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What High School Principals Do to Develop, Implement, and Sustain a High Functioning Character Education Initiative

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Principal leadership is crucial to the success of a high school character education initiative. The purpose of this qualitative grounded theory research was to identify the roles and effective practices that high school principals utilize in developing, implementing, and sustaining a high functioning character education program. Fourteen high school principals from around the country, representing different schools, were interviewed one-on-one through Skype, Google Hangout, or by telephone. Data were collected during these one-on-one semi-structured interviews and analyzed through three separate coding procedures: (a) open coding, (b) axial coding, and (c) selective coding. Open coding analyzed the concepts emerging from the interview data and relationships among the concepts were revealed. Six categories emerged from the data: (a) Cultural Engineer, (b) Plate Peddler, (c) Collaborative Leader, (d) Reflective Leader, (e) Moral Leader, and (f) Champion. Data were decontextualized and microanalyzed in relation to the categories through axial coding procedures. The axial coding process revealed interrelationships between the data that were not initially evident. Selective coding, the final stage of the coding process, was applied to the data and focused on a macroanalysis that was provided in an explanatory narrative. The narrative synthesized the relationships that emerged from the data around a core category—"Principal Leadership in a Character Education Program." The narrative report described the basis of the study's findings and explored the interrelationships between the categories.

The first finding from this study outlines the roles high school principals play in the phases of a character education initiative—development, implement, and sustainment. Throughout these three phases a high school principal plays a combination of the roles of: (a) Cultural Engineer, (b) Plate Peddler, (c) Collaborative Leader, (d) Reflective Leader, (e) Moral Leader, and (f) Champion. The second finding describes the various exceptional practices of principals in a high school character education initiative that are exercised during the three phases. The third finding reveals and describes a detailed timeline in developing, implementing, and sustaining a character education initiative. The timeline outlines the roles and exceptional practices that are utilized at the different phases to ensure the sustainability of the character education initiative.

High school principals are key to a successful character education initiative in their schools and this study has outlined the roles and practices that they must utilize to ensure the youth in their schools are prepared when they graduate. It takes strong leadership to oversee and establish an effective character education initiative that will develop youth into productive upstanding citizens. Principals have the power to develop a character education initiative that will have lasting effects on their students, schools, and communities.