. I feel like we had it once.*

**You:** *What else?*

**William:** *I’d just appreciate if you would communicate with us. If you plan to make big changes, make sure you talk with all the people who will be affected so we’ll know what you’re thinking. I feel like a principal who is honest and transparent is much more trustworthy than someone who’s always surprising us with sudden or impulsive ideas.*

**You:** *I will certainly keep that in mind. Communication is something that is crucial in a successful school. I, too, have worked in environments of distrust, and that can be hard. I will say, though, that although I understand your frustrations, I love that the first thing you told me is that you enjoy the students—hanging out with them, helping them, supporting them in this tough part of adolescence. After all, that's why we're really here—for the kids. You'll hear me say that a lot. When I make decisions, I always ask, "How does this help students? Are we making choices or changes for them—or for us?"*

**William:** *Well, that sounds good.*

You are taking advantage of a chance to explain what you value—cohesiveness, communication, putting students first—all while gaining information about this teacher's perspective.

**You:** *Well, I won't keep you any longer. I do appreciate your time and perspective. Please come by anytime you would like to talk. I want to be supportive of you in your work, and I'm here to help you as you work with our students.*

### **Scenario 3: The Aggressive Parent**

The final scenario in this chapter describes a situation in which you are approached immediately after your welcoming remarks at the beginning-of-year Open House. The parent asks if you have a few moments to talk. You begin by reaching out and shaking her hand.

**You:** *Let's start with introductions. But you already know my name!*

**Parent:** *I'm Seiko Miles. It's nice to meet you in person—I've heard so much about you.*

**You:** *It's nice to meet you, too, Ms. Miles. I'd love to chat with you, but we need to keep this conversation brief. I want to make sure I am*

*available to personally meet as many other parents as possible this evening. Do you think that is possible?*

**Ms. Miles:** *I understand. This won't take long. I just wanted to meet you right away because, quite frankly, you're going to see a lot of me.*

**You:** *Oh?*

**Yes, you have undoubtedly identified one of your “bulldogs.”**

**Ms. Miles:** *I am very involved in the school. I volunteer all the time. I work in the office whenever they need something, and I am the head of the Athletic Boosters. I'm around a lot!*

**You:** *That's great. Volunteers are incredibly important to a school. Why don't you tell me about your kids?*

**Ms. Miles:** *Well, Shino is a freshman, and Maya is a senior. They are both accomplished athletes in several sports. I know you'll be hearing a lot about them. They are both playing on the volleyball team right now, so you will see them play this fall. They are also extremely successful in school; neither one has ever had anything below an A. And I expect that to continue.*

**You:** *That's terrific. They must be very hard workers. I have watched the volleyball team practice, and I'm extremely impressed by their teamwork and focus. It seems like a great group of girls.*

**Ms. Miles:** *Oh, it is. Maya is the cocaptain of the varsity team. She shares the role with Darisha, who is her best friend. My niece, Audrey, plays on the junior varsity team with Shino. You'll meet their mom—my sister—quite soon. I'm sure she'll find you tonight to introduce herself.*

**Listening carefully to information shared about friends and family helps you build a web of connections among students and parents.**

**You:** *I look forward to meeting her! If I don't meet her tonight, I'm sure there will be other opportunities. I think it's probably a long process to get to know everyone in this school, and I want to do it right! I will warn you—and your sister, too—I will need to hear your name several times*

*before it will stick in my memory! I have always struggled with names. So the next time I see you, you may need to tell me your name again!*

It's a good choice to acknowledge both your limitations and the fact that it will take time to meet and remember each parent.

**Ms. Miles:** *Oh, I understand. There are a lot of people in this school. Now, I don't want to take up too much of your time, so I'll let you go. I just wanted to make sure I met you right away, since we really will work closely together in several areas.*

**You:** *I'm so glad that you introduced yourself.*

**Ms. Miles:** *And I'm pleased that you took the time to speak with me. I know you're really busy this evening. We'll talk again soon!*

By speaking with this aggressive parent immediately and strategically, you've laid the groundwork for a positive relationship.



Initial meetings with your school community—both as a whole group and with individuals—are the foundation of your success in your new school. With that said, it's important to note that you'll never convince *everyone* to be completely accepting of your new leadership. Some people seem to carry an inherent sense of distrust of leadership, and nothing you can do will change that mindset. It's best to accept and move on; do not waste energy trying to convert someone who simply isn't welcoming. Just move forward with your goals, focusing on the staff, students, and parents who are glad to have you there and glad to follow your vision.

Your relationship with teachers, parents, and students will help you determine the nature of your school's culture. This is an essential step in your first few years.

