Keeping All the Balls in the Air

by Frank Buck, EdD

The principal is the school’s instructional leader, a visionary, a decision-maker, public relations pro, and a confidant. A principal is also a counselor, a motivator, financial planner, and the face of the school. When the final bell of the day sounds, the principal is a spouse, a parent, a community leader, a sports fan, an arts supporter, and the friendly face in the grocery store who causes children to say, “Mom, look who’s here!” The multifaceted nature of the job is what leaves the principal so tired each night, and so energized each morning.

Principals are busy people and may spend some part of the day putting out fires and responding to whichever wheel squeaks loudest at the moment. Some principals operate with a laser focus and demonstrate the ability to see a project through to the end. Given the endless options of how to spend their time, they seem to make the best choice in the moment. What makes the difference?

It Starts With the To-Do List
Starting the day with a list of pre-defined work is the first step towards making the day count, accomplishing what was intended, and doing it all with little stress. The very best make a tough job look easy.

However, a laundry list of unrelated, half-baked tasks is less than appealing. As a result, we set it aside. Compose a list that “works” by adopting these principles:

1. List the “Fab Five” at the top.
How much stress do you create through the fear that your most important items are buried far down the list? Review the list, identify the top five most critical items, and move them to the top. Each time you look at the list, you are reminded of what you decided was important for a successful day.

2. Batch related items.
Your list may include short interactions with a dozen different teachers. The entire dozen could be handled in a few minutes before the start of the school day if these were listed together, allowing you to quickly move from one teacher to another. Phone calls are handled quicker when those calls are made in succession. When items appear together on the list, the job of hammering through them all becomes easier.

3. Word the items clearly.
Every task on the list either motivates us to do it or to avoid it. When a task is worded clearly, it becomes easier to do. As human beings, we tend to do that which is easy. Setting up our list so it is easy increases the chances the items on it are actually accomplished.

For today’s principal, a digital to-do list which syncs between all devices is the best choice. Many software options are available. Choose only one which offers all of the following seven capabilities:

1. Has a “due date” field and can be sorted by due date.
We often think of tasks now which need to be done later. Being able to assign a due date means what you want to see next month isn’t mixed in with what you want to see today.

2. Allows for repeating tasks.
Education is a cyclic business. Much of what we do, we do again at the same time next year, next month or next week. Being able to put a task on the list once, and have it come back each time we need it, is a huge step in staying afloat in this multifaceted job.

3. Has a note section for each task.
Often, you have detailed information you want to have handy when you tackle a task. The note section is the perfect place for it.

4. Can be searched easily.
When you want to find every task related to “Jim,” being able to search for “Jim” puts tasks at your fingertips. When you want to see every phone call you need to make, searching for “Call” puts every call at your fingertips, organized by due date.

5. Syncs across all devices.
If the list is available only on the computer, it is useless the moment you walk away from that
Having a System is Everything

Digital to-do lists offer many bells and whistles, most of which you don’t need. You can enter the task, a start date, due date, a priority, location, category, color, reminder, and that’s just a start. If you have ever watched someone spend longer putting a task into their system than it would have taken to do that task, you understand why I take a minimalist approach.

Every one of my tasks gets a due date. The due date is simply the answer to the question, “When do I want to see this task again?” Making input quick is important, whether I am at my desktop computer or whether I am out and about with my phone. My settings in Toodledo and my mobile apps assign a due date of “Today” as the default.

My list is sorted by due date. Therefore, those items which did not get done yesterday automatically start out towards the top of the list. My job each morning is to put this list in the order I want to complete the tasks. Since the list is sorted by due date, changing due dates is all that is necessary to give me a list I can work in order from top to bottom.

Email and List Work in Tandem

To-dos often arrive in the form of email messages. All too many principals wind up using their email as their to-do list. Toodledo provides the user with a unique email address. Anything sent to that email address is automatically added to the list in Toodledo.

If I receive an email about something I now need to do, I forward it to that special email address. I can do this whether I am viewing the email on the desktop computer, laptop, tablet or phone. Before sending, I edit the subject line as needed. The next time I look at Toodledo, I see the forwarded email on my list. The subject of the email becomes the subject of the task. The entire body of the email is included in the note section of the task.

This one technique, turning emails into tasks, is one I have used for more than a decade to get my email Inbox empty every day, and consolidate on my to-do list everything which needs my attention. Other web-based services offer this same ability to forward emails to the to-do list. Outlook allows the user to “drag and drop” emails to the Task button to turn emails into tasks. Personally, I would not use a to-do list which did not afford this option.

Handling Multiple Projects and Goals

One element which makes the multifaceted job of the principal challenging is the number of different projects or goals going on at any particular time. All time-management systems recommend breaking goals into their individual tasks. Thirty years ago, Stephanie Winston’s The Organized Executive emphasized defining and ordering tasks that comprise a project. Charles Hobbs advocated defining long-range goals broken into short-range goals, and finally into a daily action list in his hallmark book Time Power. In his best-selling book, Getting Things Done, David Allen emphasizes identifying the “successful outcome” of any project, and then asking the question, “What’s the next action?”

Being able to see the task and the goal side-by-side helps me stay clear on exactly what to do and why I am doing it. The methodology I teach, and have written about in my own books, is to handle an entire project within one task. As soon as I inherit a project or envision a goal whose realization will obviously require a number of steps, I phrase my goal as a statement which is either true or false. If I have a vacancy
for a music teacher, have been asked to give a presentation at a local civic club, and want to write the article which you are reading now, my list would start like this:

xx Music teacher has been hired
xx Civic club presentation has been prepared
xx Article for Principal magazine has been submitted

Notice the “xx” preceding each goal. I now decide on the specific “next steps” which will move forward the goals I defined. Those “next steps” go on the other side of the “xx.” My list would now look like this:

Search applications at the central office xx Music teacher has been hired
Call Tom to ask about length of time allowed xx Civic club presentation has been prepared
Outline article xx Article for Principal magazine has been submitted

Any good to-do list includes a section for notes within any task. Other “next steps” and additional

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References

Web Resources
Toodledo is a popular online productivity tool which syncs with a variety of apps across all platforms of mobile devices. The service offers both free and paid plans. Visit www.Toodledo.com.

Call for Papers
The University of Texas at Tyler Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Studies seek submissions for Diversity, Social Justice and the Educational Leader. The journal seeks to explore relevant issues that impact educational leaders and teachers who serve linguistically and culturally diverse students. For additional information about the journal as well as submission guidelines, please visit www.uttyler.edu/elps/dsjel.
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information will go there. What happens when I complete a “next step”? I remove it and replace it with the next next step.

Remember that I talked about one of the requirements of a good to-do list is that it can be searched? If the superintendent asks, “What do you have on your plate right now?” imagine being able to quickly search for “xx” on your phone and read off a list of every project or goals together with the next step towards the completion of each one.

One Person Can’t Do It All
The principalship is a big job. Delegation is important. Prioritization is important. Deciding what to do as well as what is not worth doing is critical. When everything is before you, in one list, those decisions become easier.

A juggler is able to keep many balls in the air because he knows how many he has, he knows the position of each one, and he gives each the right amount of attention at the right time. For the principal, the responsibilities are great, and they extend across many fronts. But with a system which puts it all in one place and puts it in order, the principal can give each one the right amount of attention at the right time. A tough job just got a little easier.

Author
Dr. Frank Buck served as a middle-level teacher, principal and central office administrator during a 30-year career. He now speaks and writes on organization and time management. He is the author of the recently-released second edition of Get Organized: Time Management for School Leaders published by Routledge/Eye on Education. Learn more at www.FrankBuck.org and @drfrankbuck.