

The Teacher

PATRICK WELSH

Teachers Coach Each Other on the Art of Teaching

T. C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia, started the 1984-85 school year with a new principal and associate principal. Things were going to be different, "tighter," we were told. What happened over the course of the year was, for me, graphic confirmation that administrators and teachers all too often live in totally separate worlds with the result that administrators usually have little positive effect on what goes on in the classroom.

At the first department meeting in September 1984, a memo from the associate principal announced a new policy of "teacher observations and evaluations" and set down half a dozen steps deemed essential to instructional success. These included a "sponge activity" and a "closure activity." Though administrators had trouble explaining the sponge metaphor, they told us to have a brief activity ready at the beginning of every class so that students could get busy as soon as they walked in the classroom. The closure activity, it was explained, meant that at the end of every class we were to summarize the lesson and ask students what they had learned.

During a meeting of disgruntled English teachers and the new associate principal, I complained that the treadmill schedule of the school day was tedious enough for students without a sponge activity to start them working the instant they sat down. The associate principal told me that he saw my point, but that it would be "teacher risk" not to follow his guidelines. It would be acceptable, he said, to deviate from the lesson plan if a "teachable moment" arose. Teachers left the meeting chuckling over the new clichés. Some of us felt that the associate principal was trying to intimidate us with jargon. To me his implication was, "I've got the latest secret about teaching—you don't."

What bothered most teachers was not the idea of evaluations as such. I think we accepted the premise that

teachers can always get better. The new guidelines, however, were too rigid and mechanistic and seemed to be a desperate attempt to make it appear that administrators were doing something about the alleged crisis in the classroom.

I laugh when I think of the evaluation Shannon Derian got that year. Derian has taught for 35 years, and her abilities have often been publicly recognized. In 1983, she was presented an award at the White House as one of the country's outstanding teachers. In 1985, she was our school system's nominee for the Virginia Teacher of the Year. For years I've heard students praise her seminars and lectures, yet when she was evaluated (by a former football coach), she was faulted for allowing her students to continue a heated debate on a historical issue until the bell rang. The evaluator told her she should have stopped the argument, summarized both sides, and declared one side the winner. Derian says that it is ridiculous to tell kids that one side is right when eminent historians disagree among themselves. Rather than stop the argument before the bell rings, Derian wants her students

to leave the classroom arguing and take the discussion home to the dinner table.

Take the evaluation that another administrator gave one of my colleagues in the English department. During the class for slow readers that he was observing, students were writing letters to the editor of a local newspaper. In his formal evaluation, the administrator wrote that the letters should have been written at home and that the teacher had omitted both the sponge and closure activities. Shortly thereafter, the newspaper printed a full page of the students' letters. It gave the students and the school a big boost to get this kind of public recognition. All the teacher got for her creativity and effort was an evaluation in her file that seemed to me very picky and negative.

But as teachers were being boxed into sponge and closure activities and morale was plummeting to an all-time low, something truly exciting began to happen. A few teachers and administrators began studying a state-funded experiment at Varina High School in Richmond. Teachers at Varina were doing most of the classroom observa-

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tion; they were coaching each other in the art of teaching and had a great deal of say when decisions were made in their school. One administrator was put in charge of the day-to-day management of Varina, freeing the principal to be an instructional leader in more than name only. Our superintendent, Robert Peebles, gave his full support to teachers who wanted to

study how the Varina model could be used at T. C. Williams.

Now teachers were faced with some brand new questions. Did we really want to put in all the work and time needed to play a part in running our school? Or were we content with our traditional passive roles—hiding behind our classroom doors, taking little responsibility for the life of the school

as a whole, and constantly criticizing those who did? Those questions are still being asked a year after we began studying the Varina project.

Some answers to those questions in my next column. □

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The Principal

JOANNE YATVIN

On Riding a White Horse

An important part of a principal's job is supporting teachers. Long ago I swore allegiance to this belief without quite realizing what I was letting myself in for. Over time I have found that actually giving support is a major test of will, endurance, and compassion, perhaps because the system shrinks from it and so does the union, except in contractual matters.

Teachers need four general kinds of support from their principals: resources to carry out the standard instructional program, resources plus moral backing for new programs, protection against intrusions on the classroom, and help in moderating the bad effects of their own mistakes.

None of this is as easy as it sounds. In many school districts just getting the necessary books and supplies is a major battle. Either the money isn't there, or it is and you can't pry it loose from Downtown. The same kinds of obstacles, magnified, hinder the launching of any new program. Bureaucratic operation seems to be based on the principle that change must be made as difficult as possible in order to forestall anarchy. But even after getting approval and resources, there is yet another obstacle to hurdle: selling the program to parents. The temptation is strong for principals to stand back and let the teachers involved carry the ball. But if someone in authority isn't ready to become informed about a new program, publicly extol its benefits, and soothe parents' fears, the program will fail.

Dealing with classroom intrusions is no less demanding. Yet, the most obvious forms—P.A. announcements and

frequent pull-outs of children—because they are partly under the principal's control, can be reduced. Complaining parents, on the other hand, are not under anyone's control, and their grievances, no matter how trivial, have to be dealt with patiently, tactfully, and fairly. After teachers have made an honest effort to solve a problem, they should feel free to refer it to the principal, "who makes all the decisions around here anyway." This action in itself may terminate the matter, since parents are more reluctant to quarrel with the principal than with teachers. But if it doesn't, principals have to defend the merits and logic of the curriculum and apply school policies consistently. When exceptions are called for—as they sometimes are—principals need to make clear that values, not pressure or sympathy, are what overrides policies.

Even harder to deal with is the continual paper storm, because notices and requests blow in from so many directions and because most of them deserve attention. Despite their worthiness, the principal must stand guard with a large wastebasket at the ready, or teaching and learning will get buried under side issues. Some missives should never leave the office; others can be modified to get or give the same information more easily; and still others can be handled by the principal with a "thank you for your interest, but..." or a generalized response. Teachers should not have to count how many widgets are in their classrooms; the principal can estimate with a clear conscience.

The most difficult aspect of supporting teachers is helping them when they get into trouble. Too often princi-

pals take a stance at one extreme or the other. For reasons unknown, they stand 100 percent behind Ms. Y, who slapped a kid, while they abandon to the wolves Mr. Z, who let slip a profanity in front of his class. Before defending or condemning a teacher, principals must put the facts in perspective. What did little Johnny do that prompted the teacher to question the authenticity of his term paper? How many times had Sally been late to class before the teacher told her that she was not welcome there last Thursday? Even when they think that teachers have erred, principals need to point out to irate parents their strong, clean records and to explain that teaching is an on-stage job where quick decisions are required and mistakes are inevitable. Teachers need and deserve a fair measure of tolerance from those looking on and risking nothing.

In matters so serious that all of the above is not enough to set things right, principals still have an obligation to errant teachers. They can support them by ensuring that any formal proceedings are fair, orderly, and dignified, that all legitimate means of appeal are explored, and that any penalties are both just and humane. A teacher's disgrace is a tragedy, and a principal should not permit anyone to take delight in it.

If, at the end of many a day, principals find that their plumes are wilted and their horses exhausted, I am not surprised. But wasn't it an exciting trip? □

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