

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 extoll 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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