

KEY EVENTS IN THE LIVES OF  
SUCCESSFUL MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN VIRGINIA

by

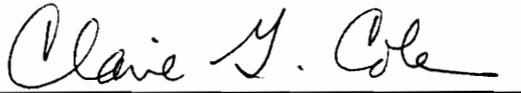
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(ABSTRACT)

The purpose of this study was to determine from successful middle school principals what significant or key life events seem to have made a difference in the manner in which the principals work and lead their schools. A similar study of executives in business, conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership, was utilized as a model for this study.

The research included interviews with six successful middle school principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The six principals were identified using a reputational selection procedure with professors, association executives and state department of education officials serving as the nominators. The criteria for selection was that these middle school principals fit the nominating individuals' perceptions of a successful principal. The six principals were interviewed to gather data on significant life events and the lessons learned from these events. Five of the principals were interviewed in the work setting. The interviews were recorded. The questions asked in the

interviews were sent to the subjects two weeks before their scheduled interviews. A software package, The Ethnograph, was utilized to assist with the coding and analysis process. Two assistants to the researcher analyzed the data independently. The researcher and these assistants determined the event categories and the lessons learned from these events.

The research was based upon the belief that there is a missing "piece" to the body of knowledge regarding effective school leadership. The research has shown that the principal is crucial to the success of a school. The literature speaks to academic preparation programs, training, mentorship and other factors, but does not address the impact of life events on the work of school administrators.

There were nine event themes and twenty lesson categories identified through this study. The results indicated that the middle school principals attributed their success mainly to job-related experiences, role models and colleagues, and personal (non-job) influences, although conferences and divine intervention were also noted as being significant. Academic preparation programs and training were not considered to have made a difference in the manner in which these successful principals lead their schools.

DEDICATION

TO NANCY  
MY WIFE AND THE LOVE OF MY LIFE

AND

IN MEMORY OF

MY FATHER

SAMUEL E. PERRY

WHOSE PRESENCE IS DEEPLY MISSED AT THIS SPECIAL TIME

AND

WHOSE PRIDE IN WHAT I WAS ACCOMPLISHING

WAS EXPRESSED SO BEAUTIFULLY

IN SO MANY DIFFERENT WAYS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract. . . . .	ii
Dedication. . . . .	iv
Acknowledgements . . . . .	v
Chapter	
I.    THE PROBLEM . . . . .	1
Introduction . . . . .	1
Need for the Study . . . . .	1
Statement of the Purpose . . . . .	6
Organization of the Study . . . . .	6
II.   METHODOLOGY . . . . .	7
Research Methodology . . . . .	7
Selection of the Subjects . . . . .	9
Instrumentation . . . . .	14
Collection of Data . . . . .	19
Method of Analysis . . . . .	20
Summary . . . . .	22
III.  RESULTS. . . . .	23
Description of Data . . . . .	23
Findings of the Study . . . . .	79
Analysis of Data . . . . .	87
Summary . . . . .	105

Table of Contents continued

IV.	CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS . . . . .	107
	Conclusions . . . . .	107
	Recommendations of the Study . . . . .	113
	Summary . . . . .	117
REFERENCES	. . . . .	119
APPENDIX		
	A. Map. . . . .	123
	B. Letter and Nominating Form . . . . .	125
	C. Background Questions . . . . .	128
	D. Center for Creative Leadership Questions	130
	E. Explanation of <u>The Ethnograph</u> . . . . .	133
VITA	. . . . .	135
LIST OF TABLES		
TABLE		
	1. Career Development Model . . . . .	3
	2. Background Information on Principals . .	13
	3. Interview Questions . . . . .	15
	4. Number of Times Events Mentioned . . . .	24
	5. Relationship Between Events and Lessons	81
	6. Number of Times Lessons Mentioned . . .	86
	7. NASSP Skills Areas and Lesson Categories	100

## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM

#### Introduction

The effective schools movement has been reviewed and discussed for over a decade. A major focus of that movement has been effective leadership from the school principal.

Research has shown that the principal is crucial to the success of a school. What factors determine success in this role? Is the successful school principal one who has proper training, academic preparation, and mentoring or is success dependent on other factors?

#### Need for the Study

Very little information is available regarding the impact of life events on the work of successful school administrators. In fact, no studies have been identified in which principals, who were considered effective, were asked to name key events in their lives which significantly impacted their work.

However, certain significant events appear to occur in the lives and careers of successful school administrators. Such events and the lessons learned from the events appear to be crucial factors in the effective leadership of certain school administrators. For this study of successful middle school principals, the career development model found in

Table 1 illustrates the belief that certain significant events in the lives of middle school administrators provide important lessons, which when applied, produce effective middle school leaders.

The basis of the model and the impetus for this study of successful middle school principals came from a private sector study. In that study, sponsored by the Center for Creative Leadership, certain executives of Fortune 500 companies were interviewed to determine what events in their lives had impacted on their success in business. The results indicated that several variables often thought to be significant in the development of successful business leaders (training, job rotation, certain academic degrees, etc.), were actually not as important in the success of these executives as were other events in the business executives' lives. Other factors or events (getting a difficult job done, working with a difficult boss, switching positions, etc.) and the resulting lessons learned were identified by these Fortune 500 executives as being crucial to their success (Lindsey et al., 1987).

The book which emerged from that study, The Lessons of Experience (McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison, 1988), addressed the general question of how executive talent is developed. The authors found that training programs, corporate

**TABLE 1**

**Career Development Model**

**(Key Events In The Lives Of Successful  
Middle School Principals in Virginia)**

**Significant Events**



**Lesson Learned**



**Effective Leadership in Middle Schools**

sponsored courses, and other corporate classroom-type activities were estimated to cost "in the range of \$40 billion" (McCall et al., 1988, p. 1). However, the authors noted, such activities take up only a very small part of an executive's time on a job or time in a career. Thus, most development takes place on the job, with job experiences playing a significant role in executive development. The authors decided to explore this area further, realizing that data on the subject were scarce. The authors also noted that a review of the empirical literature (McCauley, 1986) "revealed no systematic body of research focused on what experiences or events may be important in managers' careers" (McCall et al., 1988, p. 2).

McCall and his colleagues did note some "common characteristics such as optimism, emotional stability, and desire for achievement and power" related to similar background experiences which were found by John Kotter in his 1982 study of corporate managers (p. 3). According to the authors, Kotter also "concluded that it takes ten to twenty years to 'grow' a general manager" (McCall et al., 1988, p. 5).

The authors of The Lessons of Experience state further that development during that ten to twenty year period depends not only on raw talent, but also on the experiences one has and what one does with them. Specifically, not all

experiences are created equal. Some experiences simply pack more developmental wallop than others. Further, the lessons that these experiences might teach are not random. Certain things are more likely to be learned from one kind of experience than from another (McCall et al., 1988, p. 5).

In Technical Report 32, Key Events in Executives' Lives (Lindsey et al., 1987) the original inquiry for the study was stated: "How do we develop adequate depth in executive talent to run the business in the years to come" (p. iii)?

Executives in six Fortune 500 firms were interviewed or asked open-ended survey questions. The 191 executives studied were identified by their corporations to have high potential or to have reached their full potential. The Report further stated that the 191 executives ". . . ranged from high-level functional or general managers through chief executive. . ." (Lindsey et al., 1987, p. iii). The data gathered resulted from executives' responses to one basic question asked at the interviews and through an open-ended survey also utilized during the interview process.

The raw data gathered from the responses included 616 descriptions of key events. Also included were 1,547 descriptions of lessons learned from the 616 key events. Sorting by similarity, the events were grouped into 16 kinds of event experiences, while the lessons were sorted into 34 categories of what was learned from the events.

### Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine, from successful middle school principals in Virginia, what significant or key life events and lessons learned seem to have made a difference in the manner in which they lead their schools.

### Organization of the Study

This study is divided into the four chapters:

Chapter 1 contains an introduction, a statement of need for the study, a statement of purpose for the study and an outline of the organization of the study.

Chapter 2 contains a description of the research methodology, selection of the sample, instrumentation, collection of data, and method of analysis.

Chapter 3 includes a reporting of the data and other findings of the study and an analysis of data relating to the research questions.

Chapter 4 contains the conclusions and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER II  
METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research methodology of this study, explain the selection of the subjects, describe the instrumentation, explain how the data were collected, and describe the method of analysis of the data.

Research Methodology

As stated previously, the purpose of this study was to determine from successful middle school principals in Virginia what significant or key life events seem to have made a difference in the manner in which they lead their schools.

Qualitative research methodology was utilized in this study, as it was for the private sector study conducted with business leaders. The Center for Creative Leadership Study, Key Events in Executives' Lives (Lindsey, et al., 1987) served as a model for this study of school principals.

This research methodology was selected because:

Qualitative data are attractive. They are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes occurring in local contexts. With qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, assess local causality, and derive fruitful explanations. Then, too,

qualitative data are more likely to lead to serendipitous findings and to new theoretical integrations; they help researchers go beyond initial preconceptions and frameworks. Finally, the findings from qualitative studies have a quality of 'undeniability,' as . . . [others have] put it. Words, especially when they are organized into incidents or stories, have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavor that often prove far more convincing to a reader -- another researcher, a policy-maker, a practitioner -- than pages of numbers (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p. 15).

In this qualitative study, the unit of analysis or object of investigation was the individual school principals, taken singly, in a series of cases. The object of investigation was not a specific variable, event, process, or program which could be manipulated either by assignment to subjects or by selection from naturally occurring instances. There was no specific comparison between the subjects (school principals) because that was not the purpose of the study. The purpose was to determine key events which individual principals felt helped to make them successful school leaders, as well as the lessons learned from these experiences or events. There was no intent to determine whether certain events were more important than others, or how/why various types of events

affected some principals, but not other principals. While many inferences and conclusions may be drawn by those reading the study; the primary purpose was to identify significant events or experiences which impacted the careers of six successful middle school principals. Whether or not a formal theory is generated will depend upon the future interests of the researcher and others who may review the data.

### Selection of the Subjects

The subjects for this study included successful middle school principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The principals selected work in various locations around the Commonwealth (See Appendix A).

The subjects for the study were nominated by individuals who have knowledge about middle school principals in Virginia. These nominators included four university faculty members (from three Virginia universities), two of whom work directly with the Virginia Association of Middle School Principals. Also recommending names for the study were one current and one former Virginia Department of Education officials who had worked extensively with middle school principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia. One retired middle school principal was also asked to nominate subjects. The nominating individuals are people who have worked with

middle school principals across various school divisions throughout the state. The seven nominators were asked by letter (Appendix B) to provide the names of twelve to fifteen middle school principals in Virginia whom they felt were successful. The criterion for the selection was that the middle school principals nominated fit the nominating individuals' perceptions of a successful principal.

Lindsey et al. (1987), in the study of Key Events in Executives' Lives, asked personnel officials and "those in the know" to identify who was successful in their organization. In the working paper which described the methods for the key events study, the criteria for those persons who were to be identified as successful were noted:

They had to be promotable, still eligible for a shot at the top jobs (or already in them). We did not rely on titles, or formal high-potential lists. . . . We relied on 'savvy insiders' to tell us who to interview, in effect, using almost a cascade approach. . . . (White and Lombardo, 1986, pp. 7-8).

Once the names of the successful principals were received, the list of names was checked to see which principals were listed by more than one nominator. The middle school principals whose names appeared on multiple lists were then contacted and asked to provide the names of other principals whom they felt were successful. The same

letter (Appendix B) was used to solicit nominations from principals, as had been used with the original nominators. Again, the only criterion for the selection was that the middle school principals nominated fit the nominating individuals' perceptions of a successful principal.

After receiving names from the second group of nominators, the lists were checked to identify principals named on multiple lists by both nominating groups. The total number of principals who constitute the study group was determined by the committee, based upon limitations of time and distance. It was agreed that six middle school principals would be interviewed.

The six middle school principals selected all received at least six nominations. These six principals were contacted, to secure their agreement to participate in the study. All six who were contacted agreed to be interviewed. Arrangements were then made for the interviewer to meet with the six principals in order to conduct the interviews.

There was no effort to select subjects on the basis of sex, race, region of the state in which they were located, or years in the principalship. With the small number of principals being studied, it was believed that such distinguishing characteristics were not appropriate. However, this information and other background information

was gathered by a questionnaire and through the interview process.

From the "Background Information" questionnaire, (Appendix C), the following information was gathered (See Table 2). It was found that four of the subject principals had been middle school principals for five (5) years, while the other two selected principals had served as middle school/junior high principals for longer than ten (10) years. All of the six principals had been at their current schools for more than five years. The number of years spent in a school administrative position ranged from seven years to twenty-three years, with four principals reporting ten years or less experience as a school administrator.

In response to the question, "In what year did your current school become a middle school?" the following information was gathered: Four indicated their school had become a middle school in 1988 or later; one indicated his school became a middle school in the 1970s and one principal did not respond. The age of the six principals ranged from 35 to 52. The student enrollment at the six schools ranged from 640 and 850 students. Staffing reanged from 50 to 85 classroom teachers, with one to three assistant principals per school. All of the subjects held masters degrees; two principals indicated that they had completed a

Table 2  
Background Information  
On The  
Six Virginia Middle School Principals Studied

	<u>Principals</u>					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Number of Years as Middle School Principal	5	5	14	5	13	5
Number of Years at Current School	14	10	14	5	6	5
Number of Years in School Administration	10	10	23	7	20	9
When Current School Became Middle School	1970	1988	1988	NR	1991	1989
Current Age of Principal	48	43	52	35	45	45
Enrollment of School	730	640	850	750	1406	750
Number of Classroom Teachers in Current School	50	50	63	50	85	50
Number of Assistant Principals in Current School	2	1	2	1	3	1
Highest Academic Degree	M.Ed.	M.Ed.	M.Ed.	M.Ed.	M.Ed.	M.Ed.

substantial number of graduate hours beyond the master's degree. All principals were informed that they would not be individually identified. All were told that the interview tapes would have no names assigned. The tapes were labeled "Interview I", "Interview II", etc. Subjects were also told that the tapes would be erased once the data were transcribed.

Over a period of several months, the six Virginia middle school principals were interviewed. Five were interviewed in their work settings. One principal was interviewed in another setting to better accommodate the principal's schedule.

Between the time the six principals were identified and asked to participate, one changed jobs. This person was interviewed immediately after moving into a new position.

### Instrumentation

Questions in the interview protocol are grouped into three sections. The first section contains the main question which asks for at least three key events that from their perspective, have made a difference in the way the school principal administers his/her school. Two sub-questions are included in this first section. The entire interview protocol is found in Table 3. Questions utilized

TABLE 3

Interview Questions\*

Section I

We shall begin with the question dealing with the three "key events." When you think about your career as an administrator, certain events or episodes probably stand out in your mind -- things that led to a lasting change in your approach to your work as a school administrator. Please identify three "key events" in your career: things that made a difference in the way you work now.

Please relate:

1. What happened?
2. What you learned from them (for better or worse)?

Section II

Having talked about key events that really stood out for you, we'll now address some things that may or may not have had a lasting effect on you. Because our time is limited, I need your help in controlling it. As you looked over the questions, some were no doubt more meaningful to you than others. Please go into some depth on the important ones, and comment briefly on the others. I realize that some questions may have been answered in the first section, when you talked about the three "key events".

Sub-Section A

1. What was your first administrative job? Was there anything special about it? About your first boss?
2. What was your first "quantum leap" -- movement to a job with significantly more responsibility/challenge/pressure than prior jobs?
3. What was your first important exposure to high-level school administrators? Have there been others that stand out for you?
4. What was your "organizational first date" -- like your first real date, a time when you were all alone and had to take complete responsibility for something you'd never done before?
5. What was the biggest challenge you ever faced in your career?
6. What was your most frightening first -- something you did for the first time in your career that really had you worried?
7. What event (or events) in your career made you realize you were going to be successful as an administrator? In this organization?

TABLE 3 continued

Sub-Section B

1. What was your darkest hour in your career?
2. What was a significant miss or near miss in your career-- a time when you tried something and failed?
3. Describe a time when you pushed things to the brink-- that is, a time when you stretched the system by coming perilously close to violating rules, norms, or authority.
4. What was your most significant act of procrastination in your career? By this I mean a time when you didn't face up to a situation that got steadily worse, resulting in a mess.
5. Do you recall a time at work when you had the rug pulled out from under you -- a situation when you had everything ready to go and the door was slammed shut?
6. Were you ever worn out or fed up in your career, but managed to restart?
7. Did you ever learn a great truth that turned out to be a falsehood? That is, was there ever a case in your career where you thought you'd learned something significant, but later found out it wasn't so?
8. Was there a situation at work you took very seriously at the time, but were able to laugh about months (or years) later?

Sub-Section C

1. Please describe the person who taught you the most during your career. What did that person do that made him or her so special?
2. Most of us have worked for a person we simply couldn't tolerate for one reason or another. What did you learn from such an experience?
3. What was your most significant work-related interpersonal conflict -- a situation in which dealing with another person (or persons) was very difficult for you?

Sub-Section D

1. Overall, how have you changed, plus and minus, over your career? If you ran into someone who knew you well years ago, what differences would that person notice?
2. Are there times when you've been more open to learning than others? More closed?
3. Have events in your personal life played a part in your growth as a school administrator?

TABLE 3 continued

4. What about being a school administrator has been fun for you? What are some examples of situations or events you particularly enjoyed? That were the most fun? Least fun?
5. What advice would you give to a younger school administrator about managing his or her career?
6. What is the most significant thing you've learned as an adult -- the one thing you'd pass on to someone else if you could?
7. What's next? Are you facing a situation now from which you expect to learn something new?
8. Do you consider yourself to be an effective leader? If so, why?

\*These interview questions were modified from questions utilized in a private sector study, as reported in The Lessons of Experience, McCall et al., 1988.

for this study of middle school principals were based upon (and in some cases taken directly from) the 1988 work by McCall and others. Appendix D contains the questions from the Center for Creative Leadership Study as reported by McCall et al., (1988, pp. 191-194). In the middle school principal study, the terms "school principal" or "administrator" were substituted for the private sector term "manager." Likewise, the term "administer" is substituted for the term "manage." Sub-headings "A," "B," and "C," under Section II of the private sector study were deleted for the principal study, fearing that the terminology might influence the responses of the subjects. The questions, modified from the private sector study (Lindsey, 1987) are organized so that the most general items come at the end. In the private sector study, the sequencing of the questions was purposeful -- in case interviews had to be shortened due to the subject's schedule. It was felt that the questions in the last section were not as crucial to the private sector study, as those in the first two sections. However, in this study of successful middle school principals, it was decided that the general questions were crucial. Therefore, all of the questions were asked of all six principals during the principal interview process.

### Collection of Data

Data were gathered from the subjects through the use of interviews. The interview was selected for several reasons. Interviews provide the researcher with the opportunity to secure richer data, since the interviewer can pursue responses to questions with probes. When soliciting personal information, it is productive to have an open, more personal method of collecting data. In an interview situation, the subject of the interview has the opportunity to develop a certain level of trust with the interviewer, which should help produce honest and valid responses.

The subjects studied (the principals) were interviewed once. However, they were contacted several other times: Initially, to ask for their cooperation in conducting the study, and then by sending to them questions which would be asked at the interview. The interview questions were sent to the subjects two weeks before the scheduled interview. This permitted the principals to reflect, jot notes, and ponder. in preparation for the interview. This was done to provide for greater completeness of the data. As in the private sector study (Lindsey, et al., 1987), participants were allowed to include their spouses (or significant others) while reviewing the questions. This was also done in this study to provide reliability to the study.

Verification that the data collected from each source were complete and accurate was accomplished through the use of the tape recorder during the interviews. Having another person transfer the complete transcript from the tapes into the computer reduced the possibility of editorializing. Whether or not the school principals provided accurate and honest information is difficult to verify. The nature of the questions and the study itself depends upon the recollection, opinion and perceptions of the interviewee.

Proof that the interviewer's direct contact with the case did not bias the sources of information (school principals) is established because the interviewer did not create the criteria used to select those studied. Secondly, the interviewer had not worked with or for any of the subjects interviewed. The use of the tape recorder, although not used in the private sector study of Lindsey et al. (1987), did remove much of the risk of recorder bias.

#### Method of Analysis

The information from the interviews was transcribed from the tapes and entered into a data base. A software package, The Ethnograph, was utilized to assist with the coding process, once the word-for-word interview data were entered. The researcher utilized this system by identifying

and entering certain words signifying events reported in the interviews. Also, terms describing the lessons learned from these themes were entered in the computer. An explanation of the utilization of The Ethnograph is found in Appendix E.

The data from the interviews were analyzed by using the technique of clustering related events into event themes or categories, as was done in the private sector study (Lindsey et al., 1987). In this technique, frequency is not a determinant for retaining or eliminating a category. According to White and Lombardo in their "Description of Methods" working paper (1986), the researchers' "guiding principle in forming event categories, no matter how few the number of events falling within the category, was an ability to identify conceptually distinct elements that set the event apart" (p. 15).

In this study of school principals, two assistants provided an independent analysis of the event and lesson data. (The two assistants were trained by this researcher, with examples provided from the private sector study and from The Ethnograph manual.) The independent analyses were compared with the analysis of the researcher so that event themes and lesson categories could be established. Once the event themes and lesson categories had been determined, inferences regarding the key events and lessons and their

significance related to these principals' careers could be drawn.

#### Summary

This chapter described the research methodology of the study, explained the selection of the subjects, described the instrumentation and procedures for the collection of data, and the method of analysis. The methodology utilized in this study was patterned after that used in a similar study of private sector executives.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a description of the data, the findings of the study, and an analysis of the data.

#### Description of Data

##### Event Themes

The nine event themes established as a result of the data collection were the following: (1) "New/First Administrative Job", (2) "Personal Influence", (3) "Handling Change", (4) "Personnel Problems", (5) "Role Models/Colleague Support", (6) "Student Success", (7) "Success With Parents", (8) "Conference" and (9) "Divine Intervention." The event themes were established by combining similar individual events experienced by the middle school principals interviewed. Some event themes contained multiple individual events, whereas other event themes contained fewer events. Table 4 lists the nine event themes, the number of times events were mentioned and the number of principals who mentioned each theme.

An explanation of each of the nine event themes follows. Specific events taken from the interviews of the six middle school principals are provided to illustrate the

TABLE 4  
NUMBER OF TIMES EVENTS MENTIONED IN INTERVIEWS

Event Themes	Number of Times Mentioned In The Six Interviews						Number of Principals Who Mentioned Event	Total Number of Times Events Mentioned In Six Interviews
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI		
Conference	0	1	4	1	0	2	4	8
Divine Intervention	0	0	2	0	0	0	1	2
Handling Change	5	18	3	1	4	2	6	33
New/First Administrative Job	10	10	3	19	10	28	6	80
Personal Influence	6	6	11	7	9	4	6	43
Personnel Problems	4	2	3	1	2	2	6	14
Role Models/Colleague Support	3	3	2	2	3	1	6	14
Student Success	1	31	1	1	1	1	6	36
Success With parents	7	9	9	4	0	3	5	32

(Principals Responding)

types of experiences encountered. These specific events are illustrated with direct quotations from the principals.

(1) New/First Administrative Job

The "New/First Administrative Job" event theme as it related to two of the principals meant an administrative position initially at the middle school level. For two others, this was an administrative position held initially at a junior high school. An administrative position in a high school served as the first administrative experience for two of the interviewed middle school principals. All six of the principals had their first administrative experience as an assistant principal.

Leadership and management traits and skills were developed largely because of the events and experiences encountered in the first or a new administrative job. All six principals noted that events within this theme were significant to their development as successful school administrators.

In this event theme the principals encountered events many of which were negative experiences from which they learned. Experiences shared by these principals included:

- inheriting staff;
- dealing with expectations different from their own;

- being thrust into a community which had negative feelings about the school;
- working with other administrators;
- inheriting an assistant principal with whom it was difficult to work;
- going into a school with many discipline problems;
- being named principal of a school at one level when the principal's training and experience had all been at another level;
- being placed in a school where there were problems with staff or curriculum, about which the principal had not been informed when hired for that particular job;
- dealing with the "frightening" realization that one is in complete charge;
- dealing with a feeling of being alone;
- administration of corporal punishment was a crucial event, since one principal had not been trained or prepared to handle discipline in such a manner; and
- change in thinking regarding the purpose of the middle school and education in general, as well as the realization that growth and learning had occurred.

The following quotations provide examples of some of the event experiences:

### **Working With Other Administrators**

"In another sense, the biggest challenge I had was my second year as an assistant principal . . . when I was in a situation with the principal and assistant principal who didn't get along."

### **Being In Complete Charge**

"Walking in there, with my first secretary, that was my first organizational first date. Nobody to talk to, nobody to delegate to, this is it."

### **Being Alone**

"It was just that kind of a weird feeling that if anything did occur, any decisions had to be made, I was going to be the person that was going to have to do it. That was just a kind of an unusual position to be in for the first time. Normally you could bounce it off the other two people you worked with."

## **(2) Personal Influence**

All principals noted that certain out-of-work experiences proved crucial in their development and in the way they looked at and approached their jobs as middle school administrators. Personal events included:

- influence of a spouse;
- situations experienced as a parent;
- influence of parents;

- personal illness or illness in the family; and
- divorce.

It was noted that these experiences directly and indirectly affected how the middle school principals dealt with parents, students, curricula, professional development, work habits, and feelings of what was really important in their lives. The personal, non-job related events were critical to the ultimate success of these middle school principals, both in the roles in which they were placed or chose to be placed.

The following quotations provide examples of some of the events:

#### **Influence Of Spouse**

"But, that in my personal life has made an influence. Certainly, my wife has had, as I talk around the dinner table, and she says, 'Oh, don't do that or settle down or . . .', she's got a big influence."

#### **Situations Experienced As A Parent**

"Having a kid had a major influence on the way I dealt with children. There is that unconditional love kind of thing that every one of these kids has a mama, generally speaking that loves them so . . . I want to be emphatic."

"I think being a father, fatherhood . . . and dealing with these concerns and things has helped me to be . . . a better middle school principal and here recently being a

grandparent. I think you bring all of that to the table with you as a principal, and hopefully, by doing that you see the need that all young people if possible, need to be successful or at least we should try to portray traits and acquisitions to help them become successful . . ."

#### **Influence Of Parents**

". . . my father always had the adage that the customer is always right and that, I think, is what we have to deal with . . . with our parents and our business people and things of that nature."

#### **Personal Illness**

"So, that physical problem made me re-evaluate my work habits and what I would get involved in . . . ."

#### **Divorce**

". . . I kind of came out of my own self personally since the divorce, so I am kind of a different person in a lot of ways, and I think that has had an effect on me as an administrator -- a positive effect."

### **(3) Handling Change**

All of the interviewed principals mentioned one or more events dealing with change. All seemed to look upon such events as important to their development as public school administrators.

The handling change theme included the following events:

- changes in jobs;
- changes and adjustments in instructional programs;
- changes in work responsibilities;
- handling many jobs all at the same time;
- dealing with disappointments;
- handling success;
- changes in leadership and management styles;
- coping with expectations of the job of middle school principal; and
- broadening one's career.

The following quotations provide examples of some of the experiences:

#### **Changes In Jobs**

". . . I was sent over as the principal the year they were going to close it (the school), so as I went into the community, I was labeled as the person sent to that community to close their school."

"So, I went into three situations where they needed a jump start to get back on track and I was able to be successful in all three."

#### **Changes/Adjustments In Instructional Programs**

"I sold my teachers on it and we all got together and had a committee of teachers and community persons and put

together what I think was an outstanding plan for a building."

#### **Changes In Leadership/Management Styles**

"I think when you have been used to involving two or three in the decision making and then change to where you involve the other people and bring about consensus, sometimes that may not be exactly as a leader what you really want to do. However, you must look at the needs of the students and make sure that we are moving in the direction that the decisions that have been made collectively are in their best interests."

#### **Broadening One's Career**

"I will be starting this year to become aware of what other positions may be available in other school divisions, because now, because of that second key event, I've got this burning desire to test my talents on a wider scale."

#### **(4) Personnel Problems**

Personnel problems involved difficulties encountered with staff members who worked under the leadership and direction of the middle school principals. Such problems also were found in relationships with central office staff. The following groups were involved with specific events found in this theme:

- subordinates;

- colleagues/other administrators; and
- superintendents.

Five of the six principals indicated that such events were crucial, in that valuable lessons were learned from experiences with personnel. Many of the experiences were negative in nature.

The following quotations provide examples of some of the personnel problems:

#### **Subordinates**

"I had to fire the assistant principal - that was probably the biggest challenge."

". . . I had to talk about termination of that person because that person had lost some of the qualities that made that person a good teacher."

"I sought to really help (the teacher) improve, even though this (the teacher) had a number of weaknesses. I saw enough good (in the teacher), that I thought (the teacher) was worth saving."

#### **Colleagues/Other Administrators**

"I picked up the telephone and I called my supervisor and said 'I can't do this anymore. I am going to recommend that (the teacher) not be, not return next year. You all can do what you want to do, but I can't put on paper that this teacher should return.' So basically, it was against

what the central office wanted to do because politically it was a lose/lose situation."

### **Superintendents**

". . . I mean I am still bruised from that dressing down . . ."

### **(5) Role Models/Colleague Support**

Half of the middle school principals interviewed indicated that certain individuals had provided significant support and encouragement to them. These principals felt that such interest by people with whom they worked or with whom they had been associated contributed positively to the way in which they developed as principals.

The role models and colleagues in this event theme were:

- fellow principals;
- former bosses;
- conference speakers; and
- university professors.

The following quotations provide examples of some of the support provided by others:

#### **Fellow Principals**

"He has been such a mentor as far as instruction is concerned."

### **Former Bosses**

"And, I guess if I think of key events it would be more in terms of key personalities with whom I have worked and those three really have molded who I am as an administrator."

### **Former Bosses (Principal)**

". . . he was special because he was definitely a role model, he modeled the traits and the qualities of an effective leader."

### **Former Bosses (Assistant Principal)**

"The only three things that I can think of that made a lasting change in my life as an administrator or whatever would first of all be that I was encouraged to become an administrator by a colleague . . . who at the time was an assistant principal where I taught school."

### **Conference Speakers**

"So, I would say that was probably a real benchmark as far as my thinking as an administrator. It really made me rethink the organization of the school."

### **University Professors**

"But, I had some people that were very important in my life as far as school administration and . . . he was also my advisor and . . . the type of person that tested you to the limit as far as bringing up different types of problems to see how you were going to deal and handle them in various

situations - to see if you were cut after the mold and knew the things to do."

(6) Student Success

This event theme deals with the successes of middle school principals in working with individual students and groups of students. It also addresses school-wide student success. The events included:

- going "out on a limb" with an outside agency for a student;
- initiating programs for at-risk and lower achieving students;
- helping to turn around the lives of particular students who were having problems;
- improving student behavior; and
- initiating programs to expand the curriculum and activities for students.

While all six principals noted significant events in this area, several principals mentioned that successes with students were prime motivators in continuing their careers, when other factors were making the principals question whether or not they were being successful.

The following quotations provide examples of student success:

### **Going "Out On A Limb"**

". . . he never finished high school, but he got a GED, he is working in the community and married and keeping his nose clean."

### **Initiating Programs For Lower Achieving Students**

"I get the biggest charge out of walking into the classroom and the children are all reading their own individual reading books, the high interest and I know that they are engaged in learning . . ."

### **Turning Around Lives**

". . . but one of our central office people said . . . you are the right person for the job because you just have that affect on kids."

### **Improving Student Behavior**

"And, all of a sudden the whole place was just click, click, click. Kids were liking each other again and the respect was back up into the hall . . . ."

### **Expanding Curriculum/Activities**

"I have been fortunate . . . to see that growth process . . . and that has been very enlightening and it has been rewarding, both, in particular the scholastic as well as the extracurricular and personal growth of these young people."

(7) Success With Parents

Working successfully with parents was an event theme which mentioned by five of the middle school principals interviewed. The principals seemed to be aware of the crucial nature of the parent/school and parent/principal relationship. Principals noted the following experiences:

- specific instances in which they successfully dealt with difficult parents;
- the importance of working with groups outside of the school setting, in the community;
- the importance of working with parents through school parent advisory groups and PTA groups; and
- having their own children, which helped them to understand the role of parents better and, therefore, to be successful with parents.

Changing the attitude of a group of parents and citizens was noted by one principal as a major success story in that principal's career.

The following quotations provide examples of success with parents:

**Difficult Parents**

"I think probably one of the greatest things that happened -- I experienced success working with the parents."

### Parents Outside of School Setting

"So, we had to work through that and we did close the school and, I hope, and I feel that the people, I was honest with the people, I was up front with them. I kept them informed to the maximum and whether they agreed with the closing or not, their acceptance of the honesty we brought forth I think, certainly helped our position in the community."

### Own Children

". . . I never had a PAC (Parent Advisory Committee) meeting that ended on a negative note for . . . years. I think it is because I gave them a chance to say what they wanted to say and they were always very supportive. I opened the doors."

### Groups Within School Setting

"I think I can talk to parents from the standpoint that maybe they will buy into, by saying, if it were my kid, I would . . . I would expect my own child to do such and such."

### (8) Conference

Of the six principals interviewed, four noted that attendance at a conference had a major impact on the way they now lead their schools. Conferences provided the following experiences:

- broadened these principals' perspectives from a curriculum and instruction standpoint; and
- caused these principals to look at and improve their administrative/leadership styles.

There were certain individuals, at particular conferences, who through their contact with these successful middle school principals made a difference in the principals' careers. Some of the principals interacted personally with the conference leaders. Such interaction further explored what the leaders had talked about in the conference, which then initiated new thoughts about curriculum, instruction and leadership.

#### **Curriculum/Instruction**

"Dr. . . . challenged me to become part of that focus . . ."

#### **Leadership Style**

"So, I went to this conference and heard Dr. . . . speak and it was as if someone had opened up a curtain for me."

#### **(9) Divine Intervention**

This event theme only was mentioned by one principal; however, it had such an impact on the principal's life and career that it was included in this study. Divine intervention was believed by the principal to have:

- guided decisions;
- molded attitudes; and
- affected leadership style.

### **Impacted Decisions, Attitudes, Leadership Style**

"Looking back, somebody else had a plan. Really, it is almost like somebody else had a plan for me. Just about everything that has happened in my life, good and bad, ended up culminating in this position."

### Lesson Categories

There were twenty lesson categories which emerged from the study. The lesson categories were established by combining individual lessons learned by the middle school principals interviewed. In the process of categorizing the lessons, the individual lessons were noted, grouped, and then regrouped according to similarities which appeared as the process developed. As was the case with the event themes, some lesson categories contained many individual lessons, whereas other lesson categories contained fewer individual lessons as noted by those principals interviewed.

It was felt that all of the lesson categories established contained enough significant individual lessons learned to warrant their inclusion in this study. These

lessons seemed to have had a definite impact on the careers and leadership styles of the interviewed principals.

An explanation of each of the twenty lesson categories follows. Specific lessons taken from the interviews of the successful middle school principals are provided to illustrate the types of learning experiences encountered. These specific lessons are presented as direct quotations from the six principals who were interviewed.

(1) Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities

This lesson category included the following lessons learned:

- the importance of being organized;
- staying focused on what is important;
- developing needed skills;
- prioritizing appropriately;
- confronting and dealing with situations; and
- working diligently pays off.

Principals were able to better deal with change because of these lessons learned.

The following quotations provide examples of the lessons learned:

**Being Organized**

"I mean every ten minutes there is something else and the situation changes and I have two pads of paper going at

all times because I've got to take notes on everything that is happening now."

### **Staying Focused**

"I had to understand the importance of staying focused even in very difficult times."

### **Developing Needed Skills**

"I can look back now, and see that I have the experience now to take difficult tasks and break them down into small manageable units and look at the total picture and know what the end result you want, but take it step by step, inch by inch, so that you don't do things too quickly or too haphazardly."

### **Prioritizing Appropriately**

"I've really got to start making some decisions on priorities, on how I want to work and the manner I want to work."

### **Confronting/Dealing With Situations**

"I am not a procrastinator, I am kind of person that likes to take the bull by the horns no matter what it is, no matter how ugly it is, no matter how messy it may become, I like to deal with the situations and get them out of the way."

### **Working Diligently Pays Off**

". . . the people that have seen me work know that all the hard work is starting to pay off."

(2) Do What Is Best For Kids

"Do What is Best for Kids" involved individual lessons which sometimes dealt with situations in which principals took risks on behalf of their students. This lesson category involved the following lessons learned:

- importance of providing for the needs of the students;
- the necessity of making the school an instructionally sound place; and
- always remember why you are in this job.

This lesson category also was a major theme in all six interviews of middle school principals.

The following quotations provide examples of the lessons learned:

**Provide For Needs of Students**

"However, you must look at the needs of the students and make sure that we are moving into the direction that our decisions that have been made collectively are in their (student's) best interest."

". . . first thing that I would have to say to a young administrator is become a child advocate . . ."

**Provide An Instructionally Sound School**

"It is so easy in this business to be distracted by all the trivia and all the circumstances on the peripheral of running a building. They are all very necessary, but if you

are not careful, you can be caught up in that, that you don't give time to the most important thing that goes on here, which is instruction of children."

### **Remember Why You Are In This Job**

"You cannot ever lose sight of the real purpose of being here -- you can't. I think in the long run -- what's best for kids is always the deciding factor."

"If you get in it for the wrong reasons, if you are seeking glory, if you are seeking financial remuneration, if you want to get rich, then get out of the business."

### **(3) Learn How To Work With Staff**

The lessons in this category addressed areas such as curriculum and instructional techniques, as well as lessons learned while working with staff members who had to be dismissed or otherwise dealt with for incompetence. Lessons were learned through current job experiences. Lessons also involved previous experiences of the principals, when they were assistant principals or principals at another level. Many of the earlier lessons learned proved to be helpful when these principals achieved their current positions as middle school principals. Lessons also were learned from experiences that these principals had in their current jobs, with their bosses.

This category included the following lessons learned:

- how to deal with instructional issues and people;
- how to deal with boss;
- how to remain focused;
- how to deal with people as individuals;
- how staff feels about issues;
- how to work together; and
- how to take care of staff.

This category yielded the following quotations relative to the lessons learned:

#### **Dealing With Instruction/People**

". . . I would have to say teachers, individual teachers kind of throughout have not only taught me about teaching, instructional process, but just about dealing with people and dealing with kids, dealing with parents, just kind of some of the things that we do. Through them I have been able to learn."

#### **Dealing With Boss**

". . . I caught hell for not being specific . . . but I am certainly going to be specific the next time he comes around."

#### **Remaining Focused**

"At one of the faculty meetings, I guess I had had it, so to speak. I blew my cool and I raised my voice to the teachers in a condescending manner . . . I had to understand

the importance of staying focused even in very difficult times."

#### **Dealing With People As Individuals**

". . . I think there are always situations where you have to deal with peoples' feelings as well as their professionalism and their attitudes and their beliefs and all that sometimes becomes a very difficult mix."

#### **Dealing With Staff Feelings About Issues**

"It also taught me that even teachers that know you and know you are a good person, a good administrator, who believed in you and trusted you before, as soon as one within their ranks was threatened, they all feel threatened."

#### **Working Together**

"If we want to solve the problem, we have got to work together in spirit . . ."

#### **Taking Care Of Staff**

"Take care of people -- they will take care of you. Hire good people who are, number one, child centered and support them -- stay out of their way. Do that and you will have a good school."

#### **(4) Involve Others**

Involving others referred to parents and community members, as well as teachers. In some cases students also

were mentioned. Examples of involvement included: informal parent groups, PTA's, community groups, faculties, individual faculty members, assistant principals, and students.

The lessons learned in the "Involve Others" categorization were:

- listening to others;
- bringing about consensus;
- working together through communication; and
- helping people to believe in themselves.

This category included the following illustrations:

#### **Listening To Others**

". . . he taught me how to listen to people when he would come down and had something to bring to the table. He would listen to how we felt about that and he would reflect on what we brought and then he would encourage us to think about different possibilities or solutions and the ramifications of each selection . . . so he taught me how to think, how to listen to other people."

#### **Bringing About Consensus**

"I think building a new school plant and focusing in on the different entities or organizations and everything you have to pull together to bring about consensus . . . was very time consuming and very challenging."

### **Working Together Through Communication**

"I learned a tremendous amount from my first boss, my principal at the time. I learned a lot of people skills, how to talk with people from wherever they were coming, how to understand how they were feeling not just to hear what they say, but to understand what they feel and to address that and not to get diverted by what they are saying, which was sometimes very offensive and abusive toward me personally and to get past that and to see past that and to get to what was really bothering them and listen to them and try to address their concerns. I would say that of all the things I did as an assistant principal that that was probably one of the most effective . . . to develop communication between the kids and me and the parents and me and the teachers and try to connect all that so that we were all working together as one."

### **Helping People To Believe In Themselves**

"I think as a leader the one thing you have to do is to realize that you've got to make the people believe in themselves and be able to do things, buy into it . . . I think everybody out there would say, (I) involved the people that should be involved in anything that goes on in this school."

(5) Do What Is Right

The lesson category "Do What is Right" provides examples which deal with not compromising one's principles. Doing what is right also pertains to doing just that for the benefit of the students, for the instructional program in general, as well as tackling difficult personnel problems which would have been far easier on the principal to have not addressed. This lesson category involved courage and some risk taking on the part of the principals who did what was right.

It was learned by the principals that it was important to do what was right:

- in spite of the personal cost;
- for the good of the school/not self;
- in whatever way works;
- without asking for permission; and
- in order to stand for something.

This category provided the following quotations associated with the lessons learned:

**Personal Cost**

"It was like the biggest weight had been lifted from the shoulders of the school -- it had to be done. I was just very sorry that I had to be the one to do it -- it was a great cost to me personally."

". . . I saw the frustration that my teachers were having and my frustration in how it was being done, so, I started speaking up. Well, I could tell you that any of my desires or aspirations I would have for future promotions died very quick."

#### **Good Of The School**

". . . I always try to make the decision for what I think is best for the school -- not what is going to make me look good in the eyes of that person or group. I learned those things from watching other people make mistakes."

#### **Whatever Way Works**

"I would like to have been able to do it in another way, but we never seemed to get anybody's attention and now I think we have gotten their attention. What was kind of a bomb shell has hopefully had a positive element as how to approach it."

#### **Without Asking Permission**

". . . I caught flack . . . for being out of the building so much. I tried to explain what I was doing, but nobody would buy into it. I knew it was right, so I did it."

"But, boy, it helped my staff for a while. It is one time I am glad I asked forgiveness instead of permission."

## To Stand For Something

". . . there were times I felt that we stand up for things that were right for kids or stand up, take a position against a parent who was wrong and to stand up for what we believed and there were times when I felt we did a 'soft shoe' and the child did not benefit because there were times maybe we were too concerned how we were viewed by the central office. I guess I learned that there are times you have to stand up for something even if it is a lose/lose situation for you personally, because if you don't do that, after a while you stand for nothing and I could not live that way."

### (6) Be Decisive

This lesson category included descriptions of principals during those times when they had to make important decisions. It included the following lessons:

- make the best decision possible with the information you have;
- be calm and think clearly;
- care about what people say;
- sometimes it is necessary to make tough, unpopular decisions; and
- use experiences to assist in decision making.

The decisions in this lesson category related to personnel matters, as well as to curriculum and instructional matters.

This lesson category is illustrated by the following quotations associated with the lessons learned:

**Make Best Decision Possible**

"So, I commend . . . in working with me and getting me to understand that in school administration there are times where there are different situations where you are dealing with people and that it is hard to make all people happy as you make decisions; however, he was also one that asked you to look at many ramifications and make the best decision that you could make as honestly as you could make it with the information that you had at hand."

**Be Calm/Think Clearly**

". . . I have a tendency to be very calm when everybody else is going bananas around me and thinking clearly about what the next logical step is and I credit my mother and father for that and the upbringing that they gave me."

**Care About What People Say**

"My principal was very caring, he was a good decision maker, he was a listener. For people to compare me with him, in any form or fashion, flatters me and makes me feel real good because, had it not been for him, I would not have developed as quickly as a good administrator."

### Sometimes Necessary To Make Tough, Unpopular Decisions

"My first job as . . . assistant principal was under a man who . . . gave a strength that I didn't have -- being able to make tough decisions, even though they may be unpopular ones."

### Use Experiences

". . . I can make, I think, more informed decisions than I could have made years ago based on my experiences and experiences of others -- people that I have talked to and seen in operation."

### (7) What Impacts Career Development

The lesson category "What Impacts Career Development" involves lessons learned which have affected the career path of some of the successful principals, as well as lessons learned which will affect the future careers of some of these principals. Some of the lessons are derived from positive experiences in school administration and some are the result of negative experiences. Some lessons result from just "soul searching" after a number of years in the principalship.

This lesson category included the following lessons:

- avoid certain situations;
- one has choices;
- grow in professional desires;

- disappointments can be valuable experiences;
- principalship is changing;
- positive experiences can impact career; and
- negative experiences can impact administrators.

The following quotations relate to the lessons learned:

#### **Avoid Certain Situations**

"In terms of managing your career, don't get in a situation you don't want to be in."

#### **One Has Choices**

"And, to realize that you have choices, too, that is the other part of that. Don't sit around and complain; you have choices, you don't have to be here -- tell teachers that or anybody."

#### **Grow In Professional Desires**

"Well, I think I have become more focused, more professional. I think I always had the drive to be successful and work hard to be successful. But, also, I think I am more goal oriented at this point and time in my life and I have transferred, I think, the main thing, personal desires as I have matured to desires and needs of other people, especially students."

#### **Disappointments Can Be Valuable Experiences**

"When good is on your side, it will work out and sometimes doors are slammed and sometimes disappointments happen, it is for a reason and a lot of my disappointments

ended up very valuable for me somewhere down the road with more important situations."

### **Principalship Is Changing**

". . . I also began to realize that the old view of the building principal had begun to change, not just in my mind, but in the minds of people around me."

### **Positive Experiences Can Impact Career**

"That was probably the experience for me that had the biggest impact on my career. How I approach people, how I approach situations, how we deal with kids, how we talk in terms of instruction. We made radical, a radical sweep of changes in our processes after that . . ."

### **Negative Experiences Can Impact Administrators**

". . . I think the great truth that I had in my head was this undying faith in people in this business, that everybody was right-minded about it and they all wanted the same things, shared the same vision, and worked toward those goals. I think that when I got into administration, I found that was not the axiom upon which we operated -- that people had other kinds of agendas. There were people in this business who disliked kids very much and just didn't have the right kind of attitude. I learned some very harsh lessons in that by the way."

(8) Good Relationships With Parents Are Important

The lessons learned in this section were derived from personal non-work experiences, from experiences principals had as teachers and most often, from experiences encountered on the job as administrators. Modeling by other administrators with whom these six principals had worked was also noted by the principals who were interviewed. The relationships with parents included experiences on an individual basis or with groups of parents in the school setting, as well as with parents in the larger community.

This lesson category included the following lessons:

- use one's own children to relate;
- open school to parents;
- share openly; and
- be positive.

The following quotations relate to the lessons learned:

**Use One's Own Children To Relate**

"I think I can talk to parents from the standpoint that maybe they would buy into, by saying, if it were my kid, I would . . . I would expect my own child to do such and such . . . my personal life has made an influence."

**Open School To Parents**

"I developed a relationship with the PTA that the former (principal) had been scared of and he wanted to keep parents out of the building and my feeling was 'No, the more

they see us, the more they will love us.' They are not going to come here and find bad things -- if bad things happen, it was their children, too, I mean, the kids and you expect things to happen in middle school. It is how we react to it that is important, so that when that wonderful, comfortable relationship started developing, I thought, I might be able to make this after all."

### **Share Openly**

". . . we would trade stories and it built up such a tremendous trust level with my parents."

### **Be Positive**

"And, you know, I was telling my successor . . . . I can say to a single (parent) meeting that I went in afraid and came out affirmed and pleased."

## **(9) You Are Always Learning**

The lessons which came from the "You Are Always Learning" lesson category referred to statements by the interviewed principals regarding the following:

- keeping open mind to new thoughts, ideas and experiences;
- listen to those who know;
- realize that one continues to learn;
- develop love of learning;
- learn from experiences/situations and people; and

- apply solutions effective elsewhere to one's own situation.

These lessons also included the realization that the middle school principalship is not a stagnant position, in which one can sit and be content with the status quo. Although formalized learning was mentioned, the focus of this lesson category was on learning from past and current experiences on the job, as well as from one's personal life.

The following quotations relate to the lessons learned:

#### **Keep An Open Mind**

"And I asked them (faculty) to help me to become an elementary school principal: that I would learn with them and that the curriculum they would have to help me master and to acquire the skills that I would need to help them at that level."

#### **Listen To Those Who Know**

"In doing that, I had to acquire a lot of skills quickly and my mentor at that time was very astute in building the master schedule and as I ran into obstacles, he was able to get me over some hurdles and to give me some advice on how to deal with certain issues in building a master schedule. That was a very enlightening experience."

#### **Realize That One Continues To Learn**

"I have really been lucky. I have learned so many lessons along the way."

### **Develop Love Of Learning**

"I just learned so much about education, about teaching, and the more I learned, the more I wanted to learn and from that all of the rest is history -- eternal student."

### **Learn From Experiences/People**

". . . but because I learned never to procrastinate after that custodial problem . . ."

### **Apply Solutions To One's Own Situation**

". . . until I experienced it I really didn't understand that the problems that we have in any one school system are the problems in another school system, too. It is just that the names changed. I began to see the solutions that people were trying elsewhere would work in my own school. I know that my association with (outside educational groups) has made me a better principal."

### **(10) Realizing That You Are Successful**

The principals who responded with lessons that fell into this category seemed to put great emphasis on the point in time when they learned that they were, indeed successful. Each of the six principals interviewed mentioned that they had experienced the realization that they were successful. This realization came about from experiences such as working with students, teachers, and parents, as well as achieving

one or more goals in their careers. Confidence was gained as a result of this feeling of success. One of the interviewees specifically mentioned that one of the reasons he felt successful was due to the fact that he had been selected to be interviewed for this study.

This category included the following lessons learned which made the principals realize that they were successful:

- treatment by others whom they respect;
- hard work pays off;
- accomplishing change;
- acceptance by colleagues;
- accomplishing division-wide task; and
- professional growth.

The following quotations relate to the lessons learned:

#### **Treatment By Those Respected**

"The way I am treated, I would say, by some of these other people that I respect would make me realize that I am successful."

#### **Hard Work Pays Off**

". . . at least have the understanding that I, through hard work, could be successful with those types of things."

#### **Accomplishing Change**

"When we started getting kids more involved in their own learning and it was working, when things were getting done that people had been afraid of in the past to do and it

was successful, that was when I knew that I just might be good at this job after all."

#### **Acceptance by Colleagues**

"So, when I finally realized that I was being accepted by my colleagues, that was probably the time I realized that I was going to be successful. I got feedback from them saying that I was doing a great job and they appreciated what I was doing."

#### **Accomplishing Division-Wide Task**

"So, I not only implemented the . . . training within my school, but I also coordinated throughout the school division. That was a challenge and a half . . . and that was the key event in my career because that event solidified my desire and validated that I had the talents and abilities to move beyond the principalship."

#### **Professional Growth**

". . . I have developed into a good motivator, an effective communicator and a good presenter."

". . . but colleagues . . . would probably say that I have grown in confidence in the position . . . I didn't have any training for it and, of course, made some mistakes along the way, but I have become much more outspoken in things and I read a lot, am knowledgeable about things that I didn't have knowledge about before."

(11) Effective Teaching For Kids

Learning what was effective in working with kids both within the classroom setting and without was the subject of this lesson category. Principals noted that they learned about students through individual and group experiences, through faculty members and by serving as school administrators at different levels. Some principals learned also about effective teaching of middle school children through exposure to ideas and techniques at conferences. Most of the middle school principals attributed their learning of what was effective through hands-on experiences within the school setting.

The lessons learned within this lesson category were:

- effective teaching and learning mean different things to different students and adults;
- the background from which students come and the setting in which they are educated may denote a lack of opportunity, not necessarily capability;
- student assessment needs to relate to student success;
- students must have needs met; and
- fit the system to the children.

The following quotations illustrate the lessons learned:

### **Meaning Of Effective Teaching/Learning Differs**

". . . I understand first hand what it is like to be in the world where academic success is the benchmark for everyone's opinion of you and to not be successful, for no fault of your own, and I understand for the first time because I had not experienced that as a student myself. I would say that is tremendously important."

### **Background Of Students Does Not Denote Capabilities**

". . . I realized that the kids at . . ., though they may be country kids from a rural background, were as capable as kids in other areas, urban areas; they just didn't have the same opportunities. And, I saw that . . . could really help open some doors for these kids and I believed in it."

### **Student Assessment Needs To Relate To Student Success**

"The least fun I guess, is when the teachers and I feel that a student who has tried their best and for some reason our standards when we measure success at that point in development, that our measurement is not good enough for that person (student) to understand that they are making strides and are success bound. We might be stifling that because of certain standards we have out here. So, I think we are going to have to look at that very critically in the future, as we look at alternative assessment, etc."

### Students Must Have Needs Met

". . . all the middle school whistles and bells aren't really going to be important unless we train our children to be able to decode . . . their own language effectively and pull them into the mainstream."

"We wanted material that was worthy of being read and we wanted kids to have time to read."

### Fit The System To The Children

"So, I went to this conference and heard Dr. . . . speak . . . It was like here were some answers, here were some alternatives to work with children, thinking about the characteristics of these children and in developing everything around them as opposed to constantly fighting the characteristics to get to the children to fit the system that was faulty and inappropriate for them. So, I would say that was a real benchmark as far as my thinking as an administrator."

### (12) Be Honest

The lesson category "Be Honest" included the following two lessons:

- be honest with others, and
- be honest with yourself.

Principals noted that whether they were dealing with positive or negative experiences, it was always best to be

honest. Lessons in this category were learned from role models and colleagues, and from experience.

The following quotations describe the lessons in the "Be Honest" lesson category:

**Be Honest With Others**

"So, he was a great mentor, always, a very honest person."

**Be Honest With Yourself And Others**

"Don't do things that are later going to antagonize you or others. Be honest, be yourself."

(13) Developed Leadership/Management Styles

Certain individual lessons learned related to an awareness and development of leadership or management styles by those principals interviewed. Though the terms leadership and management can have different connotations, the principals in these interviews seemed to use the terms interchangeably. Mentors and colleagues seemed to have played a significant role in development of these styles.

This lesson category included the following lessons learned:

- style developed when became principal (one style does not necessarily transfer to another situation);
- surround yourself with good people; and
- utilize traits of bosses.

The following quotations describe the lessons in this lesson category:

#### **Style Developed When Became Principal**

"So, I wrote this hell fire and brimstone letter to those that I knew weren't out there and it was just a 'come to Jesus letter' and boy, they all just about revolted on me. And really had not -- they weren't accustomed to that style and it just flew all over me and I realized I was still test driving my style as an administrator and I had been an administrator for a month . . . You can be an assistant principal until you are blue in the face, but your style is (developed) when you become a principal. ."

#### **Surround Yourself With Good People**

"And, I would say surround yourself with good people. You can't do it all."

#### **Utilize Traits Of Bosses**

". . . when I taught school, he was a principal and I remember as we would talk about things in classes, in coursework, whatever I would come back to (his) style as a nice, humanistic type style. He seemed to have a pretty good rapport with his teachers and yet got things accomplished and I guess I found myself taking the . . . approach, maybe as a model toward what I wanted my approach to develop into."

"I think we all have to remember the good traits of the individual or individuals (bosses) . . . and try not to implement the negative management styles in our decisions."

"The only thing I learned from my principal was something not to do. I felt there was too much time spent worrying about protecting himself."

"As my first administrative job, the thing I remember most was just learning the nuts and bolts of being an administrator, but also was having him as a role model. He had tremendous influence on me in terms of my style, my interaction with staff, and my problem solving abilities that I developed over time. The first significant thing about my first job is my relationship with my first boss."

"So, I guess that taught me something, too. Neither style was something I want to have . . ."

". . . but, just reflecting on his style and assessing what I admired about him so much kind of brought to a conscience level the kind of educator and administrator that I wanted to be."

(14) Be Positive

Each of the principals interviewed realized that it was important that they had learned to be positive in their role as a school administrator. It was mentioned that it was necessary to be positive with staff, students, parents, as

well as to be positive with themselves. This lesson was learned from personal experiences, colleagues and from situations with which the principals dealt.

This lesson category included the following lessons learned:

- learn from mistakes, and
- treat people like the people you want them to become.

The following quotations describe the lessons in this lesson category:

#### **Learn From Mistakes**

"I think we need to stay focused and I think we need to keep a positive attitude in times of defeat and learn from our defeats, our mistakes and in our defeats, there has to be some victory for the future."

#### **Treat People Like The People You Want Them To Become**

"But, truly what has gotten me through this, is always believing that there is good in every person and that when people behave mean or in an unprofessional way, generally, it is because they feel very negative about themselves and I have always worked under the premise that if you treat people like the people you want them to become, they do somehow improve their behavior."

(15) Be Calm

In the lesson category "Be Calm", half of the principals noted that they learned the very important lesson of remaining calm when dealing with the many pressures encountered in their jobs. With their diverse responsibilities, the middle school principals learned that to do their jobs effectively and to be appropriate role models for the staff, it was necessary to remain calm.

This lesson category contained the following lessons learned:

- be a realist, not a perfectionist, and
- one can make it through difficult situations.

The following quotations describe the lessons learned in the "Be Calm" lesson category:

**Be a Realist, Not A Perfectionist**

"I don't let everything bother me as much; I used to let everything bother me. I wanted everything perfect. I was a perfectionist and I have changed in that. I realize my own faults. I realize other people's faults. I know you are not going to change the world. You just try to do the best you can and do it right so probably people who knew me then and know me now would say 'Gee, you are more relaxed, more calm, you don't seem as tense, you seem to enjoy yourself a little bit more'."

## **One Can Make It Through Difficult Situations**

"I became emotional even before our case came up in executive session. I had to be calmed down, interestingly by that same principal who told me I could do it. He was there that night, too. He talked to me, calmed me down. He said it will be fine, you will make it throughout all right and I did."

### **(16) Find Humor/Fun In Job**

Of those principals interviewed, three specifically mentioned that they had learned the lesson of enjoying their jobs. All three said it was crucial to find humor in the job and to have fun with the jobs they were doing as middle school principals. Students and staff members were referenced in the lesson examples as well as the principals themselves. The following lessons were learned:

- students are fun;
- working with staff is fun; and
- laugh at yourself.

The following quotations describe the lessons in this lesson category:

#### **Students Are Fun**

". . . I find them (students) very healing. When I have had a tremendously difficult day, there is nothing more fun to me than talking to a middle school kid who just comes

out with whatever they are thinking and saying at the time. I just generally burst into laughter when maybe I shouldn't sometimes, but I just find this job enormously fun."

#### **Working With Staff Is Fun**

"So, I look upon every day as a fun day here. As far as the job, I enjoy working with the staff, I enjoy working at anything they are doing, but I just consider this a fun kind of job."

". . . there were also comic things that were going on when you are working with someone who is that methodical in her behavior. I have always, always found something funny about everything. That happens because there is humor in everything. Even in my personal life, it has it's funny moments."

#### **Laugh At Yourself**

"You have got to be able to laugh at things, otherwise, you are going to develop ulcers. Ultimately, I truly think you will become ineffective if you can't laugh at yourself. You've got to be able to do that."

#### (17) Know/Be Yourself

Most of the principals interviewed noted that it was important to be natural in the role of school administrator, whether it be in an interview situation for a position or in dealing with faculty or parents or other colleagues. It was

noted that an important lesson for them was to be themselves. They learned this lesson from role models, colleagues and on-the-job experiences.

The following lessons were learned in the "Know/Be Yourself" category:

- the "real you" will come out in stressful situations;
- don't think you have arrived;
- don't mirror negative traits of colleagues;
- get a reality check;
- don't let another person have a negative influence on you; and
- don't be influenced by other's administrative style.

The following quotations describe the lessons in this lesson category:

#### **The "Real You" Will Come Out**

"So, I would say, especially in school administration, it gets painful at times, it gets stressful at times, and you better have a handle on who you are. Because you are going to pull from your inner soul as it were and you are going to be yourself in those situations."

#### **Don't Think You Have Arrived**

"Then, when I compare myself to others, I think gosh, I still have a lot of work to do and I do. I think one of the biggest mistakes anybody can ever make is to believe that

you have arrived. I think the moment you think you have arrived somewhere, you are in big trouble."

#### **Don't Mirror Negative Traits Of Colleagues**

"I started becoming more like them. As a result there is a certain cynicism, certain know-it-all attitude that I have found in some . . . teachers develop. And, I guess, I developed some of that, too. I became very miserable because I realized later on, it went against my personality. It was not in my personality to be that way."

#### **Get A Reality Check**

". . . have your teachers evaluate you. Get a reality check at least every other year. It is as important as going to the doctor and getting an annual physical. Being an administrator you may think you know what your strengths and weaknesses are but no one can tell you better than your teachers that you work with."

#### **Don't Let Another Person Have Negative Influence**

"I let someone play an influential position in my life that I shouldn't have for a longer period of time and without that now, I am altogether a different person."

#### **Don't Be Influenced By Another's Administrative Style**

"From the first one (principal), I learned to involve people, to be myself. I am a people person to begin with and not to think I had to put on this cloak of administration or this attitude of 'I'm in charge'."

(18) Be A Team Player

As this lesson category title suggests, most of the principals interviewed felt that they had learned how to be a team player and that it was important to be a team player not only in the school division organization, but within the individual school setting. None of the principals indicated that in order to be a team player they had to forsake their integrity or ideals. Lessons in this category were learned through personal and work experiences.

The following lessons were learned:

- don't push things to the brink/too far;
- teaming is challenging; and
- can maintain loyalty even through negative.

experiences

The following quotations describe the lessons in this lesson category:

**Don't Push Things Too Far**

"I tend to be pretty much of a company man. I understand the county philosophy of instruction, personnel development, management, maintenance, operations, finances. Each county, I think, has a status quo or way of doing things . . . I'm just not willing to push things to the brink, stress the system. It is just not something that has been successful for me."

### **Teaming Is Challenging**

". . . focusing in the different entities or organizations and everything that you have to pull together to bring about consensus both at the central office and within the community itself or within the teaching faculty and along with the school plant, at the same time, bring a philosophical change in how we teach. Going from a departmental position into a teaming interdisciplinary type of approach at the middle level was very time consuming and very challenging."

### **Can Maintain Loyalty Even Through Negative Experiences**

". . . it really hurt my level of trust for central office administrators and yet, I have this tremendous sense of loyalty for my boss whomever it is."

### **(19) Take Control**

"Take Control" referred to lessons learned when dealing with changes in school organization and with staff members. Principals learned that it was essential to take control of situations in the schools. Sometimes the decision to take control caused problems for those principals, but all did what was necessary to address situations which needed to be handled.

The following lessons were learned in the "Take Control" lesson category:

- negative personnel situations must be handled promptly;
- confronting administrative personnel with a system-wide problem can achieve positive result; and
- hard, personal choices are sometimes necessary to make.

The following quotations describe the lessons:

#### **Negative Personnel Situations Must Be Handled Promptly**

"Word got to me and because of that . . . experience, I went right down there, pulled them in the office, let's have it out and all that."

#### **Confronting A System-Wide Problem Can Achieve Positive Results**

"So what I did was I kind of broke protocol in terms of saying: Look we got a problem here, we have been dancing around this issue for years like it doesn't exist, we haven't grasped the bull by the horns, here is data that is staring you in the face that we've got a problem and we better do something about it. I am personally tired of taking the rap for this and we need to do something about it. It created quite a stir and some consternation."

#### **Hard, Personal Choices Sometimes Are Necessary**

"If I had not gone through with that divorce, I would not be here today. . ."

(20) It Is A Rewarding Job

While this lesson category would seem to be one which would be recognized by all six principals who interviewed, actually only half of the principals specifically acknowledged that their jobs were rewarding ones. The jobs were noted to be rewarding due to the success of the students and the teachers.

The following lessons were learned in this category:

- change by teachers, for students is beneficial;
- ownership by teachers is important; and
- change by administrators has positive effect.

The following quotations described the lessons:

**Change By Teachers For Students Is Beneficial**

"And seeing teachers change and seeing classrooms become student centered to me has been very rewarding: to see the benefits that are brought about by the young people as they strive to learn the skills that they need hopefully for our society out there."

**Ownership By Teachers Important**

"I get such a kick out of teachers taking ownership for the quality of instruction in this building. I get the biggest kick out of them coming to me and wanting to do an international week, and let's have this career fair, and let's do this picture book project and how about taking the

kids down to the Board of Supervisors and let's show them what they have learned . . ."

#### **Change By Administrators Has Positive Effect**

"Making the transition to middle school . . . was, without question, my biggest challenge. It was a time that was very rewarding, very frustrating, but now as I look back, I wouldn't want to trade that for the world."

## Findings of the Study

### Event Themes

Of the nine event themes, there were six themes in which individual events pertaining to those themes were mentioned by all six principals. There was one theme in which individual events pertaining to those themes were mentioned by five of the interviewed principals. Of the nine event themes, there was one theme in which individual events pertaining to that theme were mentioned by four interviewed principals. Finally, there was one theme in which individual events pertaining to that theme were mentioned by only one principal. Table 4, previously noted, includes this information and also provides the total number of times individual events pertaining to these themes were mentioned by the six interviewed principals.

It was found that the event theme "New/First Administrative Job" solicited the most references to individual events. All of the principals interviewed mentioned that this new/first administrative job, whether as an assistant principal, a principal at another level or at the middle school level played a significant role in their development as successful school administrators. As one can see from reviewing Table 4, five of the six principals made reference to this new first administrative job ten or more times within the interview. References to the events which

fell under this event theme were mentioned more than twice as often as references to any other event theme, except for the event theme "Personal Influence." Obviously, the "New/First Administrative Job" theme was a major event experience in the lives of these successful middle school principals. There were seven lesson categories associated with the "New/First Administrative Job" event theme: "Be Honest", "Be a Team Player", "Involve Others", "Know/Be Yourself", "Learning How to Work with Staff", "Take Control", and "You Are Always Learning." Table 5 illustrates the lesson categories found within this event theme, as well as the lesson categories found within the other eight event themes. It also indicates the relationship between the nine event themes and the twenty lesson categories.

The "Personal Influence" event theme also was included by all six of the principals interviewed. It was found that each principal made reference (at least four) times to some personal, non-work experience which seemed to have had an impact on the career of the principal. There were seven lesson categories which were associated with the event theme "Personal Influence": "Be Calm", "Developed Leadership/Management Styles", "Do What Is Best For Kids", "Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities", "Good Relationships

Table 5  
Relationship of Event Themes To Lesson Categories

LESSON CATEGORIES	EVENT THEMES									
	Conference	Divine Intervention	Handling Change	New/First Administrative Job	Personal Influence	Personal Problems	Role Models/Colleague Support	Student Success	Success With Parents	
Be Calm		*			*					
Be Decisive						*				
Be Honest			*				*			
Be Positive			*				*			
Be A Team Player			*				*			
Developed Leadership/Management Style			*		*		*			
Do What Is Best For Kids			*		*		*			
Do What Is Right						*	*		*	
Effective Teaching For Kids	*									
Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities			*		*					
Find Humor/Fun In Job			*				*	*	*	
Good Relationships With Parents Are Important					*				*	
Involve Others			*		*		*		*	
It Is A Rewarding Job			*					*	*	
Know/Be Yourself			*		*		*			
Learning To Work With Staff			*		*		*			
Realize That You Are Successful			*		*		*		*	
Take Control			*				*		*	
What Impacts Career Develop.			*							
You Are Always Learning		*	*		*		*		*	

With Parents Are Important", "Realize You Are Successful", and "You Are Always Learning."

A third event theme which had specific events related to the theme mentioned by all six principals interviewed was "Student Success." One of the principals interviewed mentioned success with students multiple times while each of the other five principals mentioned a significant event involving student success only one time. Under the event theme "Student Success," there were three categories of lessons learned: "Do What is Best for Kids", "It Is a Rewarding Job", and "Take Control."

Another event theme established from this study was "Handling Change." Again, this event theme was reported in all six of the interviews. Five of the six principals interviewed noted from one to five specific events which occurred within this category, while one principal noted eighteen events. In this event theme, there were sixteen lesson categories developed, more than in any other event theme and twice as many as any event theme except for "Role Models/Colleague Support." The sixteen lesson categories were: "Be Calm", "Be Honest", "Be Positive", "Be a Team Player", "Developed Leadership/Management Style", "Do What Is Best For Kids", "Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities", "Find Humor/Fun in Job", "Involve Others", "It Is A Rewarding Job", "Know/Be Yourself", "Learning How To Work

With Staff", "Realize That You Are Successful", "Take Control", "You Are Always Learning", and "What Impacts On Career Development."

"Personnel Problems" was an event theme which was noted by examples from all six of the principals interviewed. None of the six principals included more than four specific events within the "Personnel Problem" theme. There were five lesson categories which indicated lessons learned through events associated with "Personnel Problems": "Be Decisive", "Do What Is Right", "Learning How to Work with Staff", "Realize That You Are Successful" and "Take Control."

The "Role Models/Colleague Support" event theme was mentioned by all six of the principals. Three of the principals mentioned three specific events and three of the principals mentioned one or two specific events within this theme. There were eleven lesson categories which were associated with this event theme: "Be A Team Player", "Be Decisive", "Be Honest", "Be Positive", "Developed Leadership/ Management Style", "Do What is Best for Kids", "Do What is Right", "Find Humor/Fun In Job", "Involve Others", "Know/Be Yourself", and "You Are Always Learning."

The fifth event theme, "Success With Parents" was developed from specific events noted by five of the six

middle school principals interviewed. There were two lesson categories which were included under this event theme: 106 "Involve Others" and "Relationships with Parents Are Important."

The next event theme was "Conference." Four of the six principals interviewed noted that a conference or special meeting had influenced the way in which they developed as a school administrator. One principal provided four references to a conference event and three other principals only noted one or two events. The lesson category associated with this theme was: "Effective Teaching for Kids."

The final event theme was "Divine Intervention." Only one of the six principals interviewed noted specific events which fell in this theme. The lesson category associated with "Divine Intervention" was: "You Are Always Learning."

### Lesson Categories

From the interviews with the six successful middle school principals, there were twenty lesson categories developed from many specific lessons learned. Table 6 lists the twenty lesson categories, the number of times that specific lessons within these categories were mentioned in each of the individual interviews and the total times that

references were made to specific lessons within a lesson category.

Of the twenty lesson categories, there were nine categories in which individual lessons pertaining to those categories were mentioned by all six principals. Of the lesson categories, there were seven categories in which individual lessons pertaining to those categories were mentioned by five of the middle school principals. There was one category in which individual lessons pertaining to that category were mentioned by four principals. Of the twenty categories, there were two categories in which individual lessons pertaining to those categories were mentioned by only three middle school principals. Finally, there was one category in which individual lessons pertaining to that category were mentioned by only one middle school principal. The lesson categories and the event themes in which these categories are found provide the opportunity to study the findings in a manner different from that just mentioned. Table 5 illustrates this data. By reviewing the data found in Table 5, it is found that lessons from the "You Are Always Learning" lesson category are included in five different event themes. The lesson categories "Do What Is Best For Kids", "Involve Others" and "Take Control" were each included in four event themes. Lesson categories which

TABLE 6

NUMBER OF TIMES LESSONS MENTIONED IN INTERVIEWS

Lesson Categories	Number of Times Mentioned In The Six Interviews						Number of Principals Who Mentioned Lesson	Total Number of Times Lessons Mentioned In Six Interviews
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI		
	(Principals Responding)							
Be Calm	0	0	3	3	0	2	3	8
Be Decisive	1	3	0	7	5	17	5	33
Be Honest	5	6	8	1	3	0	5	23
Be Positive	1	3	6	4	3	2	6	19
Be A Team Player	1	6	1	1	0	2	5	11
Developed Leadership/Management Style	6	8	0	0	2	4	4	20
Do What Is Best For Kids	19	2	26	10	27	22	6	106
Do What Is Right	7	4	5	9	6	6	6	37
Effective Teaching For Kids	6	6	6	2	1	5	6	26
Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities	3	35	35	32	20	17	6	142
Find Humor/Fun In Job	0	0	2	0	1	1	3	4
Good Relationships With Parents Are Important	7	9	9	4	0	3	5	32
Involve Others	4	15	9	9	10	5	6	52
It Is A Rewarding Job	0	2	0	2	0	0	2	4
Know/Be Yourself	5	0	2	2	2	3	5	14
Learning How To Work With Staff	8	18	6	12	7	6	6	57
Realize That You Are Successful	2	10	9	8	5	2	6	36
Take Control	2	0	1	1	1	3	5	8
What Impacts Career Development	5	0	9	6	2	11	5	33
You Are Always Learning	3	3	8	9	5	3	6	31

were included in three different event themes were: "Be a Team Player", "Be Honest", "Developed Leadership/Management Style", "Know/Be Yourself", "Learning How to Work with Staff" and "Realize That You Are Successful". Lesson categories found within two event themes were: "Be Calm", "Be Decisive", "Be Positive", "Do What Is Right", "Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities", "Find Humor/Fun In Job", "Good Relationships with Parents Are Important" and "It Is a Rewarding Job." Lesson categories only found within one event theme were: "Effective Teaching for Kids" and "What Impacts Career Development."

#### Analysis of Data

The successful middle school principals learned many valuable lessons from the significant events which occurred. Many of these lessons reported by the six principals relate directly to what current literature notes about the characteristics of successful school leaders. Many of the principals also received valuable preparation for the principalship through the lessons they learned.

Current literature addresses the leadership traits of school administrators. The literature also addresses career development.

Many career development studies have been based on the theories of Levinson and Super. Levinson's theory of life

development deals with the premise that there are ages (life stages) at which individuals make certain crucial decisions which affect their career development. For instance, those individuals in the settling down period (ages 34-39) are expected to "be more interested in attaining promotions - and will want them sooner rather than later - than individuals in other life stages" (Ornstein et al., 1989, p. 120). Super's stages are career stages, not tied to individuals' biological ages. Thus, individuals may, at different periods in their lives, be in any career stage. Munley (1977) also notes that Erikson's theory "helps identify personality factors associated with success in handling career development tasks" (which seems to be) "compatible with the work of Super" (p. 266). Finally, Munley also notes that three of Erikson's stages (identity, intimacy, and generativity) might be useful in studying career development of women.

A number of articles deal almost exclusively with career development of women. These articles were reviewed, since women form a large majority of the public education profession. Works by Poole et al. (1991), Gold (1978), Long (1974), Muller and Cocotas (1988), and Rose and Stone (1978) provided insight into women's careers.

A longitudinal study by Mortimer and Lorence (1979) examined males over a ten year period. All those studied were college graduates. One finding of their research is ". . . that occupational reward values in the senior year of college are predictive of work experiences 10 years later" (p. 1379).

Hall and Isabella (1985) looked at demotions, lateral moves and other career changes in a positive manner. They said that "people need change and stimulation if they are to grow" (p. 10). They also stated that "the emerging definition of career success is psychological success -- fulfillment in terms of one's own goals and objectives, which does not necessarily entail promotions" (p. 11). Feldman (1989) addressed a similar view when he wrote about the emergence of new career values. He notes that many professionals "no longer assume the organization has unilateral control over their careers . . . . This new careerism has led to some positive consequences for employees: more critical self-analysis; more assertiveness in seeking out feedback; more refusals of transfers and promotions that subvert career goals" (p. 150).

Gail Sheehy (1981), in her book, Pathfinders, described people who developed in their careers and in their personal lives because of a high sense of well-being. "They demonstrate important qualities -- quite apart from basic

mood, social style, and energy level -- that are shaped by life experience and enable them to attempt further developmental leaps or to withstand a life accident" (p. 48).

Another work "Career: The Subjective Approach," examines personal views of careers (Stebbins, 1970). Stebbins noted that a subjective view of one's career is different from the individual-objective view of one's career. Stebbins (1970) describes the individual-objective view as follows:

The individual-objective career is . . . the progress of an individual (or cohort of individuals) through a career line. It is an observer's view of the patterns of movement from stage to stage (either horizontal or vertical) as they are related to various criteria for movement, such as education, performance, ability, and the like, and as they relate to a timetable for movement. Typically, it also includes notions of recruitment to that career line. (p. 39)

In the same work, Stebbins provides a description of the subjective view of career: "Movement between stages, the criteria for that movement, and the timetables involved may all be defined by those participating" (p. 39).

Individuals involved in career development can and do interpret career events according to their own

predispositions. Stebbins (1970) noted further that the involved individual therefore can look at an event such as a promotion ". . . although nothing exceptional within the career line framework . . . as the crowning achievement of his life . . ." (p. 39). These career development studies provided the researcher with an expanded perspective from which the design of the study of successful middle school principals involved.

### Characteristics of Successful School Principals

Effective instructional leadership is a characteristic of successful school principals. The six interviewed principals provided responses consistent with the literature on effective leadership practices. The lesson categories which contained examples of effective instructional leadership were: "Be Decisive", "Do What is Best for Kids", "Do What is Right", "Effective Teaching for Kids", "Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities", as well as "Learning How To Work With Staff." Donmoyer and Wagstaff (1990) write that there are seven management tasks which affect both teaching and learning and through which instructional leadership is exercised: scheduling; articulating policies, regulations, and norms; hiring personnel; supervising personnel; coordinating pupil services; managing staff development; as well as budgeting.

All of these management tasks were noted by the six principals interviewed, although budgeting was mentioned only indirectly by one principal, in association with an incident occurring when a teacher spent more money than was in the budget authorized for that teacher. One of the middle school principals observed a successful middle school learning situation and stated: "It really made me rethink the organization of the school." Herman and Stephens (1989) feel that in order "to be an effective instructional leader the principal must be granted four conditions: economy, authority, responsibility, and central office and board support" (p. 55). The six principals all acknowledged that, except on rare occasions, they possessed the authority and were given the responsibility to be an effective instructional leader. As one principal noted: ". . . if anything did occur, any decisions had to be made, I was going to have to do it."

Effective management of time is also a characteristic of successful school leaders. Within the lesson category "Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities", there were specific items dealing with management of the principal's time. Several principals noted that they had learned to effectively manage their time. One middle school principal stated: "I am not a procrastinator . . . . I like to deal with situations and get them out of the way." Duke (1990)

considered management of time as a key factor in school leadership in the 1990s, as it was in the 1980s. Duke also notes that how principals "prioritize their time is likely to depend on whether or not they have a vision of effective schooling that is meaningful to their staff, their students, their community and -- most importantly -- to themselves" (p. 17).

The ability to provide direction when working with various constituencies and programs is considered essential for the implementation of a quality education program. As evidenced in the lesson categories "Be Decisive", "Do What is Best for Kids", "Do What is Right", "Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities", "Involve Others", "Learning How to Work With Staff", "Good Relationships With Parents Are Important", and "Take Control", each of these principals was able to be successful in directing the multi-faceted middle school operation. One of the middle school principals expressed the desire to provide direction: "You must look at the needs of the students and make sure that we are moving into the direction that our decisions that have been made collectively are in their (student's) best interest." Diane Wilson, in an opinion column in the N.A.S.S.P. Bulletin (1990) quotes a passage from a speech by Claire Irwin: "The principal, like the conductor of a symphony orchestra, is pivotal and inspiring in directing the various

contingents to deliver, in concert, a great performance called quality education" (p. 100). Through their statements, the six principals all seemed to provide direction and to possess what Rist (1991) described as spin control, which she identified as "the ability to define the issues, shape the agenda, drive the dialogue, seize the initiative, get the message through" (p. 16).

As has been noted, the ability to orchestrate successfully the functioning of a middle school depends greatly on organizational as well as people skills. All six of the principals interviewed noted that they had strengths in the people skill area. People skills were mentioned in the lesson categories "Be a Team Player", "Good Relationships With parents Are Important", "Involve Others", and "Learning How to Work with Staff." Bowers (1990), in reviewing a work by Peterson, quotes Peterson as saying that in schools where principals successfully shape the school's culture through a team approach, professionalism and productivity can be fostered. Stear (1991) states that "research has validated the role of effective school administrators/leaders . . . they strive for a team approach where each person has a clearly defined role and is a contributing member of the team . . ." (p. 96). A principal who was interviewed for this study stated: "I think as a leader the one thing you have to do is to realize

that you've got to make the people believe in themselves and be able to do things, buy into it . . . I think everybody out there would say, (I) involved the people that should be involved in anything that goes on in this school."

The six interviewed principals also cited the importance of the skills of keeping an open mind, being receptive to new ideas, and serving others, all of which were prevalent in the "You Are Always Learning" lesson categorization.

Reflective thinking is a practice associated with effective school leaders. All six middle school principals report utilizing reflective practice in their development as middle school leaders. Their use of reflective practice was evident in each of the twenty lesson categorizations. In general, reflective practice entails looking at past experiences and knowledge, integrating these with current practice and thinking and deciding on actions which will accomplish an intended purpose (Hart 1990). An example of reflective practice was noted in one of the interviews:

". . . until I experienced it I really didn't understand that the problems that we have in any one school system are the problems in another school system, too. It is just that the names changed. I began to see the solutions that people were trying elsewhere would work in my own school.

I know that my association with (outside educational groups) has made me a better principal."

Hart (1990) states that "reflective practice can be a key to effective administration" (p. 167). Dewey (1910) stressed the importance of reflective thinking, but noted it is "troublesome because it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance" (p. 13). All of the six principals had endured some mental unrest and disturbance as they developed and as their thinking changed about school administration and their roles within it. As one principal stated: "I went through this metamorphosis, if you will, in terms of how we were going to deal with students . . ."

The lesson categories "Be Decisive", "Be Honest", "Do What Is Best For Kids", and "Do What Is Right" all included situations in which the successful principal took risks. Risk taking has been identified as one characteristic of effective principals. Pellicer (1990) notes that in a study conducted by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), it was found that "effective high school leaders often are high-flying risk takers in their own right" (p. 14). They identify and solve problems and "create opportunities for their staff members to reaffirm

their commitment to serving children . . ." (Pellicer, 1990, p. 15). One principal took a risk in order to improve the instructional program in the school division: "I would like to have been able to do it in another way, but we never seemed to get anybody's attention and now I think we have gotten their attention. What was kind of a bomb shell has hopefully had a positive element as how to approach it." The lesson categories "Take Control" and "Learning How To Work With Staff" also were closely associated with identifying and solving problems for the benefit of the students.

The successful principals interviewed in this study also learned to establish good work habits and priorities so that their professional and personal needs could be met. A middle school principal provided the following example of such a decision: "I've really got to start making some decisions on priorities, on how I want to work and the manner I want to work." Current literature indicates that successful school administrators do take care of their own personal needs. Morehead and Lyman (1990) state that "It's important to work hard, but it's just as important to manage one's personal life effectively. Diet, exercise, rest, sleep, and recreation are all necessary to the emotional and physical-well being of any successful school administrator" (p. 7). Principals interviewed provided specific examples

of negative influences involving smoking, ulcers, a bad marriage, etc., which were hindering their professional and personal well-being. One principal noted: "So, that physical problem made me re-evaluate my work habits and what I would get involved in . . . ." All principals involved realized that they needed to make changes and did so. According to their responses, these six successful principals did take care of their professional and personal needs.

Possession of twelve essential skills is felt by the NASSP to be an indicator that a person has the potential to be a successful school principal. The twelve skill areas are: "problem analysis, judgment, organizational ability, decisiveness, leadership, sensitivity, stress tolerance, oral communication, written communication, range of interests, personal motivation, and educational values" (NASSP, 1991, p. 4). Upon review of the twenty lesson categories from the study of successful middle school principals and the data upon which these categories were based, it was discovered that there were lessons learned by the six principals which related to each of the twelve essential skills of an effective principal, as identified by the NASSP. In fact, the researcher found that each of the twelve skill dimension areas identified by the NASSP contained multiple lesson categories from the middle school

principal study. The NASSP skill areas and the number of lesson categories within each follow: problem analysis - seven, judgement - twelve, organizational ability - five, decisiveness - four, leadership - eleven, sensitivity - nine, stress tolerance - eight, oral and written communication (combined) - two, range of interest - four, personal motivation - three, educational values - six. The NASSP skill areas and the accompanying lesson categories as designated by the researcher are outlined in Table 7.

### Preparation for Principalship

Preparation for a career as a middle school principal was referenced by the principals, through examples provided in all of the event themes. Some events were of a personal, non-work nature, but most concerned on-the-job preparation experiences. Those events mentioned and the lessons learned were significant enough to have played roles in the principals' leadership development. There was no mention by the six principals of leadership development institutes in their backgrounds. None of the six principals indicated that they had attended an NASSP Assessment Center. Other than through references to conferences, no information was shared which indicated that there had been any formalized leadership training experiences. (It should be noted that even though institutes and assessment centers were not

TABLE 7

N.A.S.S.P. SKILLS AREAS

and

MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS STUDY LESSONS CATEGORIES

Problem Analysis

You Are Always Learning  
 Involve Others  
 Do What Is Best For Kids  
 Do What Is Right  
 Know/Be Yourself  
 Effective Teaching For Kids  
 Developed Leadership/Management Style

Judgement

You Are Always Learning  
 Be Decisive  
 Involve Others  
 Do What Is Best For Kids  
 Take Control  
 Do What Is Right  
 Know/Be Yourself  
 Good Relationships With Parents  
   Are Important  
 Be Honest  
 Be Calm  
 Developed Leadership/Management Style  
 Effective Teaching For Kids

Organizational Ability

Involve Others  
 Take Control  
 Learn How To Work With Staff  
 Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities  
 Developed Leadership/Management Style

Decisiveness

Be Decisive  
 Take Control  
 Do What Is Right  
 You Are Always Learning

Oral and Written Communication

You Are Always Learning  
 Learning How To Work With Staff

Range of Interest

You Are Always Learning  
 Find Humor/Fun In Job  
 Know/Be Yourself  
 It Is A Rewarding Job

Leadership

Involve Others  
 Do What Is Best For Kids  
 Take Control  
 Do What Is Right  
 Be Positive  
 Know/Be Yourself  
 Learning How To Work With Staff  
 Good Relationships With  
   Parents Are Important  
 Be Honest  
 Realize That You Are Successful  
 Developed Leadership/Management Style

Sensitivity

You Are Always Learning  
 Involve Others  
 Be A Team Player  
 Be Positive  
 Know/Be Yourself  
 Learning How To Work With Staff  
 Be Honest  
 Be Calm  
 Developed Leadership/Management Style

Stress Tolerance

Be A Team Player  
 Be Positive  
 Know/Be Yourself  
 It Is A Rewarding Job  
 Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities  
 Find Humor/Fun In Job  
 Be Calm  
 Realize That You Are Successful

Personal Motivation

Do What Is Right  
 Know/Be Yourself  
 It Is A Rewarding Job

Educational Values

You Are Always Learning  
 Do What Is Right  
 Know/Be Yourself  
 Find Humor/Fun In Job  
 It Is A Rewarding Job  
 Effective Teaching For Kids

TABLE 7 continued

Stress Tolerance

Be A Team Player

Be Positive

Know/Be Yourself

It Is A Rewarding Job

Personal Motivation

Do What Is Right

Know/Be Yourself

It Is A Rewarding Job

Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities

Find Humor/Fun In Job

Be Calm

Realize That You Are Successful

mentioned by the principals, the six principals could have attended such training activities.)

Statements by several of the principals did indicate that they had to learn administrative and leadership development mainly through on-the-job, "seat-of-the-pants" experiences. Several of the principals indicated that they wished that they had received prior, on-the-job, apprenticeship type leadership training or had been able to closely observe others. Each of the areas mentioned by Blase in the following statement had to be addressed by the middle school principals mainly through their job experiences. Blase (1987) notes ". . . training in communication, conflict management, problem solving, team development, interpersonal and group dynamics would be helpful. Training experiences designed to create self-awareness of an individuals' values, beliefs, and behavior would also be relevant" (p. 608). Each of these areas had proved to be a difficult one with which to deal, for some or all of the principals interviewed. One principal learned about conflict management through experiences: "Because of that procrastination, as a positive side, I never allowed that to happen again. Whether it be custodians, cafeteria people, or teachers, I knew there was conflict. It was a lesson I learned: not to avoid dealing with it, it was very negative at the time, but turned positive for me in the long

term." Experience definitely was the major factor in the development of the successful middle school principals. All of the event themes except "Personal Influence", "Conference" and "Divine Intervention" were filled with learning experiences which occurred on the job. All of the lesson categories contained lessons which were learned through work experience. The fact that experience is important has been substantiated by a number of authors. Troisi and Kidd (1990) quote a former colleague who said "wisdom is the scar tissue of experience" (p. 42). These two educators state that school administrators who fail often do so because of a lack of experience, rather than a lack of technical expertise. Experience in a school setting almost always involves working with people. Troisi and Kidd (1990) note, as did Hughes (1991), that effectively working with people is crucial to being a successful school administrator. Hughes (1991) states that "effective leadership is based on simple relationships with people" (p. 29). The six principals in this study definitely indicated that there were key learning events associated with experience, most of which also dealt with people. Effectively working with people was evidenced in all of the major event themes, except for "Conference" and "Divine Intervention." There were lessons learned associated with working with people in every lesson categorization. Some

principals experienced more traumatic lessons than others in learning how to deal effectively with certain groups of people with whom they worked. One such example from an interviewed principal involved a personnel decision: "I picked up the telephone and I called my supervisor and said 'I can't do this anymore. I am going to recommend that (the teacher) not be, not return next year. You all can do what you want to do, but I can't put on paper that this teacher should return.' So basically, it was against what the central office wanted to do because politically it was a lose/lose situation."

References to mentors were made by several principals when they talked about lessons and events which involved role models and colleagues. Mentoring as a principal preparation tool also has been somewhat evident in the literature. Playko (1990) points out the value of mentoring since "it is a way one person is able to say to another that he or she is 'worth it' and that he or she may succeed" (p. 32). Daresh and Playko (1990) described the positive impact of a mentorship program: "Mentors believe that people who participate in this type of program became more visibly goal-directed, increasingly serious about the importance of detail, reflective and certain of their commitment to educational leadership as a career goal" (p. 52). Hart (1991) also described the importance of mentoring in leader

succession and socialization. While none of the six principals indicated that they were in a specific mentorship program, all did mention that a mentor or role model had a significant impact on their career as a successful school administrator. Obviously, this occurred within the event theme of "Role Models/Colleague Support", as well as in the event theme "Personal Influence." One middle school principal gave credit to a former boss: "He has been such a mentor as far as instruction is concerned." Lesson categories in which there were mentors who played a significant role were: "Be Calm", "Do What Is Best For Kids", "Do What Is Right", "Developed Leadership/Management Style", "Establish Good Work Habits/Priorities", "Involve Others", "Take Control" and "You Are Always Learning." The importance of mentoring was definitely evident in the development of these six principals.

### Summary

In summary, statements made by the six principals indicated that they possessed qualities of instructional leaders and were effective managers of time. From the experiences they related, the principals knew how to work with different constituencies and programs, indicated that they had the ability to orchestrate the many diverse elements of a middle school and claimed to have the

appropriate people skills to be successful. These principals felt that they utilized a team approach to leadership, where there was an openness to ideas of others. The characteristics of reflective thinking, risk taking and the ability to shape the image of the school were all indicated to be possessed by the six principals, based on their responses. Additionally, the principal's statements seem to denote a balance between their professional and personal needs. After comparing the responses of the interviewed principals and the NASSP data, the principals interviewed also seemed to possess the twelve skill areas identified by the NASSP as being essential skills of an effective principal.

The data from the interviews also indicated that these six effective principals believed that preparation for a career as a school administrator was based on experiential learning, not on formal training, coursework or mentoring programs. For these middle school principals, on-the-job, "seat-of-the-pants" experiences and the lessons learned from them were the significant factors contributing to preparation for school leadership roles. While training or other forms of preparation might appear to be appropriate and logical, the six principals interviewed for this study seemed to recognize that the lessons learned from experience were the lessons which had made them successful.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

#### Conclusions

The six Virginia middle school principals who were interviewed for this study all noted lessons learned from certain significant events or experiences in their lives and careers. I believe that these events and the lessons did prove to be crucial in the way in which the six principals run their schools.

These principals, who were identified as being the most successful middle school principals in Virginia, noted through their comments that the lessons were learned principally from events which occurred on the job. There was no mention of any impact on the way in which they led their schools due to coursework. There was also no mention of assessor training or other formalized training programs in their backgrounds. Other than a few references to experiences at conferences, all of the significant events mentioned by the principals dealt with situations and people in the job setting.

Likewise, the twenty lesson categories, which included many individual lessons, were the result of learning experiences which had occurred on the job and in their personal lives. These lessons not only impacted on the way

in which the principals led their schools, but also their values, work habits, and fundamental thinking about what schools should be. Events and the lessons learned from them result both from negative and positive experiences and from bad and good relationships with people with whom they work. Principals learned what works and what doesn't work in particular situations. Principals also learned to observe more carefully in order to be prepared for future events with which they might have to deal and how to recover and survive from mistakes they made. Principals learned to know themselves better and to adjust their personal and work lives so that both could be meaningful. Many of the lessons were learned with great difficulty, and at great personal loss in several instances.

Throughout all of the interviews, there were certain elements that were obvious from the statements by the principals: (1) the middle school principal must deal with diverse and complex situations, almost all of which involve people; (2) there are hardships involved in their development; (3) there is a gain in confidence; (4) credit for success is shared; and (5) learning occurs mostly out of necessity.

Regardless of the background of the principals interviewed, dealing with diversity seemed a common ingredient in administrative development. Principals

provided the following examples: (1) "I think building a school plant and focusing in on the different entities or organizations and everthing you have to pull together to bring about conterns . . . was very challenging," (2) "I had to fire the assistant principal - that was probably the biggest challenge." A similar theme was noted in the Center for Creative Leadership study as described in The Lessons of Experience (1988):

"It would seem that neither exposure without accountability nor small increases in responsibility are as valuable developmentally as diversity in the types of assignments. They don't offer what is most important in development -- jobs that demand dealing with sudden, unexpected changes or that call for skills that the manager doesn't have. The essence of development is that diversity and adversity beat repetition every time. The most dramatic the change in skill demands, the more severe the personnel problem, the more the bottom line pressure, and the more sinuous and unexpected the turns in the road, the more opportunity there is for learning. Unappealing as they may seem, being shocked and pressured and having problems with other people teach most. For future executives, comfortable circumstances are hardly the road to the top" (p. 58).

Some of the lessons learned by the six middle school principals involved hardships. Principals noted that hardships sometimes occurred because they did what was right:

". . .there were times I felt that we stand up for things that were right for kids or stand up, take a position against a parent who was wrong and to stand up for what we believed and there were times when I felt we did a 'soft shoe' and the child did not benefit because there were times maybe we were too concerned how we were viewed by the central office. I guess I learned that there are times you have to stand up for something even if it is a lose/lose situation for you personally, because if you don't do that, after a while you stand for nothing and I could not live that way."

The lessons learned through hardships in the school setting paralleled those noted in the Center for Creative Leadership Study: "The value they (hardships) offer is that there is meaning in suffering. Those who struggle through them can emerge with a clear view of themselves and what is important to them in life." (McCall, et al, 1988, pp. 119).

The six principals all seemed to have gained confidence in their jobs through their career and personal experiences. Even though the principals felt and knew that they were

successful, none seemed to feel that they had arrived. Humility, sensitivity towards others, and an awareness of who they are seemed to have been by-products of the realization of their success. None of the principals made statements which indicated an arrogant nature or attitude as a result of their success.

All of the principals interviewed gave credit for their success to others. Being willing to openly share the credit for their success with important people in their careers seemed to be natural and sincere for these principals. These feelings also were evident as the principals spoke about those in their non-work lives who had helped them to be successful.

These middle school principals learned the lessons of experience well. The fact that they did learn through experience, were able to survive, and to be identified as successful middle school principals, is a tribute to these individuals. Whether or not other individuals in similar roles would have succeeded given the same experiences is not known. The learning that occurred was often done out of necessity and applied appropriately by most of these six individuals:

"In doing that, I had to acquire a lot of skills quickly and my mentor at that time was very astute in building the master schedule and as I ran into

obstacles, he was able to get me over some hurdles and to give me some advice on how to deal with certain issues in building a master schedule. That was a very enlightening experience."

Executives noted in The Lessons of Experience (1988) that they learned out of necessity:

"Because of the demanding nature of these assignments, learning was not a nicety -- something to be done out of interest or because it might be helpful. Learning was something that these managers did because they had little choice but to take action -- stab at problems even if they weren't sure what they were doing because doing nothing was surely unacceptable. They did quick studies on unfamiliar topics, tried something, and learned from how it came out. They learned where they could, when they could, from whom they could" (p. 63).

These principals believe that the key events and the lessons learned through these events have made a difference in the way these middle school principals lead their schools. Based upon the comments of the principals interviewed, these events and the lessons learned will continue to be fresh in their minds and, along with other. Should the six principals choose to continue to utilize their experiences and lessons, then the events and lessons can provide clear direction for their future endeavors.

### Recommendations of the Study

This study is significant as it relates to career development of principals in school divisions. The question of how school divisions can use these key events and lessons learned in career development programs is an issue which needs to be addressed.

While the problem of career development has been examined by the Center for Creative Leadership Study, by John Kotter and others, their ideas do not exactly fit the organizational structure of a public school or a public school system; however, there are some similarities which can be noted.

### Recommendations For Practice

School divisions can make sure that the opportunity exists for identification of teachers and assistant principals who have certain experiences which relate to those identified in this study. Principals in individual schools or designated central office personnel could establish a means of judging how individuals have dealt with change, personnel problems, role models and colleagues with whom individuals have been associated, student success, and success with parents. Conferences and workshops attended could be monitored to determine what specific individuals learned from such meetings. Responsibilities provided for

teachers could be monitored closely for determination of possible eligibility for an administrative role. As an example, work as a grade level or department chairman, as the chairman of a special task force within a school or as a committee chairman all could be utilized as a component in a preparation program stressing practice. Certainly, any unusually difficult experiences in which the teacher achieves success could be noted.

Unlike business, it is more difficult for school divisions and schools to move teachers from one department to another or from one situation to another to "fix" a bad situation or to start a new program from scratch, with almost no notice and no resources. However, teachers and assistant principals could be placed in certain assignments at times which would test their abilities in handling specific situations.

As an example, if there is a difficult situation where strong people skills are needed by an administrator, then an assistant principal who had demonstrated the same strengths in this area might be transferred. Such experiences in different roles could provide opportunities for school personnel to broaden their experiences and to be challenged. A key point in leadership development in business or schools is to remember the necessity of "keeping an eye peeled for

opportunities to let talented people grow" (McCall, et al, 1988, p. 185).

One similar means of executive or administrative development which should be utilized by both the private sector and by public schools is to focus on the individual. There is no substitute for knowing the people with whom one works. Each individual has unique characteristics which include certain strengths and certain weaknesses. Individuals should be placed in developmental assignments, according to their individual characteristics. The value of this development tool was noted in The Lessons of Experience (1988): "The most sophisticated information system is no substitute for firsthand, direct knowledge, and an individualistic system will have ways of keeping the high potentials visible to important decision-makers" (pp. 185-186).

Another career development practice for potential school administrators would provide for opportunities for success, rather than to have the school organization control the process. Such opportunities could be provided by allowing: (1) people to stretch their abilities; (2) mistakes to be made; and (3) time for reflection.

School divisions or schools can provide opportunities for people to stretch their abilities, when the demands of a job necessitate new and creative ways of thinking about

problems. Achieving success in such an endeavor could provide the teacher the exposure as a high potential person.

Schools must provide an environment which does allow for failure so that potential administrators will realize that mistakes can and will be made. They should be told that mistakes are normal and that there are lessons which can be learned from them, which will make the persons better future administrators.

Providing time for reflection should be a goal of schools planning administrative development programs. If such provisions were made, then the lessons of experience might be utilized to better analyze their meaning and their impact on the careers of the individuals involved. With the unique nature of schools, it might be more difficult than in business to secure some time for reflection. However, "Success and pace together are dangerous to growth if not punctuated with some time to consolidate learning . . . it is staggering to think how much experience is wasted simply because managers aren't allowed, or forced, to stop and make sense of what happened" (McCall, et al, 1988, pp. 187-188).

### Recommendations for Research

This was a preliminary study involving six middle school principals in the Commonwealth of Virginia. This study provided some possible answers to why certain school

principals are successful in their jobs. Further research should be conducted to add to the findings. There are different variables at which a future researcher might look. Sex, age, ethnicity, and region of the state were variables which were not addressed in this study.

### Summary

As noted by the key events and the lessons learned in the study, significant learning does take place on the job, through real-life experiences. This study concludes that administrative development programs should be structured so that there is on-the-job learning, facilitated through real-life experiences. However, in order to do this, it will be necessary to make better use of such experiences.

"This means finding better ways to identify developmentally significant jobs, to move the right people to them, and to help talented people learn from them. How well these things are done is far more important than how formal or elegant the procedures are" (McCall, et al, 1988, p. 188).

Some school divisions have not formally addressed this issue, even though there probably have been individual instances where events and lessons learned have been utilized in considering personnel for administrative positions. It is felt that much could be gained in the

field of school administrative development, if programs involving on the job, real-life experiences were in place in all school divisions.

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**APPENDIX A**

WORK LOCATIONS OF THE MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPALS INTERVIEWED



**APPENDIX B**

Dear

I would greatly appreciate your assistance in a study I am undertaking. You were suggested as someone who would be knowledgeable about the area in which I am interested.

It would be most helpful if you could provide me with the names of those people whom you feel are the most successful middle school principals in Virginia. The only criteria for selection of the principals will be that these middle school principals named truly fit your perception of a successful principal. It would be wonderful if you could provide 12 to 15 names.

Once I have received names from you and other knowledgeable individuals, then I shall review all names submitted. From those names provided to me, I shall determine the principals to be interviewed for my study.

Enclosed is a form to use to list the principals. Also included is an envelope in which you can send the list.

It would be very helpful if I could receive your list by August 18. I sincerely apologize for the short notice of this request.

Should you have any questions, then please call me at work or home. I shall be working from 8:00 A.M. 6:00 P.M., Monday - Friday each week. The number at the School Board Office is (703)659-3141. My home telephone is (703)373-0580.

I thank you for any assistance you can provide. I shall look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Samuel E. Perry, Jr.  
Assistant Superintendent for  
Administration & Personnel

/dsc  
Enclosures

July 30, 1993

The Most Successful Middle School Principals in Virginia

	<u>Name</u>	<u>School Division</u>	<u>School (If Known)</u>
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			
9.			
10.			
11.			
12.			
13.			
14.			
15.			

---

Person Submitting Names

**APPENDIX C**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

### Background Information

1. Number of years as a middle school principal \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Number of years in your present school \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Number of years in school administration \_\_\_\_\_.

(Please list positions, length of service in each, and school division(s), other than your present position.)

4. In what year did your current school become a middle school? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
6. What is the enrollment of your school? \_\_\_\_\_
7. How many classroom teachers are in your school? \_\_\_\_\_
8. Is there an assistant principal in your school? \_\_\_\_\_  
If so, how many assistant principals are assigned to your school? \_\_\_\_\_
9. What is your highest academic degree? \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX D**

## Interview Format\*

### Preparation for Section I

When you think about your career as a manager, certain events or episodes probably stand out in your mind -- things that led to a lasting change in your approach to management. Please jot down some notes for yourself identifying at least three "key events" in your career: things that made a difference in the way you manage. When we meet with you, we'll ask you about each event:

1. What happened?
2. What did you learn from it (for better or worse)?

### Section II: Key Events

Having talked about key events that really stood out for you, we'll now address some things that may or may not have had a lasting effect on you. Because our time is limited, I need your help in controlling it. As you look over the questions, some are no doubt more meaningful to you than others. Please be prepared to go into some depth on the important ones, and comment briefly on the others. Still other questions may have been answered in the first section.

#### A. Rites of Passage

1. What was your first managerial job? Was there anything special about it? About your first boss?
2. What was your first "quantum leap" -- movement to a job with significantly more responsibility/challenge/pressure than prior jobs?
3. What was your first important exposure to high-level executives? Have there been others that stand out for you?
4. What was your "organizational first date" -- like your first real date, a time when you were all alone and had to take complete responsibility for something you'd never done before?
5. What was the biggest challenge you ever faced in your career?
6. What was your most frightening first -- something you did for the first time in your career that really had you worried?
7. What event (or events) in your career made you realize you were going to be successful as a manager? In this organization?

#### B. Rising from the Ashes

1. What was your darkest hour?
2. What was a significant near miss-- a time when you tried something and failed?

3. Describe a time when you pushed things to the brink-- that is, a time when you stretched the system by coming perilously close to violating rules, norms, or authority.
  4. What was your most significant act of procrastination in your career? By this I mean a time when you didn't face up to a situation that got steadily worse, resulting in a mess.
  5. Do you recall a time at work when you had the rug pulled out from under you -- a situation when you had everything ready to go and the door was slammed shut?
  6. Were you ever worn out or fed up in your career, but managed to restart?
  7. Did you ever learn a great truth that turned out to be a falsehood? That is, was there ever a case where you thought you'd learned something significant, but later found out it wasn't so?
  8. Was there a situation you took very seriously at the time, but were able to laugh about months (or years) later?
- C. The Role of Other People**
1. Please describe the person who taught you the most during your career. What did that person do that made him or her so special?
  2. Most of us have worked for a person we simply couldn't tolerate for one reason or another. What did you learn from such an experience?
  3. What was your most significant interpersonal conflict -- a situation in which dealing with another person (or persons) was very difficult for you?

#### Section III: General Questions

1. Overall, how have you changed, plus and minus, over your career? If you ran into someone who knew you well years ago, what differences would that person notice?
2. Are there times when you've been more open to learning than others? More closed?
3. Have events in your personal life played a part in your growth as a manager?
4. What about being a manager been fun for you? What are some examples of situations or events you particularly enjoyed? That were the most fun?
5. What advice would you give to a younger manager about managing his or her career? What do you need to do for yourself? How much should you let others do for you (or to you)?
6. What is the most significant thing you've learned as an adult -- the one thing you'd pass on to someone else if you could?
7. What's next? Are you facing a situation now from which you expect to learn something new?

\*These interview questions were from questions utilized in a private sector study, as reported in The Lessons of Experience, McCall et al., 1988.

**APPENDIX E**

Explanation of the Utilization of  
The Ethnograph: A Users' Guide

1. Collect & Select: Collect data through interviews.
2. Transcribe: Type on word processor, from tapes made during interviews.
3. Convert: Convert document to usable Ethnograph program form.
4. Number & Print: Using The Ethnograph, number the lines of the text and print it.
5. Code Mapping: Using the printed copy as a scratch copy, on which one can mark up, make notes, underline, highlight, etc. Suggested event categories would be noted in the margins. All of this is done without compromising the original record.
6. Enter Codes: Allows the numbering of start and stop lines for each segment that one wishes to code and name in a particular way either for events or lessons learned.
7. Search: Search the various documents by use of a single code word or multiple words (event categories/themes/lessons suggested by the two reviewers and me).
8. Reflect: Reflect on what was found from the search.
9. Modify Codes: Decide which code words are useful and/or add or delete code words.
10. Re-Search: Search again to make sure that no appropriate data was missed.
11. Report: Type report, putting the whole story together and revealing the finds.

VITA

SAMUEL EASTBURN PERRY, JR.

Address: 19 Ridgemore Circle  
Fredericksburg, Virginia 22405  
Date of Birth: May 4, 1945

EDUCATION

Current Doctoral Candidate  
Virginia Polytechnic & State University  
M.Ed., Educational Administration - 1974  
University of Richmond  
B.A., History - 1976  
University of Richmond

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Assistant Superintendent for Administration/Personnel  
Stafford County Public Schools - January, 1992 - Present  
Acting Superintendent  
Stafford County Public Schools - July, 1991 - December, 1991  
Director of Personnel  
Stafford County Public Schools - 1986 - 1991  
Director of Elementary Education  
Stafford County Public Schools - 1985 - 1986

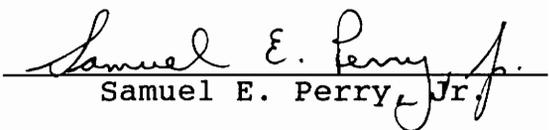
Principal - Stafford Elementary School  
Stafford County Public Schools - 1975 - 1985  
Assistant Principal - Falmouth Elementary School  
Stafford County Public Schools - 1972 - 1975  
Teacher - 6th Grade  
Stafford County Public Schools - 1967 - 1972

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION

Phi Delta Kappa  
Kappa Delta Phi  
Virginia Association of School Personnel Administrators  
(VASPA)  
American Association of School Personnel Administrators  
(AASPA)  
American Association of School Administrators (AASA)

PROFESSIONAL INVOLVEMENT

Initiated formation of local Phi Delta Kappa Chapter  
Officer and Board Member of local Phi Delta Kappa Chapter  
Presenter at two AASPA conferences  
Former Board Member and Vice President of Virginia  
Association of Elementary School Principals

  
Samuel E. Perry Jr.