

The Principalship

JOANNE YATVIN

Leading Through Partnerships

When I started out in school administration in the mid-'70s, principals were called "middle managers," but I was idealistic and arrogant enough to insist that I was an "instructional leader." Now that that term has become common currency in the profession, I am beginning to think it does not accurately describe the role academically oriented principals really play.

Looking back, I find that I was least successful when I tried to march ahead of the troops, shouting, "Follow me!" Usually they did, but with little enthusiasm and no clear idea of where we were all headed. The worst times were when I was charged with implementing programs that had been designed and packaged somewhere else. They always lost vitality in translation, weakening as they went from the creator to the marketer to me to the teachers to the kids. Moreover, because they did not grow naturally out of what was already going on in classrooms, they required too many changes too quickly from teachers, producing more anxiety than satisfaction. Even something originally wonderful, like James Moffett's *Interaction*, sank like a stone at our school in less than a year.

But nearly as bad were the times when I tried to carry out my own bright ideas. A plan for a schoolwide

resource teacher put an unfair burden on some classroom teachers; a pull-out program for gifted children created a false student elite and locked teachers out of the fun of working with their brightest students; a recreational reading program that proved sound and workable for awhile died on the vine when I wasn't at the school for a year to keep it going.

On the other hand, I have been most successful when I fostered "educational partnerships," situations where teachers and I work together to make something happen. Often, they begin when one or more teachers have an idea, see a need, or feel a dissatisfaction and bring me in to help. For example, our literature-based reading program originated with two teachers and later spread throughout the school. My role was to allocate money for paperbacks and time for planning, defend the program at the district level, write about it, do a research study, and release originators from school to do workshops whenever there was an opportunity. Now, other schools in the district and teachers all over the country are adopting our reading list, structure, and methods.

Other partnerships grow from nothing more than a shared desire for change, and I am as much a creator of programs as their financial backer. This is true of our current gifted pro-

gram, which was designed, changed, added to, and supported by a seven-person steering committee of which I am an active member.

Noting the emphasis on running a school through partnerships, a cynical reader might wonder if principals shouldn't go back to being managers and let the teachers work on curriculum. After all, they're better at it, and somebody is needed in the office. I would argue that even as partner, the principal plays a unique and necessary role. If programs are to grow strong and last, if the school is to be a purposeful and cohesive unit, some central force is needed. Working in partnerships, principals can do three things that teachers cannot do: (1) they can provide the resources that turn ideas into realities; (2) they can use their authority to advocate, defend, legitimize, and disseminate programs; (3) they can use their broader perspective to see how a program fits into the school as a whole. Because they are on the front line, not sitting in the office poring over attendance reports, they can make things happen. Maybe, after all, that's what leadership means. □

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Reading and Writing

PATRICIA M. CUNNINGHAM

They Can All Learn to Read and Write

Why don't some children learn to read and write? What can you do with children who come to school without an

understanding of the concepts essential to reading and writing? How do you motivate children to be literate, if literacy is not a high priority in their out-of-school environment? How can

you involve parents in their children's learning?

These questions, asked daily in public school lounges, administrative board rooms, and university education

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