

The Kid's-Eye View of Effective Principals

When someone asks them, children have a lot to say about effective—and ineffective—principals.

She goes in the cafeteria to see if everybody is doing right and not throwing trash on the floor and throwing milk on people's heads and putting food in people's shirts and pants. And she makes sure you have no animals, like lizards, in the trays running around.

—A third-grade student discussing his principal

Despite an increase in their responsibilities not directly related to children, school leaders are often engaged in one-on-one exchanges with students.¹ This finding comes from an extensive study of principals conducted by the Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development. Through hundreds of hours of observations and interviews conducted in 12 schools, we saw first-hand the kind of juggling act principals perform as they handle many pressures and demands from their district offices, communities, and staffs. As part of the same study, we queried 107 students to obtain their perceptions of their principals.

Although children have received little attention in educational research literature, their comments in this instance are highly descriptive and sometimes insightful about the principal's role. The principals whom students find to be helpful:

Photographs by Carrie Kojimoto



Said one sixth-grader about her principal: "She's not always in her office like some principals are. She just gets around."

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- create and maintain a safe and orderly environment;
- enhance students’ self-esteem, sense of responsibility, and ability to get along with others; and
- help students grow academically.

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The Interviews

To obtain a representative sample of each student population, we asked principals to consider the gender, ethnicity, and grade level of the students they recommended for the interviews. In addition, we asked them to choose students who represented each of five participation-style categories: academic, social, rebellious, dependent, and isolated.²

With both parents’ and teachers’ approval, we asked students to describe what their principal did, their personal interactions with the principal, and what a “perfect” principal would do. We also asked them to compare former principals to their current one. We posed the questions in various ways and in different orders depend-

ing on the student’s age.³ The following is based on the comments of 37 elementary school students.

The Importance of High Visibility

When asked “what does your principal do?” students in all schools reported seeing their principal walking in the halls, on the playground, and in the lunchroom; talking to teachers and

students; and visiting classrooms. In other words, these principals constantly “cruise” the school and do not conduct business just from behind their office desks. An “academic” sixth-grader spoke of his principal:

She just comes around the school and sees what we’re doing and stuff, or she goes out on the playground and sees how we are playing. She’s around, she’s not



Students recalled situations where a principal offered advice about classwork while making rounds on the playground



Children appreciate when principals "cruise" the playground, stopping to chat and play.

always in her office like some principals are. She just gets around.

Students generally gave high marks to principal. for maintaining this kind of high visibility. Circulating frequently connotes to youngsters that the principal knows what is going on in the school generally and is interested in what students are doing specifically.

Principals who "hide out in their offices," on the other hand, were characterized as unfriendly, lazy, and uninterested. For example, students made these criticisms:

At some of the places I went, the principals didn't really talk to the kids; they just kept to themselves and stayed [in their offices].

We didn't have assemblies with [the other principal]. She'd have one of the office attendants have the assemblies, and she wouldn't come in herself. She'd never

show her face. She never walks around to the classroom or nothing.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of highly visible principals, the students also discussed the need for safety and order, social requirements, and personal and academic guidance needs. In the following sections, we discuss those three types of needs and illustrate how students felt that active principals met them.

Meeting Needs for Safety and Order

The "cop assigned to a beat" is one image active principals projected to youngsters. When kids saw their principal "cruise," they reported that the principal was making sure that they obeyed the rules, got to classes on time, and didn't get into fights or

"[The children] expressed a clear preference for principals who counsel and mediate, who actually listen to the kids' ideas and evaluate that information before meting out punishments."

damage the school grounds and buildings. For example, several students described their principals' routine behaviors in the following ways:

I see him outside sometimes, during the winter, trying to make sure that boys and girls don't throw snowballs at other people.

She looks out the windows to see kids don't go out in the desert, because long ago, I think Tuesday a long time ago, we saw a big bull snake. And she doesn't want us to go on the desert anymore. She helped us learn about not throwing rocks and not going out on the desert catching horny toads, cuz there's a lot of snakes.

When she's in the auditorium, she's talking to us, having a meeting. When she's in the classroom, she's announcing something or checking on us, talking to our teachers. When she's out on the playground, she's watching us making sure everything is okay.

Student observations correspond with those made by field researchers who noted principals reprimanding students for making noise and running in the hallways and who described principals maintaining the cleanliness of the school yards and cafeteria. Although a few rebellious youngsters viewed the principal's supervision as an obstacle, most students regarded the seemingly constant presence as reassuring.

Meeting Social Needs

In discussing what principals did as they "cruised" that made them not only visible but accessible, youngsters pointed out that safety and order were not the principal's only concerns. Qualities that further distinguished a "good" principal in their minds were what one youngster described as "nice" and "caring." Another student, a rebellious one, commented:

She'd be everywhere, in the halls and classrooms. She really didn't spend very much time in the office with conferences and stuff. She really took her time on kids, and she didn't take advantage of us.

Either in discussing their own principal or in envisioning a "perfect" one, students preferred a principal who tried to learn about and meet their needs and develop positive relationships with them. Kids from all sites emphasized the importance to them of

face-to-face, one-on-one exchanges, beyond mainly group-directed monitoring acts discussed. According to students, effective principals performed three types of activities that met their social needs.

1. *Hi-bye/passing time with students.* When asked "Have you ever talked to the principal?" many students recalled "conversations" during which the principal said "hi" and "bye" and the child returned the greeting. This simple act, accompanied by a smile, is apparently very important to students. Children felt recognized as people, as their comments illustrate:

When I say hi to people, I like them to respond back. When I say hi to [the current principal], she says hi. But when I said hi to [my former principal], she just looked at me and rolled her eyes the other way, so I just walked away.

[The principal] always says hi and she smiles. I like her so much when she does that. It makes you feel like she knows what she's doing and knows who you are.

Hi-byes, then, let students know that their principal recognized their existence. They were particularly cherished by children typified as isolated. The following comment by a fifth-grader demonstrates their importance, "She helped me by saying hello because I don't have many friends."

Principals who took the time to engage in brief, informal chit-chat and acknowledge students' birthdays also made favorable impressions on children. Said one fourth-grade social student:

He was a very good principal. He liked to play with the kids, like more than just



Remembering how the principal had helped settle a fight, a student remarked that "she's a good problem solver."

talk or just say a couple of things, and everybody knew him. He had a thing like he'd pick you up and twirl you around, and he'd always remember your name and stuff.

A sixth-grader, categorized as isolated, doubted whether the principal knew her name. She recalled that in kindergarten, the other principal "came to class and talked to us individually, so I felt I knew him."

2. Counseling students about social behavior. Principals who took the time to project a friendly and concerned demeanor made a difference to kids. Students emphasized the value of the principal acting as a counselor, attending to their emotional or psychological needs. Youngsters felt more comfortable approaching them with their social concerns or problems. For example, one girl, a social fifth-grader, described her principal as a "nice uncle." She elaborated with this comment:

If there's a problem during school and it's involving your social life and it's bothering you, like your friends don't like you for some reason anymore, he'll talk to you and try and work it out.

The principal who used a counseling approach was particularly important to dependent or isolated kids. For example, a dependent child in an urban school admitted some of his conversations with the principal stemmed from the fact that he got into fights with other kids. He considered these talks helpful because:

She's helped me to understand the problems of the other people, and she told me that other people don't understand your problems. You got to try to understand them. You got to really try hard.

Another student who felt "the whole school relationship was not that high" offered this suggestion:

I would really like our school to have a counselor. Because ... we have a lot of kids here at our school that I know have records. And they probably have family problems and ... they need somebody to talk to. ... And I think if kids knew that they had somebody to talk to about school or their teachers or their punishment or how they're feeling or their parents or their friends, or anything like that, I think there should be somebody that they can come to.

"Students generally gave high marks to principals for maintaining . . . high visibility. Circulating frequently connotes to youngsters that the principal knows what is going on in the school generally and is interested in what students are doing specifically."

This dependent sixth-grader did not expect the principal to fulfill that role, but she felt that someone providing counseling and personal guidance would improve her school.

3. Mediating and governing disciplinary matters. Resolving disciplinary problems is such a common activity for principals that students immediately assumed they'd done something wrong when the principal sent for them. Likewise, many principals complained that most of the youngsters they came into contact with were those who were sent to the office because they were in trouble.

However, children not only accepted that aspect of the principal's role, but also acknowledged its importance. They expressed a clear preference for principals who counsel and mediate, who actually listen to the kids' ideas

and evaluate that information before meting out punishments. For example, a fourth-grader's appreciation for the way the principal listened to his explanation comes through in his recollection of a disciplinary office visit:

When I got in trouble once, cuz we were playing tetherball and I forgot I wasn't supposed to be out because I forgot one of my books. And I was out playing and she called me in. She called me in for this thing and talked to me cuz I got in trouble, and she asked me why I did all this stuff and all these questions [like] why I did it and when did I do it. She listened like she had 40 years. She was really interested in what you had to say. She wouldn't turn her head or if someone came in, she'd sort of ignore them just to listen to you.

Remembering how his principal had helped settle a fight, another student remarked that "she's a good problem solver."

Last year, me and a sixth-grade girl got in a fight and she won. Well, it was actually my fault, but I was trying to, well, okay, we were calling all these sixth-grade girls these names, and we kept on calling them and then, finally, they got mad. And so this one girl, Cheryl, she came in, and she knocked me down, and I tried to get up. Everytime I'd get up, she'd knock me down. So we had to go to the principal's office. It wasn't that bad of a fight. I was just crying because I was mad. She didn't just say, "Don't ever do it again," or something mad. She just talked it out with them.

By contrast, students criticized principals who yelled at them or showed little desire to understand situations. They saw the importance of a principal being firm and consistent, but they were emphatic in their negative opinions when a principal was indifferent to their viewpoints or treated them unfairly.

Students expressed positive regard for principals who punished fairly and, on other occasions, had positive contact with them. The positive interactions reassured them that they were not disliked as persons. For example, a rebellious student looked at his previous year in school as his worst: "I'd get into trouble almost every day." But things are different under his new principal: "This year, I haven't got in trouble, you know, hardly at all." He attributed the change in part to how his new principal relates to him.

When I got into a fight, he would talk to both of us, and he'd find out what happened, and then he'd decide what he would do and most of the time, he just tells us, you know, to stay away from each other, or you know, stay on the bench. He doesn't get mad. He just, you know, talks normally. When he tells me to stay away and sometimes, when he tells me to do that, he helps—he does stuff with me. Like you know, we talk, tell jokes and stuff at recess.

Meeting Needs for Personal, Academic Guidance

Children praised principals who kept their schools safe, demonstrated concern for them personally, and were firm but fair in disciplinary matters. But they also spoke highly of principals who contributed to their academic growth. When asked how principals had helped them learn or what an ideal principal would do, students described situations in which a principal became personally and directly involved in their learning.

Students also recalled situations during which a principal offered advice about matters related to instruction while making rounds of the school:

● *In the classroom:* "One thing I do like about [the principal] is that he does come in to observe the classroom. I really think that's good."

● *On the playground, during lunch or recess:* "I ask him to [help] with spelling, cuz I'm not a very good speller. So I ask him to like, you know, to help me spell words and with dates and stuff. If I need something, it's usually at recess, like after we had a spelling test, I spelled this way, I want to make sure it's right or something."

● *In the principal's office:* "He used to help me a lot. Like if I had trouble and my teacher didn't explain it too well. I'd go up there [to the principal's office], and I'd ask him, like with math and stuff like that and he'd help me."

When kids considered one principal more helpful than another, it was often because of the praise and compliments paid them in their academic pursuits.

[My other principal] would call some kids from the first grade and have 'em go in and read to him, and if you read really good, he'd give you a cookie. One of these big, gigantic chocolate chip cookies.

"When asked how a principal had helped them learn or what an ideal principal would do, students described situations in which a principal became personally and directly involved in their learning."

When I was smaller, in kindergarten, I used to think that schools were a bore, and then, I think it was first grade, [the principal] started saying, "You're doing much better in your work, Angela, the teachers tell me" and stuff like that, and I would think, "Ooooooh." And then after he would go outside and [do] stuff with us, and I thought that was nice. He would make us feel better just to come to school. He didn't just [say that to] me, he did [that for] everybody.

Students also felt that the principal could improve instruction in their school by obtaining better books for the school library and offering advanced students a more challenging curriculum.

The Value of Principals' Actions

Students' perceptions about principals commonly referred to three kinds of impact that resulted from principals' activities: safety and order in the school, the potential for positive influence on their self-esteem, and assistance and encouragement for their academic growth. Students' comments, which rarely have been tapped, are useful because they can help practi-

tioners understand youngsters' needs. Their remarks offer encouragement to harried school leaders by reaffirming the value and importance of principals' actions. □

1. See Ginny Lee, David Dwyer, Nikola Filby, Bruce Barnett, Bracha Alpert, Brian Rowan, and Carrie Kojimoto, *Understanding the Principals' Contribution to Instruction: Seven Principals, Seven Stories* (San Francisco: Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development, 1985).

2. We define the five participation-style categories of students as follows:

● *Academic students* are task oriented and cooperative in class; are not discipline problems.

● *Social students* value friendships more than school work; may create minor discipline problems through frequent interaction with class peers.

● *Rebellious students* are reluctant learners; may be very bright or disadvantaged learners; frequently create discipline problems.

● *Dependent students* are task oriented; hope to please; are frequent hand-raisers who require constant teacher feedback; are frequently rejected by peers.

● *Isolated students* interact little with peers; rarely participate orally in class; are never discipline problems; tend to "fade into woodwork"; may be extraordinarily shy.

3. For a full report on this procedure and others used in this field study, see David Dwyer, Ginny Lee, Bruce Barnett, Nikola Filby, and Brian Rowan, *Methodology: A Companion Volume for the Instructional Management Program's Field Study of Principals*, available from Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development.

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