

The Principal

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The Principal and Student Teachers

Principals become part of the semi-annual rites of college departments of education when they oversee the placement of student teachers. A principal's primary responsibility is to select an appropriate cooperating teacher for each student teacher. But a political question complicates the process: *who is to gain the most from the experience, the student teacher or the cooperating teacher?*

To illustrate, consider two teachers. Bruce, an experienced teacher, has not burned out, but his candle is not glowing as brightly as it might. He stands to benefit from daily exposure to an enthusiastic, highly motivated student teacher. Betty is not very experienced, but she is an outstanding classroom teacher who keeps up on the latest research. She would be a dynamic role model for a student teacher but will probably not improve her own skills measurably through the experience.

With whom does the principal place the student teacher? The college supervisor would say the principal was irresponsible if the student teacher were not placed with the best role model available. But what about the principal's responsibility to improve his or her staff? Of course, Bruce's skills can be improved without involving the student teacher. Bruce can be given the opportunity to observe Betty and other star teachers, or the principal can work intensively and directly with him. Yet daily interaction with a promising student teacher might renew his commitment and enthusiasm. And what about the principal's responsibility to a student teacher? We can always rationalize a placement with Bruce by saying that Betty is not as experienced, that a student teacher can learn a lot about what not to do in

a poor placement, that the experience may prompt Bruce to rethink and modify his behavior, and so on.

Still, the obvious placement is with Betty. To choose otherwise is to deprive the student teacher of the most potential for learning and growth. Unfortunately, not every Betty *wants* a student teacher, and I certainly would not coerce any teacher into assuming that mentorship responsibility. That's all the more reason to try to match up the classroom placements carefully with as much knowledge of the students' backgrounds as possible, so that the Bruces will still have positive effects on their student teachers.

Before placing student teachers, I meet with them individually and ask, among other things, what they consider to be their particular strengths or weaknesses. If a student teacher recognizes a weakness in math and science, for example, and Bruce is particularly strong in these areas, that may be a good match. (Am I rationalizing again?) Of course, there is always the risk that a teacher on the way to burn-out will engender less than positive attitudes in the aspiring novice. On the other hand, a poorly skilled, unenthusiastic student teacher may be just the ill wind to extinguish whatever flame is left on Bruce's candle.

But let's assume that the student teacher has now been placed with either Bruce or Betty (or with both on a shared basis—how's that for Solomon wisdom?). What now?

Should the principal meet regularly with student teachers? Yes, because the principal can answer questions, suggest topics to explore, and provide background on children and staff from a perspective that no college supervisor can claim. A seminar twice a month with student teachers representing different college backgrounds, and now sharing a common school

experience, offers much potential for learning.

Does the principal have a teaching role with student teachers? Yes, if only a limited one. During seminar discussions, the principal can share both practical experience and research findings on community relations, organizational structure, and other topics not typically covered in preservice coursework. He or she can model the professional demeanor the growing teacher will be striving toward.

Should the principal formally observe and critique student teachers? A qualified yes. The principal can observe the student teacher with knowledge that the college supervisor does not have; for example, where his or her lesson fits into the broader context of that classroom program. But even though such observations can be beneficial for the student teacher, they should occur *only* at the invitation of the student teacher and with the college supervisor's advance approval.

Direct observation of student teachers can lead to an additional benefit: a pre- and postobservation cycle can be viewed as a preservice interview, enabling the principal to learn more about the student teacher as a prospective faculty member.

In placing student teachers, I have found two maxims to be inviolable: a principal should never place student teachers thoughtlessly, and the principal's role extends beyond the placement decision. Every time a principal places a student teacher, he or she is gaining an opportunity to provide renewal for a current staff member and, perhaps, getting a glimpse of a potential new staff member. □

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