

LGS LEAD GREAT SCHOOLS

EASY WINS

FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

10 SIMPLE WAYS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE FAST



JEREMY GIBBS

INTRODUCTION

LEVERAGING SMALL WINS

When I took on my first principal role at Scott Central Attendance Center, I thought I was ready. I had spent years studying leadership, learning from my own past principals, and even seeking out a mentor to ensure I was effective from day one. I didn't step into it blindly. I had a plan.

I believed that success meant big moves—launching major initiatives, setting big goals, and tackling large-scale school issues. And to an extent, that was true. But what I quickly learned was that big moves alone weren't enough.

One of my first realizations came from a simple hallway interaction. A teacher offhandedly said, "The kids love when you come by my classroom in the mornings. It makes a difference."

That small comment struck me. I had always focused on being a strategic leader, but this taught me that simply being present can be a strategy. Great leadership isn't just making directives and pushing initiatives. It is being felt in the daily life of a school.

After that, I made a commitment: every morning, I would be visible. I started greeting students at the front door, checking in with teachers before first period, and popping into classrooms for quick, informal visits. It didn't take much time, but it led to great results. Teachers opened up more. Students felt more connected. The culture started to shift—not just because of the big moves, but because of the small ones.

That lesson has stuck with me. Big initiatives shape the future, but small, visible wins create momentum. And momentum is what leads to greatness.

This guide isn't about overhauling a school overnight. It's about 10 simple leadership moves that take little effort but have a tremendous effect. Each one will help you:

- Strengthen relationships with teachers and students.
- Boost morale through small but meaningful actions.
- Build momentum by proving that small leadership shifts make a huge difference.

These strategies don't require more meetings, more policies, or more stress. They just require being intentional.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

- Pick just one strategy to start today.
- Watch how quickly it strengthens your leadership.
- Start on another small win once the first becomes a habit.

School leadership isn't just about grand gestures. Instead, it's about consistent, visible, and intentional actions.

Let's get started.

01

START YOUR DAY WITH VISIBILITY AND POSITIVITY

JUST BE PRESENT

When I became an elementary school principal, one of my favorite parts of the day was standing at the entrance to greet every student by name. It wasn't really a strategy—I just enjoyed it. But over time, I realized it was more powerful than I expected.

Students lit up when I spoke to them. Teachers started stopping by to share quick updates. That small act of being present each day set the tone for the whole school day.

When I transitioned into secondary leadership at Sebastopol Attendance Center, I brought that same habit with me. Now, I make it a part of my routine to be visible and engaged every morning. I walk the halls before first period, pop into classrooms, and check in with teachers before the day gets busy. It's not micromanaging. It's simply showing up, setting the tone, and making leadership felt.

The fact is, presence matters. Leadership isn't just about decisions made in offices and meetings—it's about being where the people are, every day.

WHY IT MATTERS

It's easy to get stuck in your office, bogged down by emails, reports, and administrative tasks. But here's the reality: leaders who are seen are leaders who are trusted.

When students see you in the hallways, they know you care. When teachers see you in the mornings, they feel supported. A simple "good morning" can change the entire atmosphere of your school.

QUICK ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT TODAY

- **Stand at the front entrance or another high-traffic area each morning.** Greet students and teachers by name.
- **Pop into three classrooms before the first bell.** Don't have an agenda—just a quick “Hey, how's it going?” will set a supportive tone.
- **Check in with teachers.** A simple “Good morning! Anything you need?” can make staff feel seen and heard.

THE WIN

This tiny shift increases visibility, approachability, and morale before the day even starts. A principal who is present is a principal who inspires.

02

MAKE ENCOURAGEMENT A PART OF YOUR ROUTINE

A SIMPLE “THANK YOU”

When I was a principal at Scott Central, I made it a habit to send two encouraging texts a day to my teachers. It wasn't a major initiative. I just wanted a simple way to remind them that their hard work was noticed.

One Friday afternoon, I sent a few text messages thanking teachers for what they had done that week. It was nothing major, just a couple of sentences. By Monday, three of them stopped me in the hallway to say how much it meant to them.

One even said, “I really needed that reminder that I’m doing okay.”

That’s when I realized: Encouragement is fuel. Teachers get emails all the time about deadlines, meetings, and expectations. How often do they get a simple, “Hey, I notice you, and you’re doing a great job”?

At Sebastopol, I haven’t kept up the two-texts-a-day habit, but I have been intentional about sending encouraging texts when they’re needed. Recently, I also started a new practice: three handwritten thank-you notes per month. It helps me to really slow down and recognize the contributions of my staff.

It doesn’t take much. A text, a note, or a quick “I appreciate you” is all you need. The method doesn’t matter as much as the message: You are seen. You are valued. Keep up the great work.

WHY IT MATTERS

When teachers feel seen and valued, they give more to their students. They show up with more energy, creativity, and passion. The leader’s words can either fuel that motivation or drain it.

But here’s the essential part: Encouragement can’t be random. It needs to be built into your workflow so that it happens regularly, not just when you think about it.

QUICK ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT TODAY

- **Send two quick texts or emails every Friday afternoon.** Keep it short, specific, and genuine.
- **Leave handwritten notes on desks once a month.** A sticky note with “Great job today!” can go a long way.
- **Use a tracking system (like your Notes app, a spreadsheet, or a simple checklist).** This ensures every teacher gets encouragement over time—not just the most involved or most vocal ones.

THE WIN

By making encouragement a routine, you build staff morale, trust, and loyalty with minimal effort. A school that achieves excellence is a school where teachers feel appreciated.

03

SURPRISE YOUR TEACHERS WITH APPRECIATION

UNEXPECTED GESTURES

At the end of January one year, I noticed that teachers were talking about how tough this time of year was on their bank accounts. Their last check had come right before Christmas, and now they had to stretch their budget for six weeks before the next one.

I wanted to do something—something simple, lighthearted, but meaningful. So, I bought a bunch of miniature Payday candy bars and attached a note that said:

"Guess what day it is? PAYDAY! Have a great Friday!"

It wasn't a big or expensive gesture, but the response was great. Teachers laughed, took pictures, and told me it made their day. A few mentioned that it was exactly the kind of pick-me-up they needed.

That's when I decided to make this a habit. I would perform a small act of appreciation every month. But I wanted to keep it unexpected, so I planned to do it at different times each month to keep teachers guessing and make each moment a surprise.

It doesn't take much. An unexpected gesture can shift the mood of the entire school. And when teachers feel appreciated, the impact lasts far beyond the moment.

WHY IT MATTERS

Teachers expect structured rewards, such as positive evaluations or recognition at faculty meetings. But unexpected appreciation is especially powerful. It makes teachers feel valued beyond just their performance.

When teachers feel acknowledged, they show up with more confidence and commitment. A well-timed small gesture can turn a rough week around and remind your staff why they love their job.

QUICK ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT TODAY

- **Bring in surprise snacks or coffee during a stressful week.** Even something as simple as a bowl of candy in the lounge makes a difference.
- **Publicly shout out teachers in emails or meetings.** A quick “I want to give a shoutout to Mrs. Smith for the awesome lesson I saw” increases morale.
- **Drop off a favorite drink or snack.** If you know a teacher’s go-to treat, surprise her with it at her desk.

THE WIN

You bring happiness, appreciation, and better morale without needing a big budget or a complicated program. The smallest surprises often lead to the biggest results.

04

SOLVE A SMALL, ANNOYING PROBLEM

FIXING WHAT MATTERS

One of the most common frustrations I heard from teachers wasn't about policies, meetings, or even discipline—it was about the copier.

The copier on the high school hall was tucked away in a small room that made sense on paper, but in reality, it wasn't convenient for the teachers who used it the most. I kept hearing about the hassle of walking back and forth, waiting in line, and squeezing into a tight space just to make a few quick copies.

So, I moved it. Instead of keeping it in the copy room, I put it at the end of the hall where it was closer to the teachers who used it.

I didn't think much of it at the time, but the teachers loved it. They told me how much easier their mornings were and how they appreciated the change.

As I mentioned before, leadership isn't always about big, overarching initiatives. Sometimes, it's just about noticing small problems and making life a little easier for the people who do the work every day.

WHY IT MATTERS

Every school has small, persistent issues that hurt morale. A broken copier, a messy duty schedule, outdated supplies, or a confusing process—these may seem minor, but they add up to become major stressors.

When teachers feel like no one listens to their concerns, frustration increases. But when a leader quickly fixes a small but visible problem, it sends a powerful message:

"I see you. I hear you. I take action."

QUICK ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT TODAY

- **Ask teachers, “What’s one small thing that makes your job harder?”** You’ll often get easy, fixable answers.
- **Pick one simple problem and solve it quickly.** This could be adjusting a duty schedule, getting more toner for the copier, or organizing a common area.
- **Publicly acknowledge the fix.** Something like “Thanks to your feedback, we’ve taken care of [this problem]” shows teachers their concerns matter.

THE WIN

Solving small but visible issues builds trust and goodwill quickly. Your teachers will start seeing you as a leader who listens and gets things done.

05

WALK INTO CLASSROOMS EVERY DAY

PRESENCE WITHOUT PRESSURE

At first, I avoided classrooms unless I had to be there. I didn't want to disrupt lessons or make teachers feel like I was evaluating them.

Then, one day, a teacher told me something that caught me off guard. She said:

"I only see you in my room when something's wrong."

That hit hard. Without realizing it, I had created a culture where my presence meant trouble. That was the last thing I wanted!

After that, I started doing quick, casual walkthroughs every day. No clipboard. No evaluation checklist. Just a few minutes to be visible, supportive, and engaged. And over time, the entire dynamic changed.

Teachers stopped tensing up when I walked in. Students got used to seeing me. Classrooms felt more open, and my relationships with staff improved.

WHY IT MATTERS

When a principal is only seen in classrooms for evaluative observations or discipline issues, it creates distance between leadership and instruction. Teachers feel scrutinized instead of supported.

However, when walkthroughs are frequent, informal, and positive, they become a normal part of the school culture. Teachers trust you. Students respect you. And you can get a better picture of what's happening in your school.

QUICK ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT TODAY

- **Drop into five classrooms every day.** Keep it short—1-3 minutes is enough.
- **Leave a quick, positive note before you go.** Even a sticky note with “Great energy in your class today!” makes an impact.
- **Make it non-evaluative.** No stress—just a chance to observe, encourage, and engage.

THE WIN

Frequent, casual walkthroughs build trust and connection without overwhelming teachers. Presence matters, and consistency makes it better for everyone.

06

SIMPLIFY YOUR COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

CLEAR, FOCUSED MESSAGING

When I first started at Scott Central, I asked all of the teachers what they needed from me. Their answers were almost unanimous: communication and follow-through.

I took that seriously. From day one, I focused on improving how I communicated with staff, making sure they always knew what was going on without overwhelming them.

Finding the right balance wasn't easy. Too little communication left teachers feeling out of the loop. Too much, and people missed the message. It became background noise.

Over time, I refined what I did. Instead of sending emails as things came up, I organized everything into a single, structured “Friday Wrap-Up” (which later became the “Monday Memo.”) I provided clear bullet points, quick updates, and no unnecessary fluff.

The impact was immediate. Teachers felt more informed without getting buried in emails. I received fewer complaints about missing announcements, and teachers started coming to me with questions that actually mattered because they weren’t sifting through a ton of messages just to keep up.

Ever since then, I’ve been working to perfect communication with staff, always looking for that sweet spot where everyone knows what’s going on without information overload.

WHY IT MATTERS

When communication is scattered and excessive, people start tuning out. But when it’s structured, predictable, and easy to scan, teachers stay informed without feeling overloaded.

As a leader, your words shape your school’s culture. A cluttered inbox leads to frustration. However, a simple, streamlined system leads to clarity.

QUICK ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT TODAY

- **Send one structured email per week (ex: a “Monday Memo”).** Keep it brief and scannable.
- **Use bullet points and clear sections.** Avoid paragraphs longer than a few sentences. Teachers don’t have time for them.
- **Establish a single place for important information.** Whether it’s Google Calendar, email, or teacher mailboxes in the lounge, make sure everyone knows where to find key updates.

THE WIN

Teachers feel informed, not overwhelmed. You spend less time repeating information, and your communication becomes a tool for clarity, not chaos.

07

USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO SHOWCASE YOUR SCHOOL

TELL YOUR SCHOOL'S STORY

When we started a Student of the Month program, I knew it would be a great way to highlight students, but I didn't expect the response from parents to be so overwhelming. Every time we posted pictures of the honorees on social media, comments and shares came pouring in. Parents loved seeing their kids recognized, and it reinforced something important: people want to celebrate the good things happening in our school.

That's why I make it a point to post occasionally, even though I've designated people to handle our social media. I also enjoy creating (or helping students to create) videos that highlight some of the best aspects of our school.

Sometimes, the biggest impact comes from the smallest posts. A quick snapshot of students working on a science experiment or a fun moment from a classroom lesson can go a long way. It doesn't have to be a major event, just a small glimpse into what makes our school special.

Every time we share those moments, it reminds parents, students, and the community that learning here is engaging, exciting, and worth celebrating.

WHY IT MATTERS

The outside world only knows what you share. Parents, the community, and even district officials form opinions based on what they see and hear. If the only stories getting attention are negative ones—discipline issues, low test scores, or budget problems—you're missing a huge opportunity.

A strong social media presence allows you to:

- Boost school pride among students, staff, and parents.
- Showcase teachers' hard work in a way that feels meaningful.
- Shape your school's reputation in the community.

And here's the best part: It takes almost no time.

QUICK ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT TODAY

- **Capture one great moment per week.** This could be classroom success, student achievement, or a fun event.
- **Keep posts short, authentic, and engaging.** Even a one-sentence caption with a quick photo can be powerful.
- **Feature students and teachers.** Let them be the stars—parents love seeing their kids in action.

THE WIN

You boost morale, enhance community engagement, and control your school's narrative—all in under five minutes.

08

STEP IN FOR A STUDENT TO BUILD A RELATIONSHIP

CONNECTION OVER CORRECTION

One day, a teacher came to me frustrated about a student who refused to do any work. He wasn't disruptive. He just shut down when it was time to engage.

Instead of immediately enforcing consequences, I pulled the student aside and simply asked,

"What's going on?"

At first, he shrugged me off. But after a few moments, he admitted:

"I don't get how to do the work, and I don't want to look stupid."

That changed everything. Instead of sending him back with a warning, I sat down and worked through the first few problems with him. He needed support, not punishment. Over time, his attitude improved—not just in that class, but in others, too.

That experience reminded me: Not every discipline moment needs a consequence. Sometimes, students need connection, not correction.

Even when you do enforce policies, be sure to follow up with that student to restore the relationship.

WHY IT MATTERS

Many students act out because they feel lost, frustrated, or unseen. If every leadership interaction they have is about discipline, they start seeing school leadership as the enemy, not an ally.

One of my mentors, Gary Maze, once taught about the negative correlation between rules and relationships: as one increases, the other decreases. How would you prefer to invest your time? How about your students?

When students know that their principal cares, they behave differently. They feel accountable not just to rules, but to relationships.

QUICK ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT TODAY

- **Pick one struggling student per week to check in on,** not because they're in trouble, but because they need support.
- **Ask students for input on a school issue.** Even something small, like "What's one thing that could make school better?" increases trust.
- **Acknowledge student effort, not just behavior.** Let them know you see their progress, not just their mistakes.

THE WIN

Better student relationships lead to fewer discipline issues. When kids feel seen and supported, they try harder, respect adults more, and engage more fully in school.

09

CREATE A STUDENT LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

GIVE STUDENTS OWNERSHIP

At Sebastopol, we wanted to create a reward system that helped increase student motivation, but finding something everyone liked wasn't easy.

Early on, I had students request a homecoming-style dance, but our district policy didn't allow it. So instead, we planned a neon glow dance party after the first semester. It went over great with elementary students...but the high schoolers weren't interested at all.

I realized we needed the high schoolers' input if we were really going to motivate them.

Instead of guessing what they wanted, I asked them directly. Their ideas were simple but spot-on: a trip to the park for kickball and pizza, and even a field trip to play TopGolf.

Once we started listening to students and giving them ownership, participation got a lot better. The rewards actually felt like rewards because the students had a say in creating them.

Students don't just want to be given things—they want a voice in the process. When you let them take ownership, the buy-in is completely different.

WHY IT MATTERS

Students want to feel like they have a role in their school. When they're given responsibility, they take more pride in their school community.

Even small leadership opportunities can:

- Increase engagement by making students feel valued.
- Reduce discipline issues by shifting students from passive participants to active contributors.
- Create a culture of ownership where students solve problems instead of causing them.

QUICK ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT TODAY

- **Start a student advisory group**, or use your existing student council. Meet once a month for feedback and ideas.
- **Assign student roles.** Designate greeters, event helpers, or door holders. Small jobs that give students more responsibility increase ownership.
- **Let students have a say in decisions.** Even something simple, like what snacks to include on the snack cart, makes them feel involved.

THE WIN

Students feel invested in their school, which leads to higher academics and better behavior. When they have a role in making school better, they rise to the challenge.

10

FOLLOW UP ON ONE PROMISE EACH WEEK

ALWAYS KEEP YOUR WORD

One morning, a teacher mentioned that a student's desk in their classroom was broken. The writing surface was about to come off, making it hard for the student to work comfortably.

I told her I'd get it taken care of.

But the week got busy. After dealing with meetings, emails, and discipline issues, it slipped my mind.

The next week the teacher brought it up again. This time, she seemed more frustrated. The student had still been using the broken desk, and I had completely dropped the ball.

That moment taught me an important lesson: broken promises—even small ones—erode trust.

Now, I make it a point to track my commitments. If I tell someone I'll do something, I make a note in my phone and follow up within a week. One simple fix—just keeping my word—made a huge difference in how my staff saw me as a leader.

WHY IT MATTERS

Your credibility is built (or lost) one promise at a time. If you follow through, people trust you. If you don't, they start assuming you won't—and eventually, they stop asking.

But here's the good news: Even small follow-ups can restore trust.

When people see that you remember the little things, they trust you with the big things.

QUICK ACTIONS TO IMPLEMENT TODAY

- **Think: “What have I told someone I’d do but haven’t yet?”** Pick one thing and take action.
- **Write down every promise you make.** Even small ones—track them in your notes app, your planner, or a spreadsheet.
- **Make it a habit to follow up every Friday.** Set a reminder to check in on outstanding commitments before the week ends.

THE WIN

Keeping small promises builds trust, credibility, and leadership integrity. When people believe you mean what you say, your influence grows.



START SMALL, WIN BIG

Great school leadership isn't about grand gestures—it's about consistent, intentional actions.

When I first became a principal, I thought I had to make big moves to create meaningful change. But over time, I learned that small wins, consistently applied, build momentum that lasts.

The 10 strategies in this guide aren't complex. They don't require more meetings, bigger budgets, or new policies. But they do require one thing: intentionality.

WHAT NEXT?

The Bible mentions that we should be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). Take something you read about in this guide and apply it in your daily practice. Once it becomes a habit, stack another small win on top of it. It's easy!

Remember, leadership isn't about doing everything all at once. It's about doing the right things consistently.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Jeremy Gibbs is a dedicated school leader passionate about student success, teacher support, and school culture transformation. With experience in both elementary and secondary school leadership, he specializes in turning vision into action through practical leadership strategies.

Learn more about effective school leadership at LeadGreatSchools.com

