

# WHAT'S ON YOUR PRINCIPAL'S MIND?



We pose the questions we know you want to ask. You may be surprised at what you find. **By Pamela Wheaton Shorr**

**B**e honest: Sometimes you don't understand your principal. Sure, she dressed up like Abe Lincoln for your unit on the presidents, but sometimes you think she's forgotten what it's like to be in the classroom. Sometimes you just want to ask

her what she's thinking. We've been wondering too, so we decided to ask. We spoke to a dozen principals in a variety of schools and their attitudes, concerns and priorities were pretty similar. So here's your chance to get inside the head of the head of your school.

## PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #1:

What qualities matter most in a teacher?

Passion for teaching and compassion for students topped the list for most principals. "I'm looking for people who teach with dedication," notes Dr. Yvonne Chan, an award-winning principal at Vaughn Next Century Learning Center in Los Angeles, California, and a member of the State Board of Education. "Skills can always be learned."

But, administrators say, this passion for teaching must be paired with compassion—a love of students and the wish to advocate for them and help them reach their full potential. Mike Scholz, who was an assistant principal for 13 years and is now in his first year as principal of Mascoutah High School in Mascoutah, Illinois, says he wants his teachers to be involved with kids outside the classroom. "I look for teachers who give extra of themselves," he says, noting that it's important for teachers to run extracurricular activities and clubs and show up at school events to show how important the kids are to them.

Other key teaching qualities include an interest in continuing professional development, commitment to the overall school community, subject knowledge, and understanding of the developmental stages of children.

## PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #2:

If you could ask one thing of teachers, what would it be?

"I would ask teachers to teach and treat all students as if they were their own children," says Sharon I. Byrdsong, of Azalea Gardens Middle School in Norfolk, Virginia, who is also National Association of Secondary School Principal (NASSP) Middle School Principal of the Year. Byrdsong says she loves seeing the sparkle in children's eyes when they grasp a concept that they have had difficulty understanding.

Barbara Menard of Burrillville High School says she'd like teachers to ➤➤

spend more time sending home positive information, like making a call to the homes of kids who are struggling to tell parents what they are doing well. As dean of students, she'd also like teachers to stop using her as their only method of discipline.

#### PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #3:

### What's the first thing you look for on a classroom visit?

No surprise here—principals want engaged kids. A little classroom chaos is fine, as long as it's appropriate for the project at hand. Your fearless leaders don't want you to be fearful of trying something new. They'd rather see an instructor experimenting with a fresh idea—even if it fails—than droning on. Ron Landman, who's been a middle school principal for the past 28 years, the last 17 at the Swampscott Middle School in Swampscott, Massachusetts, points to a recent attempt by his world languages teacher who used math manipulatives to help his students grasp a foreign language. "It's not something we use today," Landman says, "but it was really interesting to see how the more visual kids responded."

The room should be engaging, too. Cynthia A. Quezada, who's headed up the Kimberly Elementary School in Redlands, California, for the past five years, says she likes to see an attractive classroom environment that welcomes kids.

#### PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #4:

### What's your biggest pet peeve about teachers?

You can get on a principal's bad side, and one of the easiest ways to do it is to act just like your students! Marcia Parrott, who has helmed the Miraloma Elementary School in San Francisco, for seven years, says she hates griping and whispering between staff members. "I'm a problem solver," Parrott notes. "So come to me and tell me what's wrong."

But the biggest pet peeve of all is a teacher who doesn't see that every child

is an individual. "We're a small town of 6,000 people and a school of 230 kids," explains Pat Hould, principal of Lewistown Junior High in Lewistown, Montana, for the past 13 years. "Teachers say 'I had your older brother' and then hold misconceptions based on what the older sibling did," Hould explains. "But every child is different."

#### PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #5:

### What is the hardest part of teachers' jobs?

Lack of time, dealing with parents, mountains of paperwork, NCLB pressures, covering the standards, being under the microscope, an increasingly wide variety of students, helping kids cope with complex social issues, class ratios—principals really do get that teachers are under the gun, and the many we interviewed really seemed to appreciate what you do every single day. "Sometimes, the hardest part of being a teacher is just showing up!" rues Bob Cancro, principal of Monmouth County Academy of Allied Health and Sciences in Neptune, New Jersey.

#### PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #6:

### What can teachers do to improve school morale?

"The attitude a teacher brings to work has an effect on the school," notes Larry R. Barnes, principal at Milford Elementary School in Milford, Utah, for the past 14 years. Most other administrators agree that healthy, happy teachers are key to good school morale, and they recognize that their own attitude has a lot to do with that. Award-winning principal Roberta M. Ellis of Brawley Middle School in Mooresville, North Carolina, has implemented a program that rewards any teacher who goes beyond the call of duty with massages, dinners out, and the like.

Daniel Matthews has been assistant principal for the past nine years at Northview High School in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and is the recipient of the 2005 NASSP Assistant Principal of the Year

Award. Matthews says it's critical for school leaders to explain exactly why decisions are being made, and to keep teachers in the loop. For instance, Northview recently abolished detention and in-school suspensions completely, based on the theory of Perceptual Control by Ed Ford. "Teachers had to move away from a punishment model," Matthews says, and that was extremely difficult. To help make the transition, the school brought Ford in to work directly with the staff to get into the whole theory behind the change. That has paid off in spades.

## PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #7:

### What part of your job would teachers find most surprising?

The amount of time administrators spend with parents and community members would surprise most teachers, say our hardworking principals. "I'm on the phone, e-mailing, and in meetings with parents and community members every day," says Roberta M. Ellis of Brawley Middle School.

Most school leaders average three or four parent interactions every day. Marcia Parrott of Miraloma Elementary says she thinks teachers would be amazed at how much planning and time goes into avoiding nasty surprises, anticipating problems, and working the system behind the scenes.

Daniel Matthews of Northview High says that teachers might be surprised at how many gut-wrenching problems their students have, and how much time he spends as a social worker, trying to help kids find solutions.

And Bob Cancro, principal of the Monmouth County Academy, says the big shocker for most teachers would be that he loves his job! "Teachers tell me they wouldn't change jobs with me for anything," Cancro notes. "What they don't see is that I'm involved in everything. I'm elbow-deep in really exciting ideas every day. I get to see every classroom, I see great teaching. It's not all drudgery and paper pushing."

## PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #8:

### What do you miss most about teaching?

Barbara Menard, dean of students at Burrillville High School in Harrisville, Rhode Island, has been in education for 37 years. A former math teacher who spent 25 years in the classroom, Menard sometimes misses the outright goofiness of the classroom, and the joy that comes from working with kids.

When principals are jonesing for some time with the kids, they admit they'll often go take a walk. "It's one of the reasons I go through classes," says Ron Landman of Swampscott Middle School.

## PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #9:

### How do you prepare for teacher evaluations?

Most principals try to be transparent about what the evaluation is all about, giving teachers time to prepare in advance. Some principals prefer a structured approach, using teaching rubrics and a self-assessment process to augment classroom observations. Others are more laid back.

Larry R. Barnes of Milford Elementary says he's in and out of the classroom a lot, "taking little snapshots of what's going on." He's worked hard to avoid the tension and punitive feeling that can be part of these observations, and in fact, Milford teachers now ask Barnes to come into their classrooms when they need feedback or help with a lesson instead of waiting around to be told what they might be doing wrong.

Pat Hould, principal of Lewistown Junior High says he rarely has anything in hand when he comes into a classroom to evaluate a teacher. He asks the teacher what they're hoping to do in a particular lesson, and looks for evidence that it's working.

Mike Scholz, principal at Mascoutah High says principals have a responsibility here too. He says it's impossible for him to be an expert in all subject areas, so he spends a lot of time reading and attending

*(Continued on page 67)*



## GIFTS FROM YOUR PRINCIPAL, WITH LOVE

Your administrators like you—they really do! They'd love to shower you with gifts. In fact, if they had all the money, power and time in the world, this is what they would give you:

"Hope." —Pat Hould, *Lewistown Junior High School*

"Recognition by parents, community and local business people that teachers are working on a professional level and have successes with students every day." —Ron Landman, *Swampscott Middle School*

"Money—Utah pays less per student than any other state." —Larry R. Barnes, *Milford Elementary School*

"I'd ask them individually what would make their jobs easier, and give them that." —Cynthia A. Quezada, *Kimberly Elementary School*

"Release time: time to meet and talk and reflect and share." —Marcia Parrott, *Miraloma Elementary School*

"Facilities! And a laptop that they could take home with them." —Roberta M. Ellis, *Brawley Middle School*

"Six full days of conferences with families a year, rather than two, and six three-day weekends off for teachers to spend with their own families." —Daniel Matthews, *Northview High School*

"I would give my teachers a well-deserved pay raise!" —Sharon I. Byrdsong, *Azalea Gardens Middle School*

"Understanding, compassion and respect." —Barbara Menard, *Burrillville High School*

*(Challenging Behavior...  
Continued from page 27)*

“The best thing is to demand access to student files quickly and get information from the previous educator who had expertise on what did or didn’t work,” says McIntire. There is an assumption that there is an efficient exchange of information, but in fact the level of communication varies from case to case.

■ **KEEP EVERYONE IN THE LOOP.**

“Make sure everyone who works with the child is included in decisions,” says Sue Masterson, a principal in Janesville, Wisconsin, and president of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. It’s crucial that the parents agree with the plan and that they keep you informed about the behavior challenges of their child.

Nelson suggests that teachers need to identify and address the child’s underlying problems. McIntire adds: “In most cases, if you understand the nature of

the disability and the need of the child because of the disability, then you can structure the situation so the child doesn’t behave poorly.”

■ **HAVE A PLAN AND REVIEW IT.** The team that knows and works with the student should develop a contingency plan for when aggressive behavior happens, says Rosemarie Young, a principal in Louisville, Kentucky, and past president of the NAESP. She advocates monthly team meetings to give progress reports and discuss the roles in serving some of the most challenging students.

“Suspension and expulsion should be our last resorts,” says Skiba. “Schools should have the right to remove children who are dangerous to themselves or others. But it can be a crutch used in the absence of clear expectations, well-trained staff, school-wide rules, and preventive options.”

■ **ASK FOR HELP.** “Often the most difficult kids are put with the best teachers

and that can ratchet up burnout,” says Lisa Thomas, assistant director of educational issues at the American Federation of Teachers. Advocate for support personnel, paraprofessionals, and teacher mentors to assist yourself and other, more novice, teachers.

■ **SEEK TRAINING.** “The behaviors I see are more challenging than in the past and teachers need training,” says Masterson. “They need to know how to de-escalate a potentially volatile situation.” This means training on body posture, choice of words, and more, she says.

■ **WORK IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS.** Today’s parents are more educated and equipped with information to lobby for the rights of their children with disabilities. “When you deal with our children, you are dealing with our hearts. Schools need to know that,” says Sherri Trapp, whose 12-year-old son Tyler is autistic. “Our children are just as special as all the other kids.” □

*(What’s on Your Principal’s Mind? ...  
Continued from page 35)*

seminars to prepare for his own job of evaluator.

**PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #10:**

## How do you view merit pay?

Bob Cancro of Monmouth County Academy says there’s no way to be objective about merit pay, and that’s the problem. “You can’t control who comes into a classroom,” he explains. “How do you equalize the roster and compare a teacher of AP calculus to a teacher who has eight special education students?”

The hardest thing about merit pay, says Ron Landman of Swampscott Middle School, is that education is a continuum, and a second-grade teacher may be reaping the benefits of what the child learned the year before. How is it fair that a teacher gets a bonus for that?

But Yvonne Chan is a fan of these bonuses—to a point. She says Vaughn Next Century Learning Center has a performance pay system, and from the

principal to the cafeteria workers, everyone takes part. The caveat is that staff members receive extra money for the skills that they themselves demonstrate. “It’s not tied to student outcomes,” notes Chan, “and only a very small portion is even tied to school performance.” Merit pay aside, principals wish they could pay teachers more across the board, though many would also like to ditch the tenure system.

**PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #11:**

## What do you do when a parent complains about a teacher?

The first step in dealing with parental complaints is usually to ask whether the parent has spoken to the teacher yet. Most principals want the two to meet before taking any action. Dr. Yvonne Chan does things a little differently, though. She says she’ll meet alone with the parent to help him or her frame the issues so that they are less emotionally fraught. She’ll investigate the problem, then meet with the teacher privately to

hear his or her side of things and respond to the complaint. Finally, she brings both parties together. She gives them options as to how to proceed and lets them decide. “It’s my job to resolve problems,” she says, “but I don’t believe there’s just one solution to anything.”

**PRINCIPAL INSIGHT #12:**

## What are your ultimate goals as principal?

Raising student achievement, providing a safe and exciting learning environment, offering teachers all the resources possible to teach students – these top the list of goals for most of our principals. But they also point to a ‘higher goal’, one that drives them and is the reason many went into education in the first place. “When I leave, of course I want to leave the school in better shape than when I arrived,” explains Larry R. Barnes of Milford Elementary. “But what I really want is to have made a difference to students.” There’s something you two have in common! □