

It's the Principal of the Thing!

One of the fundamental truths of education is that effective schools are created and sustained largely through effective leadership. While it is possible for strong leaders to help a school overcome problems and weaknesses, rarely is it possible for a school to rise above its leadership in order to achieve success. Both education lore and research on leadership agree on one point: when it comes to creating effective schools, it's the principal of the thing that matters most.

Beginning in the late 1970's, Ron Edmonds and Wilbur Brookover argued that strong leadership from the principal is the most important factor in schools that work -- schools in which students learn and achieve. Augmented by literally hundreds of studies during the intervening decades, that fundamental truth has been adjusted, tweaked, and refined, but it has never been successfully refuted.

In the past twenty-five years, the definition of "strong leadership" has evolved from a traditional, take-charge style of influence to a more facilitative model. Despite this evolution, however, there are certain constants in the literature that define the effective principal. According to Bess Parker's *Education Week* article (November 11, 1998), "Principal Matters," good principals do eight important things:

- Recognize teaching and learning as the main business of the school;
- Communicate the school's mission clearly and consistently to staff members, parents and students;
- Foster standards for teaching and learning that are high and attainable;
- Provide clear goals and monitor the progress of students toward meeting them;
- Spend time in classrooms and listening to teachers;
- Promote an atmosphere of trust and sharing;
- Build a good staff and make professional development a top concern; and
- Do not tolerate bad teachers.

While these statements seem simple enough, each one is the tip of an iceberg of organizational, political, technical and educational complexity. Each of them interacts with all of the others in a web of tangled relationships that make the seemingly simple tasks of school leadership unimaginably complicated.

So daunting is the work that Daniel Duke, a professor at the University of Virginia, says that the job is fundamentally "undoable." Because all of the work of a high school principal never gets done, Duke says, the principal who thrives "must have a clear sense of which activities produce the most student gain."

What are these high gain activities? According to the principals of effective high schools interviewed by Ms. Parker, they have a common theme -- they focus on teaching and learning.

A Detroit principal said that her time is best spent studying test scores, finding the gaps in student learning, "making sure there's alignment between the district's core curriculum and ours, and seeing what teachers are actually teaching."

Willis Hawley, a professor at the University of Maryland, concurs. He found that principals of better schools demanded high quality teaching, tracked student achievement, and recruited the best teachers they could find. In lower performing schools, principals functioned more as managers and had low instructional expectations for teachers.

In a study of New Jersey's urban districts, evaluators found the principal played a key role -- setting realistic student achievement goals, evaluating and supporting teachers, reaching out to parents, displaying a positive attitude, and leaving no child outside the school's circle of concern.

Research at the University of South Florida revealed that the principal has four critical roles in the teaching-learning process: hiring, supporting and supervising teachers, monitoring overall school performance, protecting instructional time, and building strong community ties. In fact, for many beginning teachers, the principal is the most important factor in their decision to remain in a school or even in the profession.

This recognition leads Charmaine Tourse, Director of Teacher Recruitment and Retention for the Stamford (CT) Public Schools, to conclude that the principal is central figure in resolving the teacher shortage facing America's schools. "Not only does the principal affect a teacher's decision to join a faculty, more than anyone, the principal affects his or her decision to stay."

North Carolina principal Ann Clark, former National Principal of the Year, agrees that the principal's visible support for teachers is critical. She says that the greatest part of her day is spent supporting teachers: listening to them, getting them what they need, responding quickly and being visible.

Beyond support for teachers, one of them most difficult parts of the job is confronting ineffective teachers. According to Karen Seashore Louis, a Minnesota researcher who studied urban school reform for twenty years, it's one of the things that effective principals cared about the most. She claims that monitoring teacher performance is not enough. The principal must make significant changes in the expectations people have of each other, and removing ineffective teachers is one of the strongest ways of signaling that commitment.

Virtually every decision a principal makes conveys a message about his or her vision for the school. If the principal allows time to be wasted or squandered on unproductive activity, the value of instructional time will be diminished. If the principal celebrates only one form of student achievement, other forms of achievement will languish. If the principal ignores inappropriate student behavior, so will everyone else. If the principal avoids technology, it will never be fully infused in his or her school. As a result, the effects of every decision reverberate throughout the school, communicating to everyone exactly what is important and what is not.

Being a principal is not only the most important job in the school, it is also the most difficult...and often the loneliest. And it doesn't take a lot of research to come to those conclusions, either. All it takes is an hour in the principal's office.

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