

Budget crunches in large cities leave their marks in many areas. Successful programs are discontinued without warning. Staffs are cut, book and supply funds are decreased, and assistant principals are excessed (transferred, that is, to larger schools with more classes and staff). I've been excessed four times in four years.

The trauma of the first excessing filled me with emotions ranging from sheer betrayal (on the part of my then principal), to resentment of the city's fiscal plight, to questioning the central board of education's philosophy, to animosity toward my local school board. No conferences or warm discussions with my superintendent yielded any change in the board's decision, and my seniority and satisfactory service were not enough to retain me at that school.

A hastily prepared "Sorry to see you go—Good luck in your new school" party ensued, and I was off to my next assistant principal assignment.

My new principal was delighted to have help. I helped in the lunchroom at breakfast and lunch. I helped at arrivals and dismissals and in the book and supply room. I helped in the play yards. My principal lauded me with kudos. I was a great helper. But after coming from a school where I was part of the administrative decision-making core, I did not feel particularly productive.

After 15 years of service, a master's degree, and an advanced post-master's certificate in organization, administration, and supervision, I was not only capable but obligated to provide service more meaningful than "help." I had to plan my approach to let the new principal know my feelings.

I suggested that we share some lunch periods. I recounted programs I had initiated and others I had participated in. I suggested ways to utilize staff members in nonteaching activities (such as in the lunchroom and at arrivals and dismissals). I shared my thoughts on improving existing programs.

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Slowly, a change in my status evolved. I was given responsibility for working with staff and parents in planning and implementing a humanities program. I was asked to develop a schoolwide bicentennial interdisciplinary through the grades program that was a huge success. I managed to help in nonteaching areas, too, and found energy and time to do both. I was beginning to feel fulfilled. And at the end of the school year I was excessed again.

My new principal informed me on my first day of service that the only thing she needed me for was the lunchroom. I was desolate.

I could never approach this principal with my desire or ability to be part of the administrative workings of the school. She was *the principal*. My salvation was assisting teachers, when I could, with curriculum and discipline problems on a one-to-one basis. At the end of my year there, she retired.

Enter the new interim-acting principal. His main objective was to "get the school" on a permanent basis. My role was to keep him informed of all events, programs, curriculum changes, community trends, staff demands, supply status, or any other aspect of school life that would enable him to keep on top of things. I was finally involved in the workings of a school, an improvement on the lunchroom business. At the end of that year he did not get the job.

The new man selected as principal was glad to have an assistant. The first morning, though, as he outlined my duties, I began to wonder what he was going to do. I was to be involved in most school affairs: sit in on policy-making decisions with parent council and staff liaison committees; order books and supplies; program the school; organize assemblies, fire drills, school trips, special events such as the school dance, Flag Day, and children's talent night. I assumed many of my former responsibilities and enjoyed working hard.

I realized, as I took a good look at the situation, that I was doing quite a job—probably that of the assistant principal *and* the principal. Before I could approach the problem I was excessed again.

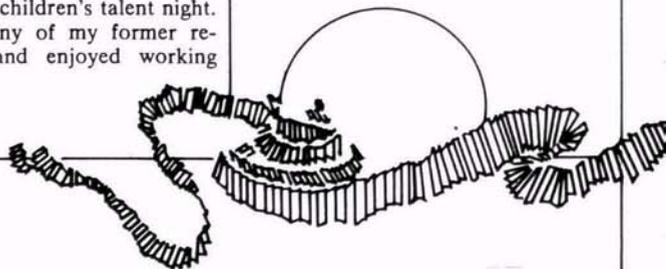
My next principal had never been an assistant principal; he rose directly to the principalship after teaching and serving a short term as an acting supervisor in this school. He was proud of his achievement and anxious to do things his way. He was committed to: "We always do it this way" and "We never do it that way."

On the first morning of my new assignment I asked him what duties he would like me to perform and was aghast when he replied, "Oh, nothing." I was speechless. This was one predicament I hadn't encountered.

He told me he did not want me to visit classrooms. Nor was I to meet with teachers on any matters. I was banished to the top floor, as far away from the main office as possible. Everyone in the building had a role to play except me.

I had to do something. I installed a coffee pot in my office, put a "Help yourself" sign over it, and placed curriculum materials, current literature, and sample textbooks nearby. Word spread. I'd return to my office to find teachers perusing materials and taking a few minutes to relax. Relationships began to develop. I was actually being asked for assistance with teaching methods and discipline problems. In this school my salvation was in offering my services to anyone who would take them.

My relationship with the principal, though, continued on difficult ground. Children knew of high level decisions



before I did. He asked me not to attend evening Parent Association or community liaison planning meetings. Each day I would steel myself for his stunning statements and continue to plan professional survival strategies.

I voluntarily supervised the breakfast and lunch programs as an indication of good faith. I made quiet inroads with cafeteria, custodial, and paraprofessional personnel and, most important, with the children. At the end-of-the-year reorganization, he asked me to take charge of graduation and senior class activities, little things in the grand scheme of administering a school.

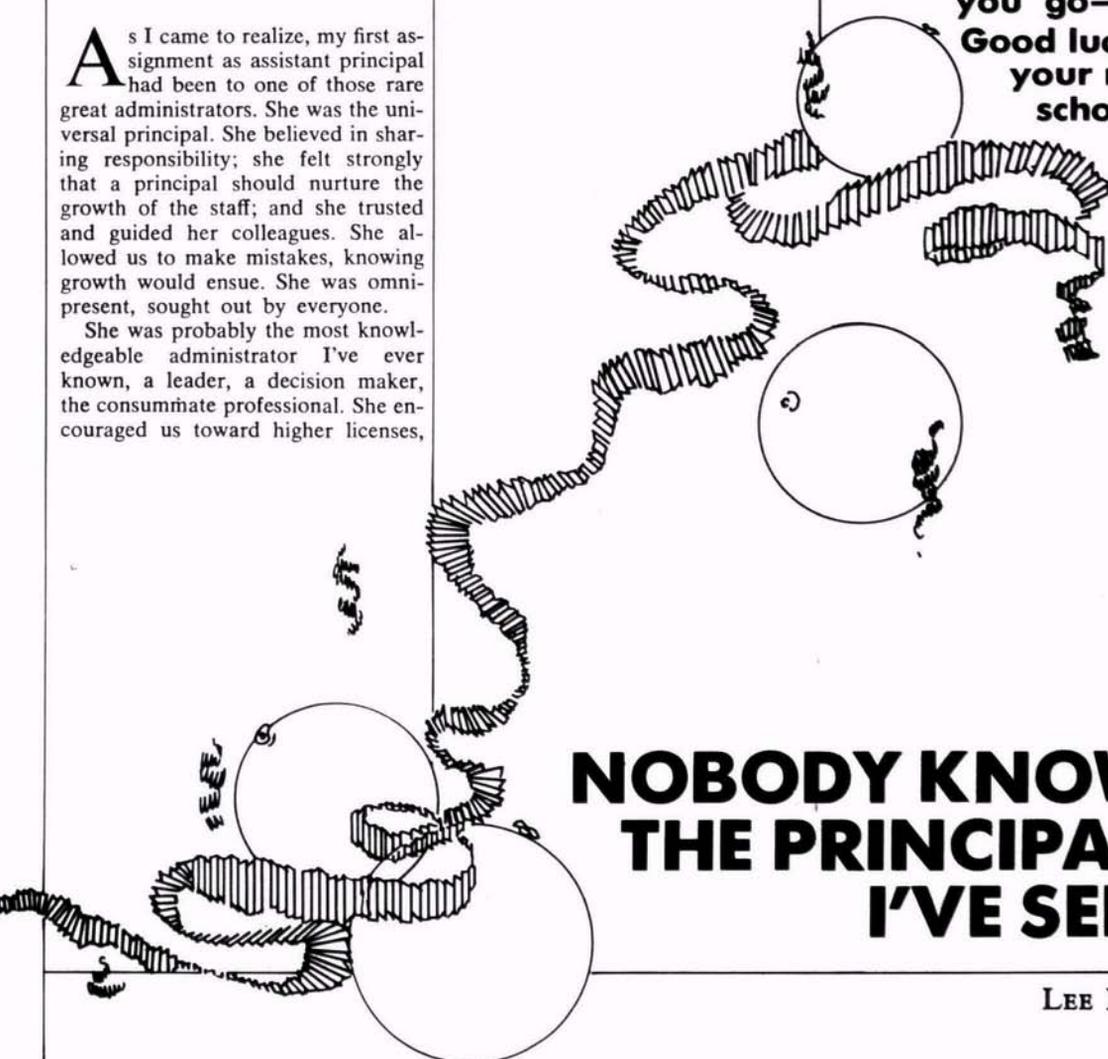
As I came to realize, my first assignment as assistant principal had been to one of those rare great administrators. She was the universal principal. She believed in sharing responsibility; she felt strongly that a principal should nurture the growth of the staff; and she trusted and guided her colleagues. She allowed us to make mistakes, knowing growth would ensue. She was omnipresent, sought out by everyone.

She was probably the most knowledgeable administrator I've ever known, a leader, a decision maker, the consummate professional. She encouraged us toward higher licenses,

never fearing a loss of staff. She tutored us for tests and graduate school comprehensive exams. She was indefatigable, sincere with students, teachers, parents, and school board members. I learned more from this rare woman than from any other source. The experience was unique.

I've recounted these experiences from my assistant principal point of view. For those of you who have assistant principals on your staff, perhaps you will view them with a new or different awareness. We're committed and able. Include us. Share with us. We're people, too. ■

**"Sorry to see
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THE PRINCIPALS
I'VE SEEN**

LEE MARS

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