

*There will always be a need for excellent school leaders. Bret Anderson is one of these, as his career shows. In *Urban Principal: Leadership Lessons*, Anderson shares what he has learned as an educator, leader and long term administrator.*

Urban Principal: Leadership Lessons

By Bret Allan Anderson

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13300.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

URBAN PRINCIPAL

Leadership Lessons

The background of the cover features a silhouette of a city skyline against a vibrant sunset sky. The sky is filled with horizontal streaks of orange, red, and yellow, suggesting a bright sun low on the horizon. The skyline is dark and includes several prominent buildings, with the most notable one being a tall skyscraper with two sharp spires, characteristic of the Willis Tower in Chicago.

BRET ALLAN ANDERSON

Copyright © 2024 Bret Allan Anderson

Print ISBN: 978-1-958891-92-6

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-668-2

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2024

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Anderson, Bret Allan

Urban Principal: Leadership Lessons by Bret Allan Anderson

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023923371

DISCLAIMER

This book details the author's personal experiences with and opinions about health. The author is not a licensed medical professional.

The author and publisher are providing this book and its contents on an "as is" basis and make no representations or warranties of any kind with respect to this book or its contents. The author and publisher disclaim all such representations and warranties, including for example warranties of merchantability and medical advice for a particular purpose. In addition, the author and publisher do not represent or warrant that the information accessible via this book is accurate, complete or current.

The statements made about products and services have not been evaluated by the U.S. government. Please consult with your own legal, accounting, medical, or other licensed professional regarding the suggestions and recommendations made in this book.

Except as specifically stated in this book, neither the author or publisher, nor any authors, contributors, or other representatives will be liable for damages arising out of or in connection with the use of this book. This is a comprehensive limitation of liability that applies to all damages of any kind, including (without limitation) compensatory; direct, indirect or consequential damages; loss of data, income or profit; loss of or damage to property and claims of third parties.

You understand that this book is not intended as a substitute for consultation with a licensed medical, legal or accounting professional. Before you begin any change to your lifestyle in any way, you will consult a licensed professional to ensure that you are doing what's best for your situation.

This book provides content related to medical topics. As such, use of this book implies your acceptance of this disclaimer.

Testimonials and What People Are Saying About Bret Anderson

“I have known Bret for the three years I have been assigned to the Southeast Precinct. As the principal of Indian Hill School, he has had to deal with extraordinary problems relating to safety. He has dealt with neighborhood violence, shots fired near the school, trespassers, drug dealers, and graffiti. His influence has created a zone of safety not only in his assigned school, but in the neighborhood surrounding the school as well. Drug dealers have lined some streets that children had to walk on their way home. The drug dealers had been kicked out of the nearby public housing development and had to move to locations closer to school. Bret actually escorts his students past these areas until they are safely home. This is far beyond the requirements of his job, yet he does it anyway. Working with police, he reported up-to-date information that helped focus police efforts on eliminating the drug dealing...I’ve found Bret working long after one would think he should have gone home. During all this, he has maintained a positive, forward-thinking attitude. Bret opens Indian Hill School for neighborhood meetings and participates actively in the South Omaha Project Impact Working Team. This team is comprised of police, government, and community leaders, and develops strategies to improve the neighborhood. Bret helped conceive and lead initiatives such as Meet the Challenge - Know Your Neighbors and South Omaha Impact Walking the Talk. These initiatives allowed law-abiding residents to set the tone and helped to replace drug activity and violent crime with a much healthier neighborhood atmosphere. Bret’s

commitment to the Indian Hill neighborhood is well known and has been extremely effective.”

Mark Sundermeier (2002)

*Former Southeast Precinct Captain, Community & School Supporter
Omaha Police Department*

“I have known Mr. Anderson personally and professionally for nearly 20 years. I met him while I was working for the Omaha Police Department, and he was principal at Indian Hill Elementary School. We were administering the Police Athletic League recreation program, and I could observe his commitment to his students’ personal growth and development. He also had an excellent relationship with his staff, and he was active in the community.

Throughout his 20 years as a Principal, Mr. Anderson has distinguished himself as an administrator and leader, and he has been an exceptional representative of the Omaha Public Schools (OPS) District. He has led the Wilson Focus School since its inception, which has become a model program for the Douglas - Sarpy County Learning Community. He has earned the respect of his peers and colleagues, and he has coached and mentored several current OPS administrators.”

Thomas H. Warren, Sr. (2017)

*Chief of Staff for City of Omaha; Former President/CEO Urban
League of Nebraska; Omaha Chief of Police*

“Bret's training was inspiring and really helped to set the positive tone for the year. It meshed perfectly with the philosophy that we are creating here at Walnut Hill. To hear Bret speak about his experiences and to learn how he applied strategies to real-life situations was not

only helpful but left us wanting more. Thank you Bret for sharing your expertise and knowledge with us!”

Nikki Longlee (2022)

*Principal, Walnut Hill Elementary; Former Assistant Principal,
Gateway and Saddlebrook Elementary Schools;
Teacher, Indian Hill, Omaha Public Schools*

“As the counselor of the school, I have worked with Mr. Anderson closely and have found him to be the epitome of what a prominent leader is. His vision for the school has been embraced by the staff, parents and students. He is consistently affirming of staff, parents and students; yet can step in and effectively coach staff, parents and students when the situation necessitates it. He has an open door policy which is inviting and ensures that small problems are resolved before turning into larger ones. The staff, parents and students trust him and truly work as a team.

He is inspirational in the manner in which he manages the school functioning. He is always calm, positive, and organized. This creates a school culture that is safe and confident. His high expectations of appropriate behavior and academic success, backed by a solid foundation of research, have resulted in a respectful school climate and higher test scores each year. He effectively achieves short and long term goals for Wilson Focus School. His expertise is also exhibited in the many requests for his participation on Omaha Public Schools

Bret Allan Anderson

boards, district-wide school coaching opportunities, and mentoring involvement. He is a recognized outstanding leader in the district.”

Pam Schiffbauer, Ed. D. (2019)
School Counselor, Wilson Focus School, Omaha Public Schools;
Former Principal in Parochial School

“Thank you for allowing your students from Wilson Focus Elementary School to be involved in the City of Omaha’s MLK celebration. Events like this that bring the city together to celebrate our common American heritage are a great example of what makes Omaha a great place to live, work and play. I deeply appreciate your help in making MLK Day a huge success in our city.

As a civic leader who understands the value of a quality education for every child, I am very proud of the reputation for academic excellence that Wilson Focus Elementary School has earned under your leadership. In particular, I congratulate you and the rest of the Wilson Focus community for your technology program recently being recognized as an Apple Distinguished Program. Once again, thank you for joining us at Omaha’s MLK celebration and for all the hard work that you do to make your school a leader in public education in our great city.”

Jim Suttle (2013)
Mayor, City of Omaha

“I am elated to tell you that I will be the Principal at Lewis & Clark Elementary in Council Bluffs next year. It is a small building that will

be going into Behavior Support Programs next year. When I look back on my educational journey, you were such a foundation for me. Your passion and desire to constantly improve gave me a solid model to follow. You were and continue to be a principal that guides with creativity, care and concern for all students. Thank you for being there for me when I began my teaching career. Thank you for believing in me to hire me on after I student taught under you. Thank you for giving me a chance at the counselor position when I had zero experience. Thank you for letting me in and allowing me to support the leadership team while I was at Indian Hill. Thank you for your support when I married Tim and started my life with him. Thank you for supporting me even when I no longer worked under you!!! Thank you. Thank you. Thank you!”

Teresa Hamilton (2017)

*Principal, Carter Lake and Lewis & Clark Elementary Schools,
Council Bluffs Community Schools; Former Assistant Principal,
Former Counselor; Teacher; Student Teacher, Indian Hill
Elementary School, Omaha Public Schools*

“Bret Anderson is one of the finest principals I have had the pleasure of working with in my career. He genuinely cares about students and staff. He is highly visible and interacts with both students and staff each day. He knows the students by name and interests. He is always there for staff. It is a joy to work in an environment like Wilson Focus School. He is fantastic!”

Teacher Comment from District Climate Survey (2017)

Bret Allan Anderson

“You have made such an empowering positive influence on so many people through creating a one-of-a-kind school. I am one of those who are grateful for all that you have taught me. You are the best, hands down.”

Scott Hilger (2019)

*Assistant Principal, Highland Elementary School;
Former Teacher, Wilson Focus School, Omaha Public Schools*

“Hi Bret! You have been instrumental in my development and approach to being a principal. The Gordon book you gifted me was a great resource for me to refer to as I developed my why regarding the principalship. I’ve never forgotten it! You will be missed but never forgotten!”

Glenn Mitchell (2019)

*Principal, Harrison Elementary School;
Former Principal, Jesuit Academy; Assistant Principal, Creighton
Preparatory School; Teacher, Wilson Focus School,
Omaha Public Schools*

“Mr. Anderson, I would like to thank you for being willing to come to Belvedere (referring to subbing for a principal). Although I know the school is challenging, you have come in ready to take the bull by the

horn. Greatly appreciated! If I can assist in anyway, please let me know.”

*Salema Stewart-Hunter (2019)
Provisionally Licensed Mental Health Practitioner, Behavioral
Health Advocate
Belvedere Elementary School, Omaha Public Schools*

"You have grown and mentored so many leaders in this district! You are so knowledgeable, levelheaded, and can see the bigger picture. You have always known how to work collaboratively with all building staff, district, and community members. You get things done and don't rely on what has always been done before. I remember the time at Indian Hill, from the beginning, and watched you turn that place around and build back the trust of the teachers, students and neighborhood.”

*Melissa Schroeder (2014)
Instructional Research Administrator, Former Elementary
Curriculum Consultant; Instructional Facilitator; Teacher;
Indian Hill Elementary School, Omaha Public Schools*

“Wilson is such an impressive school, and I am happy that we can be a part of your success...by speaking out and educating the community,

Bret Allan Anderson

we can work to make a stronger majority. Thank you for taking the lead and showing all of us how to create a No Place for Hate school.”

Jessica Gall (2012)

Senior Associate Regional Director of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) of Midwest, Former ADL/Community Relations Committee (CRC) Plains States Education Director

“...Wilson has featured strong leadership, high performing teachers, extensive enrichment opportunities, and an intense focus on technology and leadership, including laptops for every student and a student-run television studio. Most encouragingly, the students have achieved great results in reading, math and science....”

“...On behalf of the Empowerment Network and our community partners, we want to thank you for your outstanding presentations this past Saturday at our monthly community meeting. The insights you provided were encouraging, inspiring and challenging. Hopefully, you could sense how well the audience received your comments. We all took extensive notes that we will report back to our various organizations and partners. Our goal is to see the pace of innovation accelerated throughout OPS. We appreciate all of you dedicating your Saturday morning to helping us gain more insights on your models for success. We look forward to working with each of you. And thank you for the work you do every single day to EMPOWER students, families, teachers and the entire community.”

Willie Barney (2015-2016)

CEO, Empowerment Network, Former Focus School Parent, President & Co-Publisher Revive Magazine, Civic Leader/Community Advocate

“I have had the privilege to call Mr. Anderson my colleague for the past 13 years. During this time, I have served on various committees with Mr. Anderson. He is always a leader, offering suggestions and new ideas. I am aware of the great work he has done as Principal of Indian Hill Elementary and in his position as the Principal of Wilson Focus School. In his tenure at Wilson Focus, he has “broken the mold” extending both the school day and school year along with partnering with a large number of agencies and adapting new ideas to engage students. In each venue, Mr. Anderson shares his passion and continuously takes on new challenges. He advocates for both students and staff and is the type of administrator colleagues seek out. Mr. Anderson is a hardworking individual who always puts students first. He reflects a true instructional leader. He leads professional development and seeks out best practices to increase academic excellence in each school he has led. He is a visionary leader who is not afraid to think outside the box. Mr. Anderson’s tenacity to achieve academic success for each student, along with innovation, are areas that make him well respected by many colleagues. “

Susan M. Aguilera-Robles (2017)

Associate Director of Program Development at Buffett Early Childhood Institute; Former Community Relations, Outreach Coordinator, City of Omaha; Principal, Spring Lake Magnet Center, Omaha Public Schools

“Bret Anderson is a high-quality administrator and educator. He has an incredible working relationship with his impressive teaching staff and is one of the best conflict resolution experts I have seen. We had a particular issue with one of the teachers and he helped resolve it very quickly.”

Parent Comment from District Climate Survey (2017)

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Taking the Reigns as Principal.....	9
Chapter 2: Getting the Job: Marketing Yourself.....	13
Chapter 3: Developing a Mission and Vision.....	15
Chapter 4: Creating a Culture of Success.....	27
Chapter 5: Cultivating Community Partnerships	53
Chapter 6: Fostering Strong Relationships.....	75
Chapter 7: Introducing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports	83
Chapter 8: Getting Things Done.....	115
Chapter 9: Doing What is Best for Children	123
Chapter 10: Motivating Staff in Effective Ways	131
Chapter 11: Mentoring New Leaders	147
Chapter 12: Launching Instruction / Assessment / Coaching.....	157
Chapter 13: Establishing Professional Development	167
Chapter 14: Embracing Diversity	173
Chapter 15: Branding and Marketing.....	179
Chapter 16: Organizing with Intention.....	185
Chapter 17: Facilitating Difficult Conversations.....	197
Chapter 18: Starting School Improvement	213
Chapter 19: Forming The Focus School as a National Model	219

Chapter 20: The Big Three - Relationships, Opportunities, and Freedom.....	259
Chapter 21: Challenging Leadership	267
Chapter 22: Sharing Lessons Learned	273
Chapter 23: Unfolding Successes	281
Chapter 24: Balancing Your Life	291
Chapter 25: Making Meaningful Changes.....	305
Afterword.....	311
References / Favorite Resources.....	315
About The Author	327

“Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.”

— *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Introduction

There will always be a need for excellent school leaders. The role of the principal, specifically, is demanding and encompasses a wide range of skills. We need more support for those serving in this role. Building leadership capacity is where my heart lies and why I wrote this book. I have 31 years of experience as an educator and administrator--21 of which were as a principal. I can offer support to other leaders based on this experience.

The Omaha Public School System (OPS) has over 51,000 students and is a diverse urban district, with almost 40,000 in poverty--the highest percentage in the state. Over 9,000 students make up the average special education population. There are over 11,000 English Language Learners, including 2,200 refugees. The district also serves students of 107 different languages. The urban population in this midwest state faces many challenges that people don't realize.

Anyone in a leadership position can learn effective practices from this book, although it is largely aimed at education leaders. After retiring as a principal from an innovative school, I offer practical tools to principals through consulting. There is an ever-increasing need for principal support and the development of leadership capacity. As a principal, I became a problem-solver and coach, a mentor developing leaders along the way. This is my genuine passion, and an area in which most districts could do a much better job. The principal's role is critical in the success of a building or organization, and effective

leadership is key. Many consultants don't have enough experience as principals before going to central office roles. People listen better to those who have experience in their role and have a lot of knowledge.

As a new administrator, my first role was in a large facility with mostly low-income students (89%), ranging from pre-K to 6th grade, and an enrollment of 675. We reduced the school's mobility rate from 59% to 39%. The academics were low, and this was an area we would change as well. This became my home for 10 years—one year as an assistant principal and the rest as the principal. This experience was a perfect way to hone my skills and develop successful leadership techniques. That introductory quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson eventually became one of my mantras, and found its way onto the wall in the Focus School I later helped create. Experience truly matters, and it is the number one ingredient in shaping effective leadership.

I started my career as an art teacher at McMillan Middle School and King Science Center at Mann (fourth through eighth grade). I taught eight periods a day: four to fourth through sixth graders and four to seventh through eighth graders. It was a grueling day with little plan time as the travel consumed much of it. Luckily, I only had to do it for my first year because I accepted a full-time position at King Science Center the following year and worked there for 10 years. I learned the art of teaching a diverse population of students with many needs. I always looked for ways to do things better and use my strengths. Achiever is one of my top themes of talent in StrengthsFinder (rebranded as the Clifton Strengths Assessment) and a driving force in many of the things I do.

My achiever again kicked in when I began working on my master's degree in administration and supervision. I searched for opportunities to grow and develop leadership skills while teaching. I started

devouring leadership books and studied effective leaders. I loved studying what makes people tick and how to lead and motivate them effectively. This became and is still a passion of mine—even a hobby, my wife, Ingra, would say. She has spent the better part of our over 30 years of marriage watching me begin and end most days reading leadership books.

While teaching, I looked for opportunities to grow. I developed a weight-training program for at-risk students, wrote grants and looked for ways to gain experience. My responsibilities included lunch supervision, school committee chairing, district committee membership, and curriculum/test writing. I was a typical, excited, and highly involved teacher. I designed a logo for Positive Peer Culture and led one of these groups, geared at helping students navigate the challenges of middle school.

I created a sculpture for the school at which I taught. The sculpture endeavor was a valuable experience which allowed me to be creative, and lead a project from inception to completion. The sculpture journey began when I heard the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) wanted to purchase a sculpture for the courtyard. I jumped right in with a design, created a set of drawings with specs, and presented my idea to the principal, who approved it. To follow up, I presented to the PTA board to explain my concept, and the proposal was well-accepted. They thought it was a great idea to use an existing teacher in the design of this art element representing the school. They funded the materials, and I received the experience of managing a project—no pay involved, but it helped our school, and I gained experience. My design ended up being a 14-foot modern symbolic rocket going through the clouds, promoting our school's science magnet theme. I crafted the rocket from large metal heavy gauge sheets. I worked with a local welding company—Ace Welding—as we created the sculpture from large

templates I made from brown craft paper. They painted it a dark blue, and it is still there today, symbolizing a science theme in the school courtyard. We completed it in 1990 and you can see it at King Science Center at Mann.

Once your principal knows you are interested in developing as a leader, they often assign duties to help you gain experience and growth. This is especially true if he or she is an active developer of leaders, secure in their own leadership and willing to mentor and support your advancement. Some people are insecure or controlling, which is not helpful. Abraham Lincoln reinforces this point by saying, “All men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man’s character, give him power.”

I continued to develop from a variety of opportunities. I took part in two college practicum sessions, shadowing excellent principals. Through these experiences, I gained insight into the reality of urban education. I sought principals who excelled in overseeing finances, managing behavior, and showing strong leadership. Their schools were my classrooms. My goal was to learn the most effective leadership skills I could from them. When I graduated with my advanced degree, I had a master’s degree in administration and supervision with a K-12 endorsement. This double-practicum gave me extra experiences and made me more marketable.

I had been in the classroom for three years. I had also taught in a unique summer school program called Creative Connections and was seeking other leadership experiences. Creative Connections was an excellent multi-cultural program focused on a certain culture each summer. It honored me to have worked with a group of very creative educators in this highly effective, well-attended program.

It would still take time before I finally tested my ability as a leader. I applied with our district to become a summer school principal. This role allows an individual with an administrative degree to practice being a principal of a building. While still teaching, I became a summer school principal several times. I improved my leadership skills by problem-solving with staff and small groups of students during summer school. Less staff also meant I had to do most of the work on my own. One of the summer buildings I led ended up having a large hearing-impaired population with it. It was a great experience, and it gave me some wonderful insight that children are children, no matter what abilities they have. They had all the same challenges that simply come with growing up. I learned to work with varying demographics during summer principalships across the city. These experiences gave me solid leadership skills and prepared me for different socio-economic groups.

The principal and assistant principal nominated me for The Leadership Institute. This also put attendees in a pool of potential future school leaders. The assistant principal who nominated me saw my potential, took me under her wing, and encouraged me to continue. When I was a principal, I helped change The Leadership Institute into The Principal Pipeline, which prepares and selects future leaders.

I realize real leadership is difficult. Many people don't want to do what they need to excel and eventually get burned out too soon. It is a pace that never ends, with days that vary and require extreme flexibility, plus emotional intelligence to work with many people. There are far too many individuals addicted to the status quo of just getting by, uninterested in innovation or growth. This is not me (perhaps because of my inner achiever). However, I am not an advocate of change for the sake of change. Show the logic and demonstrate improvement through the data! I have always had a drive to be better, to use my

strengths, to shoot for the top—my wife, Ingra, also has the Achiever theme of talent and a similar drive. According to Gallup, people are happiest using their strengths and talents. Therefore, finding the strengths of your staff and looking for ways they can work within these areas will ensure a positive workplace.

They frustrated me when I didn't get interviewed for principal positions, despite my experience as a summer school principal. This can often happen since your plan may not match up with the district plan! I followed the district's typical path to principalship, but I saw others who didn't follow it getting promoted ahead of me. There are often superintendent and human resource changes that can set back knowledge and history. There are politics in every organization, especially large ones, so you must strive to be diligent without getting frustrated.

At Ingra's suggestion, I finally created a portfolio of experience and scheduled a meeting with the superintendent. I remember sitting across from him, showing my resume and portfolio of work, and explaining my target goal of being in a leadership position. I was eager and ready to meet any challenge and eager to make a difference with the children of our district. One question he asked was, "If I gave you the opportunity to turn around a building, would you take it?"

After being an assistant principal for one year, I said I would welcome the challenge and the opportunity to become the principal a year later. Not realizing at this point it usually takes three to five years to make any significant change, I soon found out I had my work cut out for me.

After 10 years and a successful track record, I was honored to be selected from a citywide pool of 36 individuals to start the first focus school of Douglas and Sarpy Counties, where I served 11 years. I had

the joy and challenge of creating a school from the ground up. This is something not everyone gets a chance to do, so I realize this was a blessing and a great opportunity.

The focus school was like a magnet concept, with a longer calendar and longer school day. We incorporated many successful practices from my first school into the focus school. I am a firm believer in learning from others and using what really works. As one of my old college professors, Dr. Gary Hartzell, used to say, “The best educators are intellectual thieves!”

We need to continue to find ways of replicating the ideas and concepts that are working well. People often push aside ideas to maintain the status quo because they find it inconvenient to change the current narrative. Outside of technology, we are in an educational system that has hardly changed throughout history. I appreciate the educators who are embracing positive change and making a difference. It is important we continue to strengthen an educational system which encourages and challenges students.

This book is based upon my experiences as a leader and the ways I have found to excel as a principal. I am an avid reader on leadership and have amassed a broad collection of relevant books throughout my career. I’m fascinated with what motivates people, and how to cultivate positivity, creativity and innovation.

I usually have more than one leadership book going. I had someone question me once, asking, “Why are you reading that book—you’ve already got the job!” My response was, “I want to get better.”

The learning and studying never ends if you want to continue to grow effective leadership skills. As a principal, you can’t just read educational books. Learn from effective leaders in all fields to improve

yourself. Find role models—people who are masters at their craft—and learn from them.

My goal is to help people become better, more effective leaders. As I share from my personal journey, my hope is you will find nuggets of wisdom and helpful tips on which you can expand. While much of this applies to a variety of leadership positions, I truly hope it can help build more effective principals at all school levels. The higher the competence in our school leaders, the better our educational system will become. The principal is key to a school's success. As one of my favorite leadership authors—John Maxwell—says, “Everything rises and falls on leadership.”

It's clear I enjoy looking at what effective leaders do, and what their role is in making things better. We cling to familiar methods in education, rather than seeking better options.

Creativity needs to be at the heart of what educators do. There is a quote I have on my computer as a reminder to keep. The quote reads: “Creativity is bound to stir up controversy, because its ultimate impact always is to change the status quo.” (O.A. Battista).

People are often uncomfortable if you are changing what has always been done. If you are reading this book, my assumption is you are planning on being an effective leader, which involves embracing worthwhile changes. I wish you brilliant success as you challenge the status quo, make improvements, and get meaningful results in a positive direction. Be a difference maker!

“Leadership is not about being in charge. Leadership is taking care of those in your charge.”

— *Simon Sinek*

Chapter 1: Taking the Reigns as Principal

The role of the principal is crucial, and positive leadership is instrumental to success. It is also important to have powerful teachers for sound engaging instruction, and all staff members moving forward in a cohesive manner. Proper leadership allows teachers and staff members to function at their peak level professionally. We need strong principals who will remain in the role for a significant period in order to make a difference. Unfortunately, it is rare to find someone who has been a principal for even 10 years.

One study done by Fuller and Young from 1995 to 2008 of over 16,500 public school principals showed some interesting—but not surprising—results. The average tenure for elementary school principals was 4.96 years, for middle school principals, 4.48 years, and for high school principals, 3.38 years. Many principals leave the role because of the increased complexity of the job, or because they are using it as a steppingstone to move up the ladder. These roles are challenging and demand long hours to create conditions for student success.

I have always believed in putting in the time to be an expert at what you do. If the 10,000-hour rule (Gladwell, 2008) shows it takes 10 years or 10,000 hours to do so, most principals will never get there. Wanting to move up the ladder is okay, but we should do it for the right reasons, which vary from person to person. I applied for a few roles

after serving as a principal for many years but was very selective in finding the right fit to use my strengths and talents. I learned through debriefings that my recognition as a strong principal made it difficult for higher ups to replace me in that position.

According to a 2008 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, the average public school principal has 7.5 years of experience. The average years a district kept a principal in the same school was 4.2. The study said 34.1 percent had less than two years at their current school as a principal; 13.4 percent had two years; 10.8 percent had three years; 29.9 percent had four to nine years; and 11.9 percent had 10 years or more. While districts have their reasons for moving principals, I believe it is difficult for a leader to succeed with such mobility.

Consistent leadership in schools remains difficult, as per the 2016-2017 Principal Follow-Up Survey by The National Center for Education Statistics. The sample had 5,700 public schools and discovered that about 82% of public school principals stayed at their school for the following year. Also, 2% of principals were from schools where the principal had left, but the school didn't know if the principal was working elsewhere.

(Rebecca Goldring, Soheyla Tale, Isaiah O'Rear, 2018) This study also shows principals continue to leave, no matter what the demographics of the school may be. Among schools where less than 35% of students received free or reduced-price lunches, 85% of principals stayed, 5% moved, and 8% left. The study found that in schools with over 75% of students approved for free or reduced-price lunches, 79% of principals stayed, 7% moved and 11% left. There is a higher percentage leaving with a tougher population or higher poverty, but there are many leaving no matter what the demographics.

There is a need for consistent training, mentoring, and giving principals the skills and tools to be excellent at their jobs. Educational organizations must look for successful ways to manage talent and keep outstanding leaders. We don't need people leaving due to lack of support or inadequate leadership development programs. While a principal in high-needs and specialty program buildings, I supported and mentored emerging leaders. I knew developing principal leadership capacity in a positive framework would be key to their success.

Many successful principals find it helpful to develop a network of support. As I started my career, it was sink or swim, trial by fire, and I was very grateful to have the camaraderie, knowledge, and experience base of a principals' group. After retiring as a principal, I started consulting to give tools that make the job of principals easier. I created the *Urban Principal: Leadership Lessons* podcast to teach people how to be better leaders. I speak from experience, read, research, and share tried-and-true practices and solutions. Too many people don't stay a principal long enough to develop the strategies they need. These happen through experience and life in the field. Developing better leaders and leadership capacity are goals for which I have a passion and have worked toward my entire career as a principal. As Kenneth Blanchard has said, "The key to successful leadership is influence, not authority."

When I became an assistant principal, one of our parents, Ms. Smith, said, "You have a good temperament. You are a good assistant principal and would make an excellent principal." I knew then I was up for the challenge of leading a school effectively. I like to think she was right, and I'm sure her confidence in me influenced the trajectory of my life.

“The only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be.”

— *Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Chapter 2: Getting the Job: Marketing Yourself

It is important to market yourself and go for your dreams. You have one life and need to do what you can to make the most of it. I learned this lesson the hard way after being passed over for a dream job following a change of superintendents. The superintendent's plan had a section for "evidence of success," so I created a portfolio with letters, certificates, surveys, and data. It looked professional, organized with binder covers I learned from Ingra.

I made social media accounts on different platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. You can show off your skills and have fun with them. We are in an unprecedented time of communication, where an online presence is important to remain at the top of your field. This becomes a digital resume of sorts. Although I have a paper resume that I use for certain job applications, LinkedIn is often the primary source for employers in this digital age. I also have a vitae or “CV”, which is a short-written summary of my career, qualifications, awards and education. It proves useful for the university when they require a bio or for consulting purposes.

I have noticed many who are trying to get into an administrative role often give up too easily. It takes time. You must network, put in the effort, and make the most of the chances to prove yourself. Being persistent is key and sticking to your goals. My podcast (Urban Principal: Leadership Lessons) is one example of how I have built an

online presence to market my consulting business. It is based upon my years of experience as a principal and what has worked for me. It also gives me a chance to talk about educational issues, share research and assist in my goal of creating more effective leaders.

Taking part in committees and volunteer boards and giving back to the community can strengthen your reputation. It took me seven years of applying for administrative positions before finally landing one. I had my share of disappointing letters, but also had the tenacity and motivation to continue to pursue my goal. Think of all the people throughout history who never gave up. Many of the inventions and big discoveries of today would not have happened if those people had failed and just said, "Oh well, I'll give up and do something else." If you want to do it and it's important to you, be resilient and go for it.

Then you must work hard, develop a solid reputation for success, and stay the course. Again, I must reiterate, stay the course. Develop an inner drive like I did, and it will keep you going when others are just giving up. Take every opportunity to show your abilities and talents. I had my share of "Dear John" letters--in fact, quite a stack! Be persistent! Then you can show what you can do. It seems like every role I have ever taken; I have always had to prove myself. People often underestimate me, but I usually end up on top. It doesn't hurt to be the underdog!

“People with goals succeed because they know where they are going.”

— *Earl Nightingale*

Chapter 3: Developing a Mission and Vision

I was first selected as an assistant principal for Indian Hill Elementary School and over that first year; I grew in ways unimaginable. I spoke earlier of the old sink-or-swim scenario. This high-needs building had a new principal who was experiencing challenges with the role. She would get upset, resign, tell me I’m in charge, and then leave. It was a surprise the first time she did this. Then she would return a week or two later. You can call this unpredictability an opportunity to learn, but it was more like being shoved off a cliff. However, in the times she was away, I could learn much as the temporary principal, and I learned FAST! I led a busy high-needs building while also coordinating an open house, fundraiser kick-off, and school picture day.

The building experienced a decline in its track record of stability despite having successful leadership in the previous years. I found through this experience you can actually learn a great deal from an ineffective leadership style—about what not to do. After approximately three months of this principal’s exit/re-entry pattern and erratic behavior, an interim principal—Joan McCrea—was assigned.

Joan was a solid, excellent principal who had retired and then returned to the district. She had taken an assistant principal position at another high-needs building and was happy in that role. Then she moved to Indian Hill to cover the principal position for the rest of the year. I appreciated her mentorship and continued to learn about the job.

I've noticed interesting things seem to happen around the holidays, and this year was no different. The staff felt stressed because of various personal activities going on outside of work/school. Joan was an excellent leader who helped calm the waters and become a role model for me. I learned a great deal from her knowledge and expertise. She was a master at working with people and showed the key relationship-building skills of an effective leader. I saw her communicate kindly and respectfully with people on the phone and in person while achieving tasks and acknowledging their strengths. She completed the rest of the year with me, and together we became a team, friends and colleagues. At first, she took charge of completing the budget and other important areas that had been neglected while I continued with my work. Together, we brought that building back on track. By the end of the year, Joan was really ready to stay retired, which officially opened the principal position for this building.

I watched for the posting, and I quietly applied for the placement. Joan recommended me for the position but could not make any guarantees. We worked together, and she recognized my talents. (A strong mentor is helpful, but schools need to make transitions easier.). We met with different groups, including district personnel, teachers' union, community representatives, and staff. They all wanted stability in the building. They selected me for an interview after I applied, and they instructed me not to disclose it to anyone, including the current staff. It is not always normal to move up assistant principals into a principal role at the same building (at least it wasn't in our district).

I remember going to a district office meeting and coming back to the building that same evening for a panel interview with selected staff. This was definitely not a done deal. I wasn't sure at the time they even wanted me, even though I had developed relationships with the staff. This was different. I would be their overall principal and leader. It had

burned them having inconsistent leadership. They liked Mrs. McCrea, but they knew she was a temporary fix. They seemed to like what I had done so far in building relationships, but I didn't know if I was even in the running for the job before that point.

I was nervous, and they were apprehensive as we moved into a large format interview session. They had one staff member ask questions, and a panel observed and took notes. The teachers' union was present, and they did not want a repeat of experiences in the past. They asked pointed questions of what I would do to build trust and empower the staff, and wanted to know how certain situations I would handle. The others watched and took notes—giving looks of what I perceived as *I wonder if he can do it*. It was not an easy interview, and I definitely did not feel like I had an ace in the hole. They asked specific questions and wanted genuine answers. It was their right at this point. The wounds were deep, and everyone was ready to be done with the past. They invested all these stakeholders in the building and wanted to make sure their leader would be as well.

After a few excruciatingly long days of waiting, the superintendent ended up calling me in to his office and offered me the job as principal. I felt this was a pretty quick decision in the scheme of things, as many human resource departments take weeks for an application process.

Mrs. McCrea said she was glad to hand me the keys. Though she had recommended me, she knew she couldn't guarantee the outcome of the process.

I returned to the superintendent's question about turning a high poverty building into a successful environment. It was time to put up or shut up, as the kids say. My goal was to build trust and make improvements in a school of 675 pre-k to sixth grade students and 112 staff members.

Time to get to work! Responsibility for the staff, students, facility, instruction, achievement, and community is required when holding the keys and becoming a leader. The pressure is immediate. If you are a principal or leader of an organization, you understand.

My task as a new leader was to develop trust, stability, and provide direction, consistency, and attention to this urban elementary school. Right away, I worked with staff on reviewing what was present, what was working, and where we stood as a building. Our baseline data became the starting point for a needs assessment. One of the first tasks was redefining a vision and mission for our school. We needed to get everyone on the same page. Having been there a year as an assistant principal, I was already aware of the history and the elements that were important to the staff. Change is hard, and it needs to be done carefully, not haphazardly. There needed to be a revival of purpose and building of staff, as well as a change in philosophy for how we work with students. The mission already in place was typical of most school missions, but after reviewing it with our new goals in mind, we landed on:

We will provide a caring, educational environment that develops students with strong foundations for success as lifelong learners and responsible citizens. We believe: All students have the right to an education that will enable them to reach their highest potential; Education requires sustained systematic efforts by students, staff, parents and community; Students should be educated in a climate that fosters self-worth and respect for others.

All schools develop both mission and vision statements, and I found creating the vision statement the most powerful of the two. We met as a staff to discuss our vision and goals for the school's future. The planning sessions were productive. We had collaborative meetings

with large staff groups, smaller grade levels, and teams. I did a lot of listening and guiding of discussions, and together, we grew. Our vision had meaning and purpose. I can still recite the vision from memory today:

Our vision sets high achievement as a priority with positive expectations for staff, students and the community. We want Indian Hill to be a safe place where students see a future for themselves.

It had to be something everyone could remember, and it worked for me—I can't forget it. Achieving success was crucial due to the high percentage of students from low-income housing and free/reduced lunch. The statement: "positive expectations for staff, students and community" was a goal, and where most of our work was going to take place—a great deal of work. We wanted the school to be a safe positive environment where students could succeed—another enormous area of work. We needed an attitude of positivity and success, with a belief that all students will succeed.

"A place where students see a future for themselves" came out of the need to break the poverty cycle, develop hope, and create career awareness. We encouraged career development and understanding of occupations through college visits, career fairs, and guest speakers. We wanted to break the cycle of poverty and guide students towards self-sufficiency and positive societal impact. The meticulous word selection of our vision paid off with agreement and support from all.

Another step was concentrating on the staff members themselves, helping them learn about their strengths. They went on a self-reflection journey and found their strengths and talents with Gallup's StrengthsFinder. Originally, I could take them to actual training at Gallup. Then later, I would just use the resources of *How Full is Your*

Bucket and *StrengthsFinder* materials and resources with staff. I also could go through the training on “Leading with Strengths” through our district. We soon understood each other. Gradually, a change took place. We worked hard at getting our staff together and on being productive, collaborative staff members.

The vision became our catalyst for making change. Visions are powerful and can create momentum while being a dramatic change agent. The leader must promote this vision, steer the ship and keep it on track. I created large posters with an improved image of our bear mascot and the vision. Branding around the school became extremely important to add to the climate and promote the vision. Luckily Ingra (my wife) was a marketing and public relations director with a great deal of talent in graphic art and design, as well as promotion. She helped with the branding and professional look we needed. I have used her talents throughout my career many times in this capacity. They were large posters, produced on colored card stock and laminated with some being framed and posted throughout the building.

I also used the vision on staff agendas, in PowerPoints, and put it in front of the staff at every opportunity. This was a visual reference for us to use and say, “How are we doing? Are we moving toward our vision?” We could also use the vision as a talking point. It's easier to work with staff and discuss things by asking, "does this fit our vision?" This way, strategic planning and school improvement can be based on the vision. Strategies developed to target key elements in making this vision a reality. The key, as with any initiative, is getting support and ownership. You can't create a vision and just drop it on a shelf somewhere. There has to be self-reflection and checks on progress. The staff had created this vision together based on what we needed as a building and community. If you practice shared leadership, with

collaboration and team building, this ownership and support will happen.

When I started the focus school, it was very similar. Once I had staff selected, we met to craft our mission and vision. I started by giving them all the StrengthsFinder tool to identify their top five strengths or talents. I used this at my previous school. We worked with a rep from Gallup to administer and talk about the results. This is a tool I still use to this day to identify the unique individual qualities of the staff. As I add staff, I have them take StrengthsFinder and we add their strengths to a spreadsheet that I make available to all staff. At Indian Hill with over a hundred staff, I created a book called “The Strengths of Indian Hill” and everyone had this document.

At the Focus School, I had our assistant create a spreadsheet with our Staff Strengths and it was available to all staff. Our assistant updated the spreadsheet each year and added new staff to it. This became a useful tool for working with staff. You can purchase most of the excellent Gallup books and they come with a code to allow access to the StrengthsFinder tool. Each year, staff would get a copy of this grid of strengths to use as we collaborate. The more they understand each other, the better the collaboration will be.

Why am I spending so much time on staff strengths and talents? Well, if you are working toward a vision, there are many pieces that need to be in place. Everyone should develop self-awareness about their unique qualities, including the staff. The ability to understand one another helps to develop productive relationships. Everyone comes with their own background and lens of perception. Communication is still at the core of everything, including relationships and--done well--it can keep focus on the goals at hand. This also develops culture, and culture is everything!

At the focus school, once we identified our strengths and talents, we worked on our mission and vision for the school. I started the discussion by looking at original examples and models from schools and businesses. Then we started brainstorming key characteristics of the school we wanted. Those key descriptors are to define us. Early on, I pulled the staff together, and we spent two days developing the mission and vision. It went pretty fast--I think because we were creating a new concept for an innovative school from scratch, and everyone was excited to set the course. We selected the staff based on their various qualities, which differed from inheriting a staff as I had in the past. I provided examples from different institutions, and we swiftly agreed on the qualities that we want our students to possess.

The staff had some great input and even got into some heated discussions with differing opinions. This is actually a good thing. At a certain point, I told them let's table it and come back fresh the next day, since we had started spinning our wheels. Sure enough, they came back the next day when we all had some rest and time to think, and we knocked out that final draft in a short time with consensus.

I had faith in the staff. The mission ended up as: *It is the mission of Wilson Focus School to help all children embrace diversity and cultivate learning using leadership, technology and communication. By broadening the vision of students, families, educators and community, we will create leaders who contribute to the global society.*

The vision just seemed to flow after we completed the mission and the tweaking around our theme helped this to be:

Our vision promotes leadership through technology and communication as a pathway to achieve academic excellence.

To achieve academic excellence, we believe:

In the value of diversity.

In the development of individual talents.

In the partnerships between families, school, and community.

In the importance of relationships.

In using effective and innovative instructional strategies.

These beliefs will ensure that the students at Wilson Focus School become positive leaders reflective of the global society.

This vision encompassed what we wanted all our students coming from any of the 11 surrounding districts to learn. It was about opportunities for all, no matter what culture you came from and what your background was.

This sounds similar to many, I am sure, but the vision can be the driving force for your school and can be the difference in making sustainable change. The agreement, support and ownership of staff make the difference. The school improvement plan ties to the mission and vision of the school and addresses the strategies you are using to make this change happen. Keeping the staff excited and motivated towards the vision is a challenge, but if they are involved in all aspects, it becomes easier. As you add new staff, it is important to bring them into the mission and vision, periodically review it and see if it needs tweaking. Building ongoing ownership and commitment is important.

If you, as a leader, are moving forward and exemplifying the vision, your staff will want to move with you. Developing trust amongst staff is crucial to making and sustaining any actual change. The best way you can do this is through modeling the vision and following through

with what you say you are going to do. This sounds simple, but many leaders do not do this simple thing and lose critical credibility. Your actions must match your words.

If staff knows they can share with you, as well as problem-solve, you have won part of the battle. Their input matters! Listen and collaborate. Most schools want to reach their vision and make progress, which is why I use the word "change" frequently. School improvement is never ending. Reaching for the ideal positive vision is an ongoing process. Progress never ends.

People are talking about "elevator speeches" that can quickly promote their business or building during a brief interaction. This can be an effective tool to sell your school. The elevator speech I had for Wilson Focus was:

“I enjoy being a leader of an innovative school that focuses on leadership, technology and communication. My position allows me to motivate staff to improve instruction and achievement. I coach teachers to use effective instructional strategies, review data, and look for ways to increase success. Bringing out the best in people and developing a positive environment is a priority for my leadership.”

I made this one while working with Kathy Kennedy, a consultant and former assistant superintendent who coached our district. This elevator speech gives people a quick synopsis of what I do, and it also framed many of my leadership duties as a principal to help people understand our role. I have often found people don't really know what a principal does, so my statement helps to enlighten people with a broad perspective on the duties of the job. Staff members could use this in many public situations. I could change my speech depending on how

the audience views education and our school. This helps me give them a better understanding of job duties.

The school staff should be able to recite and give a version of the mission and vision while being close to the original and still holding the core principles. You want this mantra to be part of their internal drive. I have seen some fantastic, short and sweet mission and visions. When I talk about the schools I was in, I get excited, and my enthusiasm comes out and it becomes part of the speech. Your passion and excitement help drive the impression of your organization.

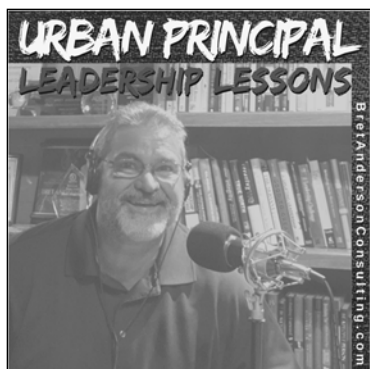
Keeping the vision in front of people and alive is important. This is where leadership comes in. As John Maxwell has said, “People buy into the leader before they buy into the vision.” The vision becomes part of your culture. This is another reason to make posters and use them on agendas, putting it out there so the common knowledge and language becomes the reality you want. Having it in front of you reminds you where your journey is headed. There are so many things you as a leader can intentionally do to keep a school or business improving, I will hit upon many of these within this book. You must start with a clear mission and vision. A strong vision guides your purpose!

About The Author

Bret Anderson is presently a leadership consultant, speaker, trainer, coach, and motivator. His career included 20 years as a principal, one year as an assistant principal and 10 years as a teacher. His background includes successfully turning around a high poverty building, and launching an innovative new year-round school concept. In 2019, he founded Bret Anderson Consulting LLC to support schools and districts, and to cultivate better leaders. He has supervised and coached student teachers for Iowa State University and the University of Nebraska--Lincoln. In addition, he has filled in for principals and conducted staff training. His expertise lies in leadership, building a positive culture, behavior intervention, and staff capacity-building for student engagement. He mentors leaders and delivers the weekly podcast *Urban Principal: Leadership Lessons*.

Anderson has a bachelor's degree in education, a bachelor's in fine arts with a K-12 endorsement, and a master's degree in administration and supervision with a K-12 endorsement from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He and wife Ingra received an Outstanding Service Award from the same university. They have also earned certifications as behavior consultants in the DISC Assessment System to aid in leadership development. He has received many awards, including the Outstanding Educational Leadership Award by Phi Delta Kappa.



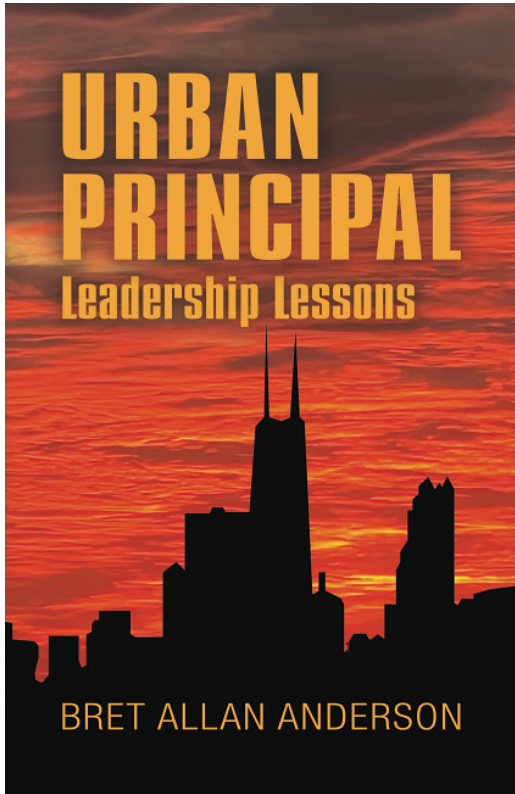


Urban Principal: Leadership Lessons Podcast

A Word of Thanks

Hello fellow principals and leaders! I just wanted to thank everyone for liking and sharing my weekly podcast over the years. We have listeners from many countries and the podcast has become popular because of people like you! I started it on January 21st, 2020, after having retired following 31 years in a large urban district. In my 21 years as a principal, I worked to turn around a high poverty, 90% free-and-reduced lunch building for 10 years. We became a model safe school and changed achievement. I then started a one-of-a-kind innovative public school to encourage opportunities and diversity. You name it, I've probably experienced it or something close to it. Join me as I share stories, review research, and provide effective leadership practices--all with the goal of helping principals and other leaders create a positive culture.

After I retired, I started Bret Anderson Consulting LLC to assist developing leaders and train staff. The best school consultants have experienced life as a principal, have practiced leadership in schools, and have met the *10 Years--10,000 Hours Rule* (Gladwell, 2008) defining an expert in the field. I also became a certified behavior consultant to fully develop leaders. I have mentored and coached many principals and teachers. I have filled in as principal for Nebraska's largest district--including assisting the lowest ranked building in the state (in terms of state testing). My goal at this point is to promote effective leadership wherever I am able. Find out more online at BretAndersonConsulting.com!



*There will always be a need for excellent school leaders. Bret Anderson is one of these, as his career shows. In *Urban Principal: Leadership Lessons*, Anderson shares what he has learned as an educator, leader and long term administrator.*

Urban Principal: Leadership Lessons

By Bret Allan Anderson

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13300.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**