

The Principal

JOANNE YATVIN

Deciding About Decision Making

A year ago I would have disagreed with the proposition that every principal should change schools from time to time. I was happy at my school, secure in its familiarity, and certain that it would provide challenges enough to keep me busy for many years to come. But life brings changes. I moved halfway across the country and had to find a new job. In many ways the one I now have is better than the one I left behind, but it is also different. I have been forced to examine many things I did unconsciously for years and to decide whether or not they are right for my new situation.

One of the things I have been thinking about is the matter of decision making. In a school, who should make which decisions? So far, I have come up with some divisions of authority that, while not always clear-cut, make sense to me and seem to work.

I began by setting up two rather obvious categories: "external" and "internal." External decisions, whether made by legislatures, courts, or school boards, are out of our hands. We are best advised to carry them out without fuss, fanfare, or agonizing over the consequences. Internal decisions, on the other hand, belong to us and deserve our attention and our best efforts.

Among the internal decisions are several subcategories that I have named according to their effects. Thus, there are *schoolwide* decisions having to do with such things as textbook adoptions and playground rules; individual *classroom* decisions, concerning behavior and work standards and daily procedures; *operational* decisions that deal with the routine functioning of the school, such as class scheduling, purchasing lunch tickets, and reporting absences; and *program-consistency* decisions concerning the philosophical and practical unity of the school. Oddly enough, establish-

ing this last category is a decision in itself. There are principals who do not believe it is necessary to have the same kinds of programs and similar teaching methods throughout their schools. But I do.

Broken down this way, most of us could probably agree about who should make each type of decision. Schoolwide decisions, because they affect everyone and (usually) threaten no one, should be made by consensus of the entire staff. Classroom decisions that affect only the internal workings of a single classroom should be made by the teacher in charge. Operational

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decisions, because they are matters of logistics, should be made by the principal. Program-consistency decisions should be made by the principal, too, since he or she is the one most likely to be aware of inconsistencies and the only one empowered to eliminate them.

Ah, but it is never that easy! Sometimes staff consensus cannot be reached. Sometimes teachers feel that what one teacher does in his or her classroom affects them, too. Or the principal feels that a teacher has gone beyond the bounds of responsible classroom practice. Teachers may also feel that the principal's operational and consistency decisions infringe their rightful authority, or, worse yet, their academic freedom. Even with external decisions there may be the question of how far to go in carrying out a particular mandate: the letter and the spirit of the law, or one, or the other?

And those, dear children, are the reasons why God made principals. They are divinely appointed to make a sixth and final kind of decision that I call *conflict resolution*: deciding among competing claims, choosing the best way, acting when action is needed, determining balance and proportion, seeing the overriding issue in a welter of petty grievances. What a responsibility. What a mess!

In a familiar, comfortable situation, where everyone has been playing by the same rules for a long time, decision making can be as natural as brushing your teeth. In an unfamiliar place, it's a new game requiring hard thinking and finesse. That is a lesson I needed to relearn. □

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