

The Principal

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Unexpected Blessings

In work as in life, I find that most blessings come well disguised. When a teacher I respected came to me several years ago wanting to reduce her contract to half-time so that she could raise her child and continue teaching, I said "yes" only because I wanted to help her. I knew that if she surrendered her job to spend a few years at home, she would not be likely to get it back again.

Since then, I have said "yes" to three more teachers for similar reasons and hired seven others to share jobs with them. Three of our twelve classrooms are now shared, and although there have been problems, I have not regretted my decision about job-sharing nor about the particular teachers who became involved.

Our version of job sharing is to assign one teacher to the morning and one to the afternoon, with the teachers dividing the subjects according to preference. One set of sharers also alternates full Mondays. Although this arrangement was one of personal convenience, the teachers have made it work to their students' advantage, too. By using Mondays for long projects, field trips, and other activities not easily contained in a half-day, they have persuaded children, parents, and me that their plan is educationally sound.

The main advantage of job sharing is that two people bring more knowledge, patience, and willingness to work than one person could contribute. They also form a productive partnership, not only sharing ideas but also encouraging, tempering, and enriching each other's work. Each subject and each child receive more devoted attention than they would if only one person attended to all. As one job-sharing teacher told me when I praised her year's work with a difficult child, "I couldn't have done it if I'd had to be with her all day, every day."

A second advantage is the fleshing out of our planning teams. Because we are a small school, only one or two teachers would be on a team at some grade levels if everyone worked full

time. Through job sharing we ensure that the tasks of planning, organizing, and writing curriculum are shared between at least two people, and in most cases among three or more.

Finally, through job sharing, we always have teachers willing to take on extra work. While other schools in our district have to hire outsiders for gifted programming two afternoons a week, we employed one of our job-sharing teachers, who, because of her familiarity with our students, teachers, and curriculum, is able to zero in on the special projects she is there for. Last year we hired another sharer to spend ten half-days setting up a math lab. Still another sharer reviews our computer equipment and software every Monday afternoon to ensure their smooth operation throughout the week.

Of course, any principal contemplating job sharing has to consider the down side, too. For me, the hardest part is scheduling. I have to set school hours so that our mornings and afternoons are the same length. Art, music, and physical education classes must be arranged so that both teachers in a classroom get their fair share of planning time. On those occasions when time distributions could not be made equal, sharers have mutually adjusted the workload to make it at least equitable.

Another problem involves setting meeting times, since not all teachers are here after school. Our solution is to schedule team and special service meetings during the noon hour, issue weekly staff memos to keep everyone informed, and retain our monthly after-school staff meetings (morning people sometimes come back for them), as informative and ceremonial occasions rather than decision-making forums. Even if we did not have any half-time teachers, I would choose to continue these helpful practices. After school is not a suitable time, and a full staff is not an appropriate size group, for discussing and deciding important matters. We get more done, more thoughtfully and with fewer conflicts, through our alternatives.

A third problem is the lack of teacher coordination time. Since, contractually speaking, one sharer arrives at school as the other is leaving, they can do little more than wave in passing. Our teachers, on their own, have extended their work time to provide a brief overlap every day and longer ones as needed. All teachers stay for noon-hour team meetings, and sharers often also talk on the telephone at home. By volunteering to teach their classes once a month from 10:30 to 1:30, I give teachers three extra hours to plan and I receive some much-needed experience on the front lines.

One pitfall I was warned about—teacher incompatibility—has not materialized, but I feel obliged to warn others. I don't know what a principal can do when two sharers want to separate and there is no place else for them to go. Perhaps when teachers are given the chance to choose their partners and are expected to resolve whatever differences arise, happy professional marriages are not only possible but probable.

Another concern of administrators is that job sharing will raise costs to the school district because of the necessity of providing benefits to both teachers. I would answer that concern by reassuring them that an experienced teacher is almost always joined in a job-share by a less-experienced teacher whose salary is significantly less. In two or three years, the differences in the total salary for the whole job more than compensate for the benefits. But much more important in the larger view of teacher employment is the fact that the district is getting more time, more dedication, and better instruction for its money.

By allowing that first teacher to share her responsibility with someone else, I helped her solve a personal problem, but the job-sharing solution also benefited the school, the district, and me far more than anyone supposed at the time. □

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