

# FRUSTRATIONS OF A BELEAGUED PRINCIPAL

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*The role of an elementary school principal has changed drastically over the past thirty years. This paper is one principal's reflections on how the responsibilities and expectations both from internal and external constituencies cause frustration for the building administrator.*



## Role of the Principal

In my 13 years as a public school principal, I have seen the role of the school principal evolve and drastically change. In 2001, the passage of federal legislation "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) highlighted the accountability expectations for all public school educators. Nowhere has that expectation been felt more acutely than at the level of the principalship.

The role of the principal has always been a balancing act between instructional leadership and managerial responsibilities. Elizabeth Shellard, in *Defining the Principalship*, (Principal, March/April 2003) concluded that "...while the principal's role as instructional leader has expanded, his/her traditional management duties have not lessened or disappeared." NCLB has further increased the list of a principal's instructional roles to include data analyst, parent recruiter, staff developer, attendance officer, and tutoring coordinator. The intent of the federal legislation was to increase reading and math proficiency so no child, regardless of ethnicity, special needs, native language, and economic circumstances, would be denied the access to school success as the federal government

defines it in terms of standardized tests. The intent is noble; however, the reality of raising test scores is very difficult, especially in an urban setting where I am an elementary principal.

## School Improvement Conundrum

The past three years have been especially intense in my school, because we have not reached the state goals and have been in the Pennsylvania School Improvement Process. This process requires that staff, parents and consultants from the state write a plan to improve reading and math instruction, as well as document progress of the plan goals throughout the year. This initiative has forced the school into a mode of "hyper academic" vigilance. Because of the need to focus on instruction to raise test scores, we no longer offer students opportunities to participate in choral or band programs, grade level plays, informative assemblies, or community educational programs. If any of these events do occur, they are pushed to the end of the school year.

The result is that the morale of a faculty under siege to produce better test scores is low. As the instructional leader, I *am* caught between the mandates of the school board and the superintendent to improve scores, and the frustrations of staff who feel they are working their hardest to teach the curriculum outlined by the state. Sixty percent of our students are economically disadvantaged. There are four homeless shelters in our district and three low income projects. Eighteen

percent of the students across the district are in special education. Of the 70 special needs students in my grade levels, 40% are mentally retarded.

In addition, the behavior of some of the students conflicts with the morals and values of my middle class staff. There is a definite schism between the behaviors accepted and even needed to survive on the streets and what teachers expect in the school. This "values conflict" is reflected in the number of discipline referrals made throughout the year. Faculty members are extremely sensitive to disrespectful students who raise their voices and often "talk back" to a teacher. This is a common discussion in faculty meetings. Teachers are not willing to spend time teaching appropriate behaviors and problem solving student conflicts. Staff are quick to point out that their responsibility is to teach the curriculum. They feel they do not have time to teach social skills.

Numerous programs are operating in the school to build a more respectful environment. I co-wrote a Comprehensive School Reform Grant which we received from the federal government. This grant specifically deals with changing school culture so all students feel they are welcome in the school. Although this is a substantial opportunity to create changes, it also means additional paperwork and supervision of a resource facilitator who provides staff development and implements classroom activities that foster self respect.

The parents of "disrespectful" students are often verbally aggressive. The behavior they exhibit is imitated by their children and, consequently, the challenge is to teach our children that they must behave one way on the street but another way in the school. We are always attempting to build relationships with parents. To get them to attend Instructional Support meetings or IEP (Individual Educational Plan) meetings is painstaking with only about 50 % of the parents attending. We have planned several

parent/student "Fun Nights." By offering parents and children prizes, we do manage to have more parents attend these events. John Dewey would cringe to think that a \$25 gift card to Wal-Mart is the motivator for a parent to attend a school meeting!

However, the responsibility to plan and implement these parent events also falls on the shoulders of the principal. The Parent Faculty Organization in my school is two parents who do the entire fund raising events for the school. Thirty years ago when I started teaching in public education, every parent in my classroom belonged to the Parents Organization. Parents who do work are stressed with job and home responsibilities. Parents who do not work, but were not successful in school, are reluctant to return to school to deal with their children's school problems.

In the fall of this year, our teachers went on strike. They have not resolved their contract and have been advised by their professional organization to not participate in any after school activities. The teachers who co-coordinated the after school tutoring last year will not work with students this year. We are contracting with a nationally franchised tutoring company to work with the "at risk" students after school. The first two days of the program, three first graders were dropped off at the wrong bus stops because the tutoring service did not talk with parents about the after school arrangements. The time and energy it takes to prepare for these after school activities again reduces the amount of time relegated to instructional leadership.

As the principal, I am constantly challenged by time constraints. The school day has a defined beginning and end. The school is a fluid, "living organism," which changes daily. School routines and procedures are established; knowing that on any given day emergencies occur which stretch the procedures and challenge the bureaucracy.

Teachers “call off” sick and there are not enough substitute teachers. Therefore, teachers unqualified to teach certain subjects cover the class. The limited numbers of maintenance men are called to another building for a boiler emergency, while the commode is clogged in *my* school bathroom and students have to walk to another hall to use a restroom. I schedule observations of staff only to find an angry mother arguing with the secretary that she needs to see me now about an unsafe bus problem. As much as I plan and schedule my day, unforeseen events—sick children and an absent nurse; buses that arrive late; parents without custody papers; school board members who call to report a parent concern—all take precedence over what I had planned. Each hour of the day I am constantly doing triage. What needs to be done immediately? What can I get finished before the children leave? Can I reach a parent without phone numbers before the end of the day to report a fight and a school suspension? While I manage the building so school can efficiently continue, the focus on instructional leadership to increase achievement is rarely paramount.

Schools do not operate in a vacuum. The relationship between teachers and parents is indicative of how the parent respects and values that teacher and how much that parent is willing to be an educational partner. As the principal, I am often caught between the parent, who is angry and upset with a faculty member, and the faculty member, who feels he or she has done more than what is expected to help a child. Without being in every classroom, every day, all day, it is hard to know what is or is not true from a teacher’s or parent’s perspective. Building relationships with both parents and staff takes time. Now that I have been a principal in three schools, I know that it takes at least three years to build a relationship with school personnel and with parents.

School personnel are represented by professional organizations. One of the most frustrating tasks of the principal is knowing and abiding by professional contracts. The contracts do not always mesh with the reality of the need in the school at any given time. The custodian does not repair the fire alarm; that is the job of maintenance. The instructional aide cannot be a substitute secretary even though the office has no one to answer the phones. I find myself in a “black market” bartering situation” with staff who will do me favors with the expectation that I “owe” them in the future! Knowing and abiding by the contract saves me time in the long run, even though the demands of employee contracts make no sense in a world of limited personnel and finite resources.

### **Understanding School Cultures**

And then of course there are the children! We all entered the profession to help kids! Why then do so many teachers complain about students? Why is every faculty room a confessional for the faults of the students in every teacher’s classroom? The four schools that I have worked in have all had different cultures and populations of students. I have learned something from all of my students and assignments!

I accepted my first assignment to “get a foot in the door” of administration. Two weeks before school was to start, the board hired me to be a principal in two buildings located ten minutes apart... This was a job that only an optimistic female workaholic would have thought a challenge! One school I called Beirut; the other I called Camelot.

Needless to say I spent very little time in Camelot, a school in an upper middle class, white community with a stable neighborhood where people had lived for three generations. The teachers felt they were superior to their colleagues because they had high student test scores, no discipline problems and parents who loved them.

Beirut was a small school on the fringe of the district. Parents moved in and out of Section 8 (low-income) housing. Since there were already “bad kids” at the school, the district decided to move all of the elementary emotional support classes there. Recess involved two roving gangs of students out to get each other every day. To solve the problem, I had the two opposing classes become model “clubs” and arranged for a few naïve volunteer dads to supervise the building of model cars and boats. This kept all the problem students inside the school building. The students never saw the playground nor the light of day from the third week of school until the end of the school year.

This arrangement cost me a fortune but saved an afternoon of discipline each day. Unfortunately, instructional leadership was an after thought to safely getting through the school day without an emotional blowup.

My favorite memory of the boys was the day of the primary election. The municipality used the lobby of the school to set up voting booths. Several of the boys on their way to the bathroom crawled under the booths and squirmed through the legs of the voters as they completed their ballots. It was difficult to explain that these were inquisitive students learning about the voting process!

My second principalship was in a rural/suburban school. Students lived on farms or in a small town on the edge of farm country. Board members had served on the school board for twenty-five to thirty years. The school was their business. I was the first female principal in the district. To say that it was an “old boy’s network” was an understatement. The teachers were dedicated, hard working and set in their ways. The majority of teachers were senior staff who lived in the district and had worked at the district *their* entire professional lives.

In the eyes of the board and teachers, my major flaws were that I was female, and that I was not “one of them.” The way things

were done for years was just fine, thank you! By working ten hour days and weekends, I began to demonstrate that I was serious about their school and this was not a stepping stone to a higher position.

My most outstanding memory of the school was the “bomber incident.” An African-American student from Detroit moved into the district. He was definitely not a farm boy and had a chip on his shoulder from the minute he entered the school. He antagonized every adult he met and defied most of them. His parents thought the whole district was racist and the multiple in-school and out-of-school suspensions that their son endured only reinforced their views. We had multiple meetings to convince the parents that he needed an evaluation and special placement. They refused to sign for any testing and the district was pursuing a due process hearing to force the evaluation.

One day the “inner city kid” as he was called, announced in the middle of a science lesson on combustible materials, that he would like to blow up the school. His announcement was investigated and researched with his parents in terms of what materials they had in their house; did he have access to the Internet, etc. That night at the scheduled monthly board meeting, a TV crew showed up, as well as over a hundred parents to complain about the safety threat made to the school. For the next month, the TV crews interviewed residents who lived on the same street as the school. They parked cameras near the school, and with zoom lenses, photographed students coming and going to the school. Sadly, curricular issues were the least of my worries for the remainder of the school year.

I am now a principal in a small, urban setting. My parents are lawyers, nurses, business owners, clerks, drug dealers, drug users, third generation welfare recipients and homeless parents. I spend the majority of the day attempting to solve behavior problems

and negotiating with staff to practice “rehabilitative” discipline. Students who feel disenfranchised from the school are disrespectful and needy. I constantly do triage to balance all of the problems sent to me by the staff. A corps of community resources from county and non profit agencies troop through the school daily. I find myself as a case manager for 400 students rather than an instructional leader.

### Too Old to Do the Job

I have been an educator for 37 years, thirteen of them as an elementary principal. I reflect over my career and feel that sometimes I am “too old” to do this job. It is not just my perception that the school and faculty are less respected by the community, it is a reality. The school is expected to be a counseling center, a health clinic, a restaurant, a pharmacy, a tutoring center, a homeless shelter, a resource to parents who can’t solve neighborhood problems, a psychiatric hospital, and last but not least, a place to educate students. We are expected to do more with less in the face of criticism by government agencies for “leaving some children behind.”

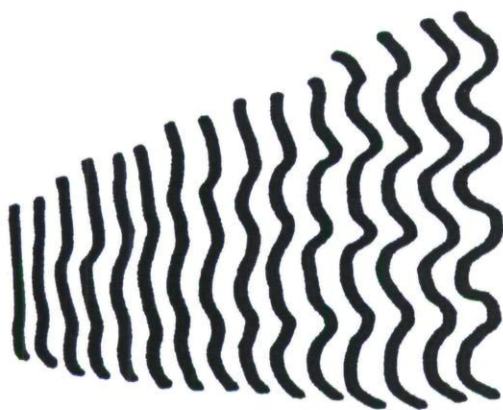
The positives of the job are still the students. I started my career because I wanted to teach students. I find that I still get

excited by student progress. I still like talking with them; sharing their lives; asking what books they are reading; hearing if their football teams are winning; and building relationships with them. No matter how the job has changed, the hook up with kids is still the motivator that keeps me going when I am exhausted and feel that I have made little progress moving the system. Students still make the work worth it! However, the most frustrating part is that we are leaving some children behind, not because the staff or I give up trying. The complex social, emotional and cognitive problems of some children can no longer be handled in the neighborhood school system.

### References

- Shellard, Elizabeth. (2003). Defining the principalship. *Principal*, March/April, Vol. 56.

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