

"Educational leadership happens, when it happens at all, within the cracks and around the edges of the job."

School Leadership Between the Cracks

For the last ten or twenty years, people have been trying to influence what happens in schools by riding in on white horses, carrying the latest curriculum unit or the latest philosophy of education, and then charging off. What they discovered—and it came as a shock—was that they had to live under the roof of the school to have an influence on it—and even then, change was not assured (Barth, 1976).

Last year, one of us had the opportunity to "live under the roof" as an assistant principal. Her assigned school, South Side High, has 1,700 students and is located in a medium-sized midwestern city. Because of her background, she was hired "to see whether all that theory can actually be applied to a school and have any impact."

Though usually associated with school discipline, the role of the assistant principal varies from school to school. At South Side, three administrators work as a team, sharing responsibilities and areas of specific control and supervision. Although the principal definitely has the final word, the assistant principals assume a good deal of the school leadership and administration.

By presenting selected incidents in a week in the life of an assistant principal, we hope to capture some of the flavor of the job and to point out some of the potential for establishing positive leadership as well as the difficulties in being the kind of principal who can really make a difference in a school.

A Week In The Life . . .

Monday

The day begins as usual. I arrive at 7:30, check in with my secretary and the other administrators and the office staff. Teachers start arriving and I greet them at their mailboxes. This is the morning ritual. I rush off to make sure the buses are arriving without incident and that the corridors are clear until the bell rings. These are all safety measures and they get a great deal of attention.

Since it is Monday, the first agenda item is the weekly guidance meeting. The idea of the meeting is to create a "team" feeling among counselors and administrators. Somehow, after a full semester of trying, the concept still isn't working. The meeting, as usual, is marked by silences, false starts, and disengagement. I think we are all about to give up on the idea. It looked great on paper, but it's just not very successful in practice.

This article is adapted from a forthcoming book *Teachers: Their World and Their Work. Implications for School Improvement* by Ann Lieberman and Lynne Miller.

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This is the week I am to begin the formal evaluation process with teachers. This is a serious part of my job. I want to put all of my training in supervision to good use, but time is short and commitment to the process is very low. I meet for a few seconds with Mr. Smith to arrange for an observation time. This brief encounter will count as our "pre-conference." I ask him if there is anything special I should look for. He says he can't think of anything, just come and watch.

The rest of the day is spent dealing

with specific discipline issues, talking to teachers in informal ways—in my office, outside their classes, in the faculty lounge. I spend as much time as I can out of my office, trying to feel the pulse of the school. Students and teachers alike feel no hesitation in registering complaints, making suggestions, and telling me what's good and bad about the day.

Even as I make my rounds, I think of the state enrollment report sitting on my desk—due by Wednesday. I'll steal half an hour at the end of the day. I vow to

myself. All too soon, the dismissal bell rings and the building is devoid of students. My desk, clean a few hours ago, is a disaster area. I cast a wistful glance at the state enrollment report at the top of the heap and decide instead to continue my conversation with three teachers standing in the doorway of my office. I'll get to the report tomorrow.

Tuesday

The morning ritual begins the day. I spend some time meeting with student representatives from the senior class to discuss the prom and spend the usual time in my office dealing with discipline problems. Most of these problems are minor, but they add up to a major portion of my job. Maintaining an orderly community at the school is a top priority: it is, I think, a pre-condition for effective teaching and learning.

I manage to spend a full hour in Mr. Smith's class as planned. He is a gifted teacher. All I can say to him at the end of the class is "Good work. Keep it up." And that about takes care of the "post conference." I think Mr. Smith is a good teacher and he knows it. I feel silly saying anything more. He accepts my compliment and then, in what for him is a sweep of emotion, tells me how much it means to hear positive feedback from an administrator. He hasn't been complimented for years, he admits, and he likes it when he is.

On to the lunchroom where I walk into a mild confrontation between ten black students and two white lunchroom



"My desk, clean a few hours ago, is a disaster area."

supervisors. The issue is radios. The black students have been asked to turn their radios off, while some white students at the other end of the cafeteria continue to play theirs without interruption. What could be a racial incident is quickly diffused with the help of a school counselor. We ask the white students to turn off their radios as well, and peace is maintained. I ask the supervisors to pay attention to the behavior of all the students, not just an identifiable group. The problem is solved for now, but the issues of personal and institu-

tional racism still need to be addressed—no small matter, I know.

As I walk down the halls at passing time, I get into a conversation with an English teacher who's trying a new language game in her class. She invites me in and I spend a good deal of my time working as an assistant to the teacher, showing the students how the game works. When the class ends, the teacher and I share our excitement about what has transpired. We spend the next hour going over the class minute by minute, exchanging insights, and making suggestions for improving the game and designing follow-up activities. This feels like real instructional supervision; ironically there is no formal procedure. Instead there is serendipity and collegial interaction.

Wednesday

This is one of those days I dread and it always happens on a Wednesday. I spend almost the entire day as policeman, judge, and jury. There are two fights in the halls. Several teachers make discipline referrals. My office is wall-to-wall students. The day seems short and so is my patience. This is *not* the reason I went into educational administration.

Just as I feel I've passed the hump, I'm met by seven students who have left a classroom on their own to complain about the teacher and his methods. The students want me to take them out of the class. They're angry and they want vengeance. Later in the afternoon, four parents call with the same message. I stop by Mr. Moyer's class and ask him to see me before he leaves. When I tell him about the exodus of students and the rash of parent calls, he is shocked and angry. He has never been *told* about complaints before and he doesn't want to hear them. He makes it clear that he considers it the principal's responsibility to handle all complaints and to shield the teacher from them. I explain that I feel differently, that he is entitled to know of any complaints against him so that he can address them himself. We agree to meet tomorrow during his preparation period.

The final bell has rung and the day is over, except for the enrollment report that is due today. I close my office door and work on the forms until they are complete. As I leave the building to take the report downtown, I run into one of our coaches. He tells me the barometric pressure was low today. That explains it, I think, as I leave the building. Everyone knows that school is harder

when the pressure is low.

Thursday

The day begins without incident. Life is back to normal at South Side. I approach the day with guarded optimism.

The highlight of the day, of course, is the conference with Mr. Moyer. I take time to prepare some documentation on what the students' and parents' complaints are about. When Mr. Moyer enters my office, I begin by telling him that the purpose of this conference is to look at the nature of the student concerns and to work together to improve the way the class is going. Mr. Moyer immediately takes offense. "I've been teaching for 20 years and I don't need any help or improvement. The students have lost all respect for authority; that's the problem—not me. What we need is harsher discipline. Check all of my evaluations from previous years. All are excellent or satisfactory. No one has ever said anything to me that even suggested I need help. I just have a bad crop of students this year." In fact, what Mr. Moyer says is partially correct. Even though it's common knowledge around the school that he's had consistent problems with students and parents over the years, there is nothing on record to indicate this is the case. Previous evaluators never challenged Mr. Moyer with complaints; they simply filled out the evaluation sheets in a perfunctory way so as not to cause more trouble. Mr. Moyer has continued to struggle in his classroom without feedback, support, or assistance.

As the conference continues, I realize the issues are not black or white, that there is a history I must recognize and deal with, and that Mr. Moyer is somewhat justified in his anger. On the other hand, the students have some valid points and they could be receiving more organized and effective instruction. I spend the better part of an hour with Mr. Moyer and we agree to begin a series of steps whereby we can answer the student and parent concerns. I will drop by his classes more regularly and we will continue to meet. I'm not certain how this will turn out in the end. In time, one of two courses will emerge. Mr. Moyer and I will develop a working relationship aimed at improving instruction—or we won't. In the latter case, I'll have to consider placing Mr. Moyer on probation so an "instructional assistance team" can be formed to work with him. In the meantime, we both need practice in working together.

That done, I turn my attention to

other areas. I meet with the cheerleading and pom-pom sponsors and we plan ways to get more minority girls involved in those activities. I stop by the class of the debate coach and wish the team good luck in their first contest. The day winds down with a small faculty meeting of the English department where the topic is teaching the low-skilled students. The meeting goes late and we all leave the building at 5:00, having begun a project to collect appropriate learning materials and to build our own bank of activities.

Friday

Donuts! Friday means donuts, all over the school. In small faculty lounges and coffee clutches, teachers have a system for collecting money to supply Friday morning donuts. I've joined one such group and I happily munch on my pastry as the morning begins.

Friday also means a pep assembly—a delight for the kids and a veritable nightmare for administrators. From the first ringing of the bell to the last rousing chorus of the school song, I hold my breath and hope for peace. This assembly goes without incident and students return to their classes to resume the school day. Pep assemblies are a source of faculty contention. Some teachers feel that they are necessary for school spirit and for a meaningful high school experience, while others want to abandon them in favor of uninterrupted instruction. I tend to side with the latter position, but I'm also aware of tradition. So, we have pep assemblies—not as often or as long as some schools, but we have them.

The school mail brings my paycheck and yet another report to be completed. The day progresses peacefully and predictably. When the dismissal bell rings, we all beat a fast path home. No one stays late on Friday.

Reflecting on Experience: Conceptualizing a Role

Principalship is a lot like teaching. It is personal, conflictual, and uncertain. One learns the job by doing it, never sure that the job is being done well. The job, as we see it, includes a wide variety of roles. To name a few:

Omniscient Overseer. A principal simply has to know everything that is happening in the building all the time. While teachers focus on the particular, principals look to the general: not one classroom, but all classrooms; not one interaction, but all interactions. Everything that happens in a building is im-



portant. The view from the principal's office must be broad and clear; it must encompass everything.

Confidant and Keeper of Secrets. The principal gains knowledge of the school through a variety of sources, some public, some private.

As the key communication links in their organization, administrators know much that they cannot share with others. These confidential matters, be they good or bad secrets, are an important part of administrative life (Burlingame, 1979).

Keeping secrets means isolation and having the fortitude not to share knowledge about a particular teacher, a particular incident, a particular problem that arises and needs solving in private. The confidences of students about their classes, a teacher's inability to keep class control, underlying currents of hostility that threaten to flare up at a moment's notice—these are secrets a principal keeps. They are private matters in a very public world.

Sifter and Sorter of Knowledge. One of the problems about knowing everything is that all things can seem equally important. The principal has to make distinctions. She has to decide what needs tending, in what order. Is cheerleader and pom-pom selection more or less important than attending a department meeting? Does enforcing a rule always take precedence over individual needs? What has top priority: completing a state report on time or meeting with a teacher in distress? What tasks can be delegated and what requires personal attention? Such are the distinctions a principal must make, under conditions that are less than ideal, again and again in the course of a day, a week, a term, a year.

Pace Setter and Routinizer. There is periodicity in the life of schools (Lieberman and Miller, 1978). Regularity is set by the principal. There are regular meetings to set, supervisory duties to fill, schedules to be designed and implemented. There are morning routines, informal sessions with staff over coffee, an "open door" at the end of the day—small rituals that help give order to a school. As routines are established, expectations are fixed. The routines of an administrator lend stability to a building as the routines of a teacher stabilize a class.

Referee. A principal spends a good part of the work day running interference between groups and individuals who are in conflict, acting as referee in a

game where the rules are unclear. Whether intervening in a matter of classroom discipline or a potential racial incident in a cafeteria, the principal is an arbiter of fair play. On another level, the principal referees among departments covetous of classroom space or a share of the budget. The principal mediates between the faculty advocates of school spirit and those who favor uninterrupted instruction. Daily, the principal stands at the center of an arena of dissenting factions, sure to offend someone and to never please everyone.

Linker and Broker. A principal links people, ideas, resources within a building and outside of it. She knows the need and skills of the faculty and is able to make good matches, if she takes the time to do so. In the larger world of the district and the community, the principal brokers with the central office, with outside agencies, and with the local authorities to gain services and recognition for the school. She is always working to cement alliances to benefit the building's programs.

Translator and Transformer. As the schools' chief executive, the principal has to carry out policy from above as well as make policy from within. A principal receives orders from a supervisor, a central office administrator who has long been out of touch with schools. Be it a new teacher evaluation procedure, a revised discipline code, a scheduling format change—all such policies are left to the principal to translate to the staff and to transform to meet the needs of the particular building at a particular time. What is actually implemented looks little like what has been mandated; it is reformed to fit the mold of the school. The policy seldom reshapes the school; the school reshapes the policy (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978). And the principal is the primary architect of the project.

Paper Pusher, Accountant, and Clerk. A principal is overwhelmed with housekeeping responsibilities. With new legislative mandates, local accountability procedures, and specially targeted programs, there are new forms to complete, new numbers to tally, new reports to file, new records to organize. The teacher evaluation procedure at South Side required documented observation notes as well as a narrative summary. Because the material was confidential, the three principals typed, duplicated, and mailed their own forms for every teacher in the school. The state enrollment report that hung like an alba-

trous around the neck of the assistant principal was one of many time-consuming bits of paperwork. In addition, there is a budget to develop, space to allocate, schedules to program, and a desk constantly in need of clearing. Unlike their counterparts in industry, principals do not supervise rationalized operations. There is still a quality of "Barnaby, the Scrivener" to the school office.

No matter how else one construes the role, the principal is held ultimately accountable for the smooth operation of the building. She is the manager of all resources—material and human. The job is to "maintain order, maximize production, and minimize dissonance" (Barth, 1981). She represents "management" and the teachers represent "labor." She supervises a staff that includes a teaching faculty, custodians and engineers, and cafeteria workers. If the building is in disarray or the grounds unkempt or the cafeteria service inefficient, it is the principal's job to put things back in working order. A public measure of principal's competence is the well-functioning of the plant. It is an area that requires careful and constant scrutiny and immediate action to put things aright.

Disciplinarian. Part of maintaining a plant is maintaining order. Whether responsibility for enforcing discipline is delegated or kept for oneself, the principal sets a tone for what is expected, what is tolerated, and what is punished. A school has a reputation as "loose" or as being a "tight ship" and it rests on the principal to make that reputation. The staff follows the leader. At some schools, there are general parameters of appropriate behavior. South Side follows this model. At other schools, there is a plethora of rules and regulations and a specified response for each infraction. Teachers watch and wait to see how discipline is handled in the executive office and then follow suit in their classrooms. A principal is seen as weak or strong based on how she views discipline.

Scapegoat. Because the principal is literally in charge of everything, she is the first to be blamed when something goes wrong. She is scapegoated by the staff, the central office, the parents, and the general community. If the building is not in full working order, it's the principal's fault. If a teacher can't control his class, the principal is to blame. If the cheerleading squad doesn't reflect the racial mix of the school, the principal is taken to task. Wherever she turns, the

principal is held responsible for the shortcomings of the building.

Educational Leader. Every principal wants to be an educational leader. Few get the chance. Pre-eminently, there is the *time* factor. There isn't much time built into the system for meaningful educational dialogue, planning, and evaluation. The formal time that is scheduled is often misdirected. Witness the elaborate teacher evaluation process mandated at South Side from the superintendent's office: pre-conference, observations with documentation, post-conference. What often transpires is cursory and uninteresting. It certainly has little to do with educational leadership. What opportunity that exists for real leadership is marked by serendipity and opportunism—by seizing the moment as it comes.

When an administrator compliments a teacher for a well-constructed and taught lesson, she is making a statement that excellence is recognized and rewarded. When a principal meets with a teacher whose classroom is in revolt, she is saying that she's concerned about what happens behind the closed doors of a classroom and is signaling a change from previous administrators who have given high marks to a teacher in need of improvement. When a principal attends department meetings that focus on curricular issues, she's letting the staff know that she supports dialogue and informed action. All of these events and actions may be defined as educational leadership—not rational, linear, and planned; but ad hoc, responsive, and realistic. *Educational leadership happens, when it happens at all, within the cracks and around the edges of the job.*

Moral Authority. Finally, the principal is the chief moral authority in a school. It is her notion of justice that prevails. The principal can maintain neutrality and let things progress as they always have; even that is a moral statement. A principal may take an active stance, threatening the assumptions of the staff and moving the school in more progressive or more regressive direction. A principal condones or condemns certain behaviors and attitudes; she models moral precepts as she goes about the job. When the administrator at South Side took the side of minority students in the lunchroom-radio incident, she gave a clear message to the faculty that discrimination was not to be tolerated. A powerful message was transmitted. Had there been administrative apathy, an equally powerful point would have

been made. At root, a principal's actions are statements about justice. The role of moral authority is one a principal can seize and make her own—or it is one, like educational leadership, she can avoid and then leave the mantle unclaimed.

Implications

There is much written of late about the power of the principal to make change and school improvements happen (Berman and McLaughlin, 1978). A good principal, the story goes, can create a school where children learn and teachers develop, where openness, cooperation, and harmony reign. We want to challenge that notion a bit because, given our understandings of the complex roles of a principal, such a view of the office is out of touch with much of what we have experienced.

The reality is that there is a huge gap between what the role of the principal is supposed to be and what it actually is. For principals, there are two worlds: the world of "is" and the world of "ought."

A principal *ought* to be a leader; more likely she *is* a manager.

A principal *ought* to be a helper; she *is* an evaluator and judge.

A principal *ought* to share knowledge; she *is* a keeper of secrets.

A principal *ought* to be democratic; she *is* autocratic, at least some of the time.

A principal *ought* to be concerned with individuals; she *is* concerned with the total organization.

A principal *ought* to be long-range; she *is* ad hoc, spontaneous, and situation specific.

A principal *ought* to be an innovator; she *is* a maintainer.

A principal *ought* to be a champion of ideas; she *is* a master of the concrete.

Ultimately, a principal has to make choices about what to be and how to become. The principal has at least three clear options:

1. Choose to live totally within the world of *is*, and in so doing disparage the world of *ought*. In this instance, a principal opts to be a good manager and not a good leader; she supports and maintains the status quo and resists attempts to change things. She may become oppressive or laissez-faire. In either case, she neither initiates nor actively supports school improvements.

2. Choose to live tentatively in the world of *is*, with one eye cocked toward

the world of *ought*. By so doing, she leaves herself open to outside influences, ready to take a step toward leadership, questioning the status-quo, and improving the school. She may not initiate improvement activities, but she can be won over. She can lend the support of her office to the programs and plans of others.

3. Take the leap. She can take on the behaviors that effective leadership requires. She can become a helper, more democratic and open, more involved in individual growth issues, more long range, more collegial, more innovative, and more involved in the world of ideas. A principal who takes this third option is capable of initiating improvements and supporting the efforts of others.

If there were magic in the world, all of our school principals would choose the third option. But there is no magic. There are, instead, systematic and ad hoc attempts to make a dent in what is, to have an influence on what may become. These attempts take many forms. There is trial and error, persistence, being present as events evolve, being attentive, being ready.

Principals need help, just as teachers

need help. They need to have the time or *learn to make the time* to spend their energies in the world of "ought." This is perhaps the most challenging and the most compelling of tasks that people concerned with educational leadership must now confront: how to provide for the care, sustenance, and development of principals in a way that acknowledges the realities of the world of "is" and helps build toward the world of "ought." ■

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