
Preface

As a new principal, I did not realize initially just how crucial decision making was to my success. I succumbed to pressure and made hasty decisions without anticipating the likely repercussions.

I wish I had been able to consult a resource like *Insights* when I was contemplating how to move my faculty toward change or when I was faced with difficult situations demanding resolution for which no decision seemed the right one. Over time, I developed a set of professional core values, but did not always make the important connection between my core values and which decisions mattered most. I also came to understand the importance of assessing school culture when making decisions to introduce change, and utilizing key problem-solving processes to resolve difficult decisions.

Homer-Dixon (2000) states,

“We demand that (leaders) solve, or at least manage, a multitude of interconnected problems that can develop into crises without warning; we require them to navigate an increasingly turbulent reality that is, in key aspects, literally incomprehensible to the human mind; we submerge them in often unhelpful and distracting information; and we force them to decide and act at an ever faster pace” (p. 15).

One of the greatest challenges principals face is the capacity to make good decisions. As principals are bombarded with competing demands, they face the daily challenge of making a host of good decisions in a short amount of time. In this turbulent reality, principals are often obliged to make decisions with limited pertinent information. *Insights: How Expert Principals Make Difficult Decisions* is full of cases about real principals and full of the words and phrases they used to describe their own dilemmas. By conducting extensive interviews

with expert principals about the difficult and complex decisions that they make on a daily basis, I have tried to tease out the factors that inform and guide those decisions. In these pages, principals speak of their core values and priorities, the cultures of their schools, the competing pressures they must withstand, and the processes they have developed to reach the best possible decisions. As the title of the book suggests, they have valuable insights to offer. With the distillation of their thoughts in this volume, I hope to provide a practical guide to strategic decision making for all principals—for new and aspiring principals as well as for those principals who are seeking to improve their decision making.

This book could be utilized for professional development for new or aspiring principals, as a supplement to a university principal preparation course, or as a guide for training principals looking for opportunities to improve their practice. Much like the professional consultation that a mentor principal can offer, *Insights* models effective decision-making processes and provides tips to guide less experienced colleagues. This book includes specific, practical leadership case studies from principals in urban and suburban settings that provide several opportunities for self-reflection. Case study resolutions and a Classroom Walkthrough instrument are included in the Resources section. Tips for making specific types of decisions are featured, for example, tips for managing a crisis with a suspected or actual weapon on school grounds, tips to consider when making policy changes, tips for managing faculty misconduct, as well as concise charts that illustrate decisions principals made to close the gap in their respective schools. Readers will be exposed to a framework for making difficult decisions in complex, unpredictable environments. Recommendations for how to avoid critical errors in decision making are also included. As an experienced bilingual high school and elementary school principal who has worked in urban and suburban settings, I also share my leadership experiences. I maintain my assertion that if school leaders are exposed to difficult and complex decisions and their resolutions, they will be better able to solve similar problems that they may encounter.

In Part I, I highlight the factors expert principals consider in decision making as well as a larger shared focus on improvement, stakeholders, and data. Strategies described include examining the whole picture, considering multiple scenarios and sifting through superfluous details, determining who else will be involved in the decision-making process, and viewing both the foreground and background of a dilemma.

In Part II of the book, I explore particular types of difficult decisions principals encountered and how they utilized strategies presented in Part I to develop a resolution. In these chapters, principals describe a wide range of decisions: for example, to conduct intense evaluations of ineffective teachers, fire a popular coach, pursue long-term suspensions, revamp a bell schedule, resolve cyberbullying, and use data to improve the performance of African American and Latino students. They shared structures they have developed in their schools, the legal implications of difficult and complex decisions, how school policy influences decision making, how to make decisions that will transform the school environment, and how to make effective decisions even in instances where trust is absent.

Introducing the Principals

The 21 principals who participated in the study—from five districts in urban and suburban counties in Massachusetts, Maryland, and North Carolina—are introduced in Table 1.0. Principals were asked the extent to which they utilized problem-solving strategies outlined in Brenninkmeyer and Spillane's (2008) framework or Davis's (2004) framework for heuristic decision making. The frameworks are utilized to examine effective decision-making practices of expert principals and to explore practical applications. Central office administrators were asked to recommend their best (expert) principals. In cases where the district expressed reluctance to name best principals, principals were selected who had been mentor principals and/or whose school's standardized test scores reflected above average school achievement for the district. Individual qualitative principal interviews (45–60 minutes) were conducted with principals in five districts in urban and suburban counties. Pseudonyms were utilized throughout. Questions were created by me in consultation with the Odum Institute and approved by my former university human rights in research committee (IRB # 2103-P-0010). The principals' administrative experience ranges from 5 to 29 years. About half the principals interviewed were female. The majority were White, but several African American and Latino principals were also interviewed. The principals led small and large schools ranging in size from 105 to 2,353 students. Principals were from traditional schools, alternative schools, and early college high schools. Some were high-poverty, majority-minority schools; several others were very prestigious, affluent schools. I enjoyed our conversations tremendously. I was amazed

Table 1.0 Expert Principals

<i>State</i>	<i>Principal's Name (Pseudonym)</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Years of Admin. Exp.</i>	<i>Type of School</i>	<i>Socioeconomic Status (Free and reduced lunch %)</i>	<i>School Size</i>
NC	Mr. Henry	White	Male	5	Urban	40%	1,268
NC	Mr. King	White	Male	13	Urban	74%	1,154
NC	Mr. Adams	White	Male	13	Urban	42%	1,195
NC	Mr. Vance	White	Male	8	Urban	100%	320
NC	Ms. Major	African American	Female	7	Urban/Early College	47%	105
NC	Mr. Edwards	White	Male	11	Urban	52%	1,725
NC	Mr. Peppers	African American	Male	29	Urban/Alternative	NR*	NR*
NC	Ms. Lyons	White	Female	12	Urban/Early College	61%	240
MD	Ms. Wallace	African American	Female	8	Urban/Alternative	81%	255
MD	Mr. Rollins	African American	Male	5	Urban	84%	326
MD	Dr. Jeffreys	African American	Female	12	Urban	89%	498
MD	Mr. Baron	White	Male	5	Urban	72%	1,659
MA	Mr. Starnes	White	Male	6	Suburban	9%	1,722
MA	Dr. Zenga	White	Female	11	Suburban	15%	1,910
MA	Ms. Cantrell	African American	Female	11	Urban	67%	320
MA	Dr. Manning	White	Female	17	Urban	30%	2,353
MA	Mr. Bliden	White	Male	4	Suburban	6%	922
MA	Ms. Rodriguez	Latina	Female	10	Urban	74%	610
MA	Ms. Perez	Latina	Female	7	Urban	55%	1,645
MA	Ms. Langely	White	Female	14	Suburban	7%	1,951
MA	Ms. Lily	White	Female	4	Urban	72%	406

*NR—Not reported

by the candor, grace, and ease with which the principals handled the extremely volatile and contentious decisions they encountered.

After reading this book, you will:

1. Discover the problem-solving strategies of expert principals, which include utilizing a data focus, improvement focus, and stakeholder focus.
2. Investigate the factors expert principals consider when making decisions to manage a crisis or make policy changes.
3. Assess the role of core values in decision making.
4. Review core values that guide principals and develop your own professional core values.
5. Ascertain the role of building trusting relationships as changes are strategically introduced.
6. Become aware of the types of decisions that can lead to regaining control of unsettling environments.
7. Articulate how school culture affects decision making.
8. Learn the practices for improving decision making using heuristic thinking.
9. Determine how examining the whole picture, expanding the field of attention, visualizing solutions, and involving others can improve decision making.
10. Adopt strategies for making difficult decisions about student disciplinary consequences.
11. Establish an Intense Teacher Evaluation Process.
12. Learn guidelines for making decisions about terminating high-profile coaches, managing duplicitous faculty practices, and dealing with allegations of faculty misconduct.
13. Review successful practices for data analysis that increase the performance of African American and Latino students.
14. Ascertain how changing structures, eliminating barriers to access, and introducing programs can increase the academic performance of African American and Latino students.