

# THE PRINCIPAL NEWS



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## THE MANY HATS OF A PRINCIPAL

OUR ROLES ARE COUNTLESS,  
COMPLEX AND REWARDING

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# Peak Productivity:

## MANAGING THE WORKLOAD OF LEADERSHIP

Missed “Organization 101” in your principal prep program?  
Try these time management tips!



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**THE** challenges of running a school, to say nothing of transforming teaching and learning, are often overwhelming. Without strategies for managing the workload that accompanies school leadership, the emergencies that arise every day—in addition to the onslaught of routine administrative work—can consume all of a principal’s time and energy, and ultimately lead to job dissatisfaction and turnover.

Increasing the principal’s capacity to do leadership work can have a direct impact on the performance of the school. But where is there room for improvement? Working harder isn’t an option, with principals routinely logging more than 60 frenetic hours a week at school. Moreover, some crucial types of work can’t be rushed, such as thinking,

planning and having instructional conversations with staff. Staying organized and managing the workload of the principalship require systems that have been around for decades, but are rarely taught in principal preparation programs.

School leaders are constantly called upon to make snap judgments about which problems deserve their attention. Is it the parent on line one, the scuffle on the playground or the classroom upstairs that most needs your time right now? In order to make a wise decision, it is critical to understand the full range of your unfinished work. However, the typical state of mind for a school leader is not a masterful level of situational awareness; as a colleague recently noted, it’s more like standing in a waterfall and trying to keep your footing. The first step in changing this reality is to make space, both physically and mentally, for doing the work of leadership.

### CLEARING THE DECKS

The typical principal’s office suggests that the proper place for paper and unfinished work is on top of any available flat surface, as if piles of paper serve as bar graphs of his or her busyness and importance. This clutter is both distracting and ineffective, but all the piles and sticky notes can be eliminated with a few simple rules:

- Paper belongs in file folders or binders.
- Tasks belong on a to-do list.
- Phone numbers belong in a Rolodex or electronic address book.
- Nothing belongs on your desk except what you’re working on at this moment and the tools you need to support your work.

The first step on the journey to organization is cleaning your desk. If a document is on your desk only to remind you of some action that needs to be completed, write the action on your to-do list and file the paper. If you will actually need the paper at a specific time in the future, use the tickler file system to get it out of your way. These two tools—the tickler file and the to-do list—are essential for managing large volumes of work.

### THE TICKLER FILE

If you need to bring a report to a meeting that’s three weeks away, you don’t want to wait until the last minute to print the report, but you also don’t want it to sit on your desk for three weeks. To ensure that you have the right documents in hand at the right time, but keep them out of sight and out of mind until then, start a tickler file. Law firms have used this low-tech system for decades as a way to manage large amounts of time-sensitive material.

To set up a tickler file system, start with 43 manila file folders. Label 12 of them with the names of the months (i.e., one folder for each month). Label the remaining 31 folders with numerals 1 through 31 (i.e., one folder for each day of the month). Place tomorrow's folder at the front; for example, if today is January 24, place the "25" folder at the front. After this should be folders 26-31, the next month's folder (February), then 1-24, then the rest of the months (March, April and so on). This whole series of folders should be in a file drawer that you or your secretary keep close at hand. Whenever you have a document you don't need today but will need at a certain time in the future, put it in the appropriate folder. Tomorrow morning, remove the contents of the "25" folder, and file the empty folder after "24" to represent the 25th of next month. This will ensure that everything on your desk is relevant to today's work, reducing both clutter and stress.

#### YOUR TO-DO LIST

To-do lists are the obvious tool for keeping track of tasks, but most principals barely scratch the surface of the list's potential. The key to making your to-do list an effective means of organizing your workload is to keep it updated and honest. An organization system is not a motivation system; you will do only the work you are committed to doing, no matter how many "Priority 1" flags or exclamation points you put after a task. For this reason, it is essential to regularly purge your list of items you once thought were a good idea, but which you now realize aren't going to happen. If it's full of tasks you aren't really committed to doing, you'll start to put your real tasks somewhere else, such as on sticky notes, and you'll abandon the to-do list. Moreover, if high-level tasks, such as providing feedback to teachers and shaping your school's vision, aren't included on your to-do list, you will mistrust the list as a valid guide to how to spend your day.

To avoid the unwieldiness of paper-based lists, use an electronic tool such as Microsoft Outlook's "tasks" feature, the Mac-based OmniFocus program or the web-based solution, Remember The Milk (rmilk.com), which also has a mobile version and apps for most smartphones. Electronic tools allow you to search, sort and update your lists quickly and easily. Most electronic tools also let you e-mail tasks to yourself, which can be a great time-saver.

### CHECK OUT THESE RESOURCES FOR TIME MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES!

- [www.43folders.com](http://www.43folders.com)
- [www.gtdtimes.com](http://www.gtdtimes.com)
- [www.TotalWorkdayControl.com](http://www.TotalWorkdayControl.com)

In *Total Workday Control Using Microsoft Outlook*, Michael Linenberger describes an excellent system for managing a large number of tasks. He recommends using *start* dates instead of *due* dates, and setting Outlook (or whatever tool you use) to hide tasks with a start date that is in the future. For example, if you know you will need to review assessment results when they become available in two weeks, set the start date for that task accordingly. In the meantime, your uncluttered list will allow you to focus on the current day's work.

Your system needs to fit you, so spend some time customizing your lists, and consider a major overhaul after two or three weeks. When you have a functional, reliable system to track your work, your mind is free to focus on one thing at a time, and you are free to respond effectively to the exigencies of the day. It's quite possible to manage 500 or more tasks without stress if you've shaped your system to fit your needs.

#### ORGANIZING FOR MANAGING PEOPLE

Of course, school leaders spend most of their time dealing not with tasks or documents, but with people. How can you become more organized and effective in your interactions with staff, parents and students? The primary tool for organizing your work with others is the agenda. While most people use agendas only for formal meetings, try adding several types of agendas to your to-do list system. Written communication, face-to-face conversations and scheduled meetings all gain structure and purpose from readily accessible agendas.

For example, rather than physically getting out your parent newsletter file every time you have an idea for the next edition, add a note to your to-do list, such as  
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## Peak Productivity: Managing the Workload of Leadership

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“Newsletter: Food drive starts Friday,” and get back to what you were doing. When it’s time to write your newsletter, simply search your electronic list for “newsletter” and work through each item on the list.

Another way to use agendas is to keep track of issues you need to discuss with specific people. If you know that your supervisor will be coming for a visit on Friday, you can refer to your list of agenda items that require his or her input and save the trouble of multiple calls or e-mails later. If you need to talk to a teacher who is in class all day except from 2:00 to 2:45, using your agenda can help you ensure that you talk about all of the pertinent issues at once, rather than just the one that comes to mind at 2:00.

Most importantly, agendas can guide your instructional leadership by allowing you to track the next growth steps for various staff members. As you notice opportunities for improvement, add them to the appropriate agenda in your to-do list, then refer to this list in your next conference or observation. Customize

your agendas to fit your school’s current priorities and initiatives so that your feedback and guidance are aligned with professional development and teachers’ efforts.

Getting organized will not only reduce your stress and improve the appearance of your office, it will increase your effectiveness as a leader. When you know exactly what needs to be done and aren’t distracted by the nagging unease that accompanies clutter, you’ll be able to act decisively and confidently in each emerging situation.

Start today. Clean your desk, create an electronic to-do list, make a tickler file and begin filling in your agendas. As you increase your ability to manage the workload of school leadership, you will start to see new possibilities for your staff and students. 🌐

*Justin Baeder writes about principal performance and productivity at [www.eduleadership.org](http://www.eduleadership.org).*



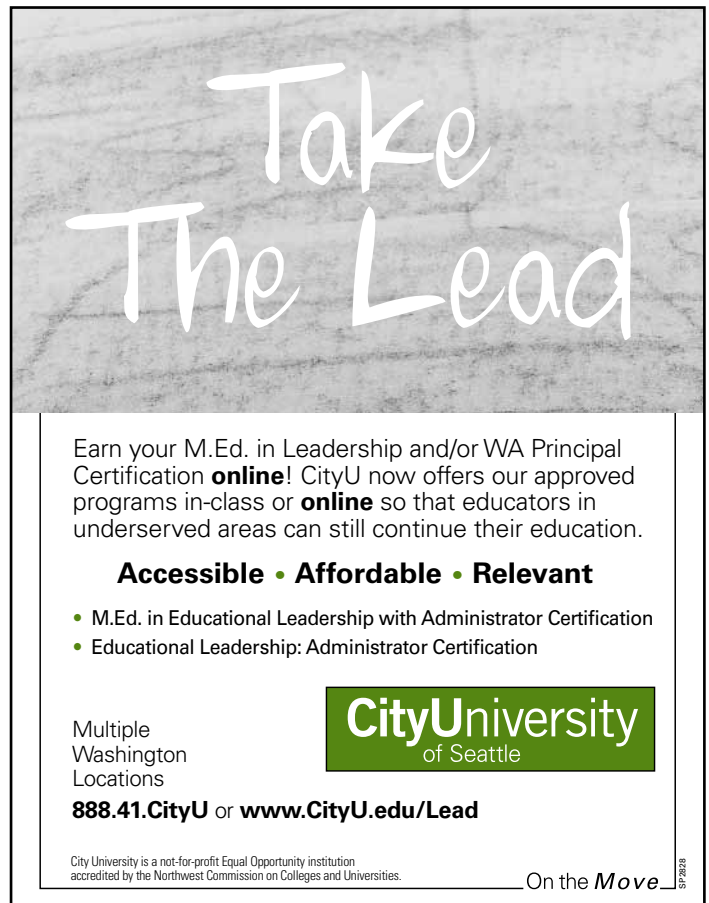
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