LEADING THE JOURNEY

An E-newsletter on EXCELLENCE in Leadership

For guidelines to creating your school's handbook, refer to the *NAD Principals' Handbook*.

http://adventisteducation.org/principals-handbook/

Why Bother with a Handbook?

Anthony Oucharek, Principal, Orlando Junior Academy

I wish I would have put aside a dollar for every time I heard *"Well, it is in the handbook, so you have to do it!"* …like a hammer being dropped on an unsuspecting nail. Over the years, I have heard this uttered by board members, teachers, parents, and even by some students. The reality is that before we can discuss what needs to be in a school handbook—how it is edited and how it is used—we need to have an understanding of what purpose a handbook actually serves.

A handbook provides a listing of the practices of an organization as well as an explanation for those practices that might be unique. The fundamental difference between a codebook and a handbook is simply this—a codebook specifies the rules of an organization, while a handbook provides the intentions of an organization. Allow me to explain further. A codebook may state that the school's computer lab is unavailable after 9:00 p.m. At 9:00, a custodian comes by, clears out all users, and locks the lab. Anyone in the lab after those hours is breaking the code and is subject to expulsion or even criminal charges for trespassing (as was the case with Bill Gates at the UW campus in the 1970's). A handbook, on the other hand, might state that as a value of health or time students are not to be in the lab after 9:00 p.m. Handbooks reflect practice. If students visit the proper authority and prove the need for lab time outside of the normal hours, the proper individuals can override the handbook. If this practice of overriding the rule becomes the norm, the handbook can be changed to reflect the new practice. Either way, **codes dictate actions while handbooks identify intentions.**

Responsibility lies with the organization to create a handbook which accurately reflects the current practices. Moreover, the handbook should be inclusive of practices as they pertain to all members. If practices exist for any members of an organization, those practices should also work in some way for all members of the organization. Take school uniforms, for an example. If students are expected to be in a uniform, teachers also need a uniform code. The dress code needs to reflect the purpose for the uniform. If it is to enhance the look of the school, then teachers also need to dress professionally. I am always intrigued when I see a handbook that states "students must remove colored fingernail polish," yet teachers walk around in their open-toed shoes with patterned and colored toenails. Either the requirement must be taken out of the handbook or teachers must be required to cover their toes. It is a desired practice, not a religious statement you are after.

Additionally, handbooks need to be updated annually to reflect current practices. An editable copy should be reviewed and revised all year long. One individual can be selected to serve as the point person for setting up the review and revision process, and teachers, board members, parents, and the student advisory council should all be solicited for input. Seldom should a new handbook be dramatically different from its predecessor. In the spring, the new copy of the handbook, together with an accompanying calendar, should be ready for ratification by the board. That then becomes the operating handbook for the coming school year.

In the digital age, we can pare down our handbooks somewhat. Some of the unknowns such as staffing, faculty, and board members need not be listed in a handbook. When needed, they can be found on the current website. The calendar also has a place on the website, and though it needs approval and dissemination at the same time as the handbook, it does not need to take up space in the hardcopy. The handbook should cover the code issues such as the philosophy, mission and goals, graduation requirements, and any legalese regarding computer use and statements of nondiscrimination. Also included is a list of practices such as academic and admissions practices, attendance and discipline practices, and dress codes. Finally, the handbook needs to lay out complete financial obligations for the coming year, including tuition rates. Other items like lunches, extra-curricular offerings, after school care, etc., need to be included in the handbook. Today's handbook should be thinner and free of redundancy and inaccuracy, grammatically correct, and should accurately depict what the organization holds valuable.

With all of the above, it is important to remember that practices represent values—all stakeholders must understand the values they want in their schools. Although available on the web, we put a dated copy of the handbook in everyone's hands. Communication is the key to having everyone on the same page, and having a current handbook is an integral part of that communication. ✸

(qouch@aol.com)

MISSION: STRENGTHENING ADVENTIST EDUCATION ONE LEADER AT A TIME

Road Map to Success

Sherril A. Davis, Principal, James E. Sampson Memorial School

Imagine buying a piece of furniture from IKEA. You open the box to find all the screws, nuts, and wood, except the paper with detailed instruction is missing. Transfer that immediate feeling to one that a parent or student would have without a school handbook. You may be aware of the general rules of assembling the piece of furniture bought; however, there may be a few small details you need to know in order to be successful. The school handbook is the road map to success for all parties involved. The task of creating a handbook is given to principals and school boards and must be well thought out. Consider the following areas when creating a handbook.

Purpose: Why is there a need? The handbook is a reference guide for the expectations, schedules, and policies of your school. Ideas should be drawn from teachers, staff members, board members, home and school association, and alumni associations. Once you decide your purpose, the next step is to consider the content of your handbook.

Content: In preparing your handbook, ask yourself what questions parents and students need answers to and what routine and legal information would they need to know. Make a comprehensive list of all those things and begin documenting. Some information to consider are routines, cell phone policy, check-out during the school day, student supply list, grading system, and health screenings. Be sure all legal information included is current.

Who Gets the Handbook: All stakeholders should receive a handbook. Students should receive their copies and be given the opportunity to read and discuss the information. Parents should receive their book at registration or open house and sign, indicating receipt. Board members, staff, and teachers should also receive a copy. This ensures that each stakeholder is aware of expectations, rules, and regulations of the school.

Addendum and Revision: The school always reserves the right to make changes to the handbook. Each year, complete the revision process with board members, teachers, and staff to ensure the information is up to date.

Measure Success: Periodically, you want to ask yourself if your Road Map is working. Are students and parents asking questions that may be answered by reading the handbook?

If parents and students are not asking questions, yet seem to be confused, a survey may help to determine usefulness of the handbook and areas of suggested improvement.

The handbook is only as good as administration and staff make it. Take into consideration the audience and make it visually pleasing to readers. Younger children will relate more to pictures than words; middle school students also prefer graphics and pictures. Consider giving incentives for those who can prove they have read the handbook. ⊕

(sherril.davis@floridaconference.com)

Thoughts on Handbooks

Rob Stevenson, Principal, Tampa Adventist Academy

Let us be honest, very few people really love handbooks. Oh, I am sure *someone* out there lives and dies for these documents, but most of us only open one when absolutely necessary. We will pick one up to figure out the dress code or find out when school starts and ends. We may need an explanation on what color of nail polish is acceptable or if our daughter can wear jeggings to school. Very few will sit down and read a school handbook from cover to cover.

For those of us in school administration, we think our school handbook, for better or worse, is the defining document of our institution. Without basic guidelines and regulations, the staff and administration of any school will struggle to keep order. In reality, the handbook should reflect our school culture, not define it. Do not get me wrong. We need to have reasonably outlined policies, but make sure that your school culture is more than rules in a book.

Time spent making the handbook as visually appealing as your budget will allow, without over-reaching your institution, will be time well spent. Making your particular document represent your school both visually and substantively is important, but be realistic about how much time people will actually spend reading it. A well-organized document with a Table of Contents so people can find information quickly and easily is essential. Having your handbook available online with printed copies provided upon request will save money and time.

When creating school policies, consider two schools of thought: 1) a school must have hard and fast policies which are to be followed to the letter; and 2) a handbook has general guidelines which can be interpreted by administration and implemented differently according to the situation. Over the years, I have worked at schools with handbooks that represented both sides of the equation. In my opinion, your handbook must reflect the expectations of the school community you are serving and the culture of your staff. Keep in mind—if your institution prefers the hard and fast rules, it is important to understand that a policy is only as perfect as the people who created it.

Each policy should be developed with the KISS principle: "Keep It Simple, Stupid." The more complicated a policy, the less likely it will be followed and enforced. Including your staff and school board in developing any policies and evaluating the importance of each policy for relevance and enforceability is imperative. If staff feel disconnected from the requirements in the handbook, they will be less likely to support the policies. Regular reviews of school policies with the staff and board help keep key school values consistent. Make it clear to the reader that your school handbook is a living document and subject to change when necessary at any time.

Finally, a thorough and up-to-date handbook protects the teachers, administration, and school board. Clearly-stated and supported expectations help maintain school standards. It is difficult to maintain high expectations if they are not codified and explained in a document. Consider your policies carefully and make sure they are defendable. Be able to stand behind your policies and make sure the rules you create are the ones you are willing to personally live by. ⊕ (principal.taa@gmail.com)