

# Our Dirty Little Secrets: Myths About Teachers and Administrators

To ensure the success of recent reform efforts, teachers and administrators need to honestly examine their hostile misconceptions of each other. Only by exorcising the Terminators, Harrassers, Loafers, and Artful Dodgers that haunt them can they build the good faith needed for progress in the schools.

"We have only begun to realize the potential benefits of peer coaching. The mutual interest and abilities of principals and peer coaches can enhance efforts that help teachers improve."

—Marcia Knoll (1988).

Although teachers and administrators are expressing their commitment to the reform of teacher evaluation, this approval alone may not be enough to ensure success. Peer coaching and teacher empowerment will realize their true potential only when we expose, examine, and exorcise the collective misconceptions teachers and administrators have traditionally held about each other. The tall tales told by teachers and administrators about each other are well recognized by the veterans of our profession, though surveys and interviews rarely reveal them. The point is not whether these myths are accurate but that most of us *believe* the dirty little secrets that we keep between us. These misconceptions have corrupted many past attempts to reform American education. Current reforms will also be undermined if we fail again to deal with them.

## How Teachers View Administrators

*Myth number one: the Snooervisor.* The classroom-snooping supervisor is a myth of gargantuan proportions. Fear of this beast is at least as common among teachers in this country as is our students' fear of the notorious *Friday the 13th* slasher, Freddy

Kruger. The stories go like this: administrators tape conversations with teachers using sophisticated gear, bug phones in the teachers' room, and listen in on the classroom PA system. The Snooervisor also buttonholes students and gladhands parents to pump them for information and then encourages informants among the staff.

Some snoovertors observe their "favorites" *in absentia*, praising lessons they have never seen, while they observe lessons taught by their nonfavorites through classroom windows or over the proverbial PA. According to one report, a principal actually squawked corrections over the PA in the middle of a teacher's lecture.

One week into my own teaching career, over 20 years ago, the most senior member of our department asked to meet me in the teachers' room, where he warned me, "Don't say anything here you'll regret later. If the principal thinks you're against him, you'll never get a good write-up." He tiptoed across the room, took down the PA box, and ripped out the wires. "Your principal doesn't need to

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observe you, he just listens in. He's so paranoid, he's got every room in this school bugged—even this one."

I was only 23, and I was sure it was the old man, not the principal, who was crazy, but I met him there at the same time the next day, as he requested. "Sh, just sit down and wait," he said.

After just two minutes of worried silence, an angry custodian barged into the room and huffed past us grumbling, "These teachers rip everything apart." He marched over to the speaker, pried it off the wall, and reconnected the wires.

"How did *he* know?" I asked my mentor. But the old man simply smiled.

*Myth number two: the Terminator.* The more recently hired and unknown an administrator is, the more teachers circulate the rumor that he or she is out to "get them," "chop heads," and "thin ranks." These tales are usually accompanied by "facts" concerning the Terminator's decimations of the pedagogical population of a previous district. Often the Terminator makes pacts with the present board and/or superintendent to home in on: (1) teachers ready for retirement; (2) nontenured teachers brought in by the previous administration; and (3) teachers in "midcareer" who they consider to be "drifting" and expensive. This means, of course, that the entire faculty ends up on the Terminator's hit list.

Any administrator worth his salt can "chop heads" by excessing, eliminating positions, and encouraging early retirements—but these methods are child's play to the Terminator. This real head chopper is adept at "evaluating the deadwood out." Translated, this means that the Terminator is the only administrator in the country who has found a way around the tenure laws.

My favorite Terminator story involves the teacher who won a Teacher of the Year Award, after which the persecution began. The powers that be were deeply offended, worried that the teacher's dangerous self-confidence might lead to impertinence, as in "So you think you've

gotten too important to have to take our advice, anymore, eh?"

A plethora of lesser creatures who aspire to Terminator status only "harrass," often at the behest of a higher-up. They observe classes on Fridays, on the last period of the day, and just before a weekend, holiday, or vacation. A harrasser may show up in a teacher's classroom (usually with an ominous yellow legal pad and a scowl upon the face) after that teacher (1) spoke up against the harrasser's policies at a board of education meeting; (2) was seen in confidential chatter with a teacher or parent who spoke against the harrasser at a board meeting; (3) looked like the type who *might* be considering doing either of the above.

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*Myth number three: the Successful Incompetent.* According to this myth, administrators have led a lifetime of incompetence. Often they were poor students who became failures as teachers (note the way they still can't make a convincing presentation to the board). They finally got tenure as administrators through political pull. Later one school after another promoted them out to get rid of them.

My favorite incompetent administrator story concerns a former superintendent of schools, former ace principal, former master-teacher-turned-famous-consultant, who made the rounds a couple of years ago as a guest lecturer on motivation to prospective teachers across the nation. His fee was high but considered worth it by the school of education who called on him. The school had a crop of student teachers who needed to be motivated before they took up their inner-city positions, and it needed a seasoned teaching and administrative veteran to do the job.

The university whisked the expert away from the local airport in a fancy limosine and spirited him into a lecture hall packed with eager faces. The stage was set as a classroom with a teacher's desk in the middle. Three portable blackboards stood behind the desk, each one shrouded in mystery by a map drawn down in front of it.

After a long and impressive introduction, the speaker stepped forward. Standing meditatively before his audience, he delivered 45 minutes of monotone lecture on the dangers of lecturing too much. Then he stepped back, took a deep breath, and in one practiced jump leaped up on the desk and screamed, "Motivation!"

With that, he reached down for his ankles and did a perfect headstand. As his audience looked on in amazement, he kicked himself right side up. Running first to one reversed map and then to another, he pulled each one down and loudly snapped it up.

"VISUAL," said one board.

"AURAL," said the other.

"KINESTHETIC," said the last and longest.

"Did I get your attention?" he yelled

again to his numbed audience. "Well, why not USE IT?"

Then he exited, stage left.

### **How Administrators View Their Teachers**

*Myth number one: the Loafer.* The mythical Loafers can be easily identified. They are prone to taking sick days on Mondays, Fridays, and Wednesdays (thereby creating for themselves a two-day workweek). They disappear right before holidays and after major life crises such as Parents' Night. They never volunteer for chaperone assignments, refuse to canvass for the administrator's favorite fund-raising activity, and avoid any extra responsibilities.

Of course the Loafer teaches little of any value. One administrator may think the teacher does nothing but distribute worksheets; but another may think the teacher does not distribute enough of them, relying instead on endless games of "telephone" and pre-war filmstrips on the mating habits of the African bee. Many administrators, rather than hold the Loafer responsible for his or her deplorable condition, think he or she was allowed to get that way because some previous administrators did not "crack the whip." The Loafer may not even be capable of doing better. The administrator's hopeless job is to shape up these malingerers. However, administrators also know that the Loafer will refuse whatever advice they offer.

A variant on the standard Loafer story concerns the superintendent who took over an ailing school district in the East. He spent the first three weeks patrolling every hall of every school building. One day he spotted a teacher reading the morning paper, oblivious to the students on the other side of the sports section, who were crawling over their desks.

"Put that paper away this minute and start teaching!" the superintendent roared. "Or I'll have you fired!"

"Aw, go away!" the teacher responded. "I'm retiring anyway. You can't do a thing!"

Those Loafers!

*Myth number two: the Artful Dodger.* The Artful Dodger is dedicated to playing cat and mouse with

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the conscientious administrator. It is next to impossible to catch the Artful Dodger in the act of doing an inferior job, or even doing nothing. These teachers warn their students to be on abnormally good behavior when an administrator drops in, thereby foiling any attempt to nail them on flimsy classroom control. Some go so far as to make secret deals to give bonus points to students who can keep their mouths shut for the duration.

One story concerns a teacher who is notoriously disorganized, unprepared, and used to doing nothing in class, not even the crossword puzzle, 179 days a year. But on that one day when the supervisor comes in, she pulls out the same yellowed lesson plan she uses year after year, and with dramatic intensity, dances her way through a perfect question-and-answer session with her adoring pupils. After sufficient time has passed for the administrator to sense he can't "get" the crafty

old bird this year, he stalks out in frustration. As he walks down the hall he hears rousing cheers coming from the classroom: "Good job, Mrs. Smith, you were terrific! Now we can party again!"

*Myth number three: Them.* By the time "The Exorcist" was released in the early 1970's, many administrators believed that "their" teachers had become possessed by the insidious evil of the teachers' unions. In addition to creating social isolation for the administrators, unionism made the administrators' everyday school management decisions much more difficult.

Observation checklists became an item for collective bargaining, and stories circulated that crafty union negotiators (having been tutored by agents of either NEA or AFT) were coercing well-meaning but naive boards of education into adopting "principal proof" evaluation formats; that is, it would now be impossible for any administrator to "get" a teacher after he or she had been forced to objectify impressions on the mandatory, pro-teacher checklist, with items such as "The teacher appears to know what universe he inhabits (Yes/ No/ Could Be)."

A common story is about the ace administrator stolen away from an adoring school system by another which was in greater distress. The administrator was given *carte blanche* to fix the ailing school. But no sooner had he begun to make real progress than the union resisted his positive changes. Never mind that many of the teachers privately thanked him and would have done so publicly if they hadn't feared the union. "All I want to do is improve instruction," he would plead, with palms upturned.

Unable to beat him on the battleground of sweet reason, the Big Union Bosses resorted to rumors and innuendos. They bitched and moaned about the usual complaints: snooper-vision (including listening in on the P.A.), going after incompetent teachers—they even accused him of incompetence himself. They never scored a point, of course, but they did succeed in tying him up just as the entire school system was about to turn

around. Even so, those community members not under the union's hypnotic sway who appreciated what he had done came through with a lucrative "golden handshake," which he reluctantly accepted.

#### **The Prospects for Reform**

Success for teachers and administrators is elusive and temporary. Both want rewards they are not allowed to have: the administrator, respect; the teacher, autonomy. The worlds in which they operate seem unfair, ungrateful, and underrated. Accusations of incompetence dog them; jealousy tags after success; and fear compounds itself, breeding defensiveness and hostile posturing.

We must pay attention to these dark and dismal issues before the move

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toward teacher empowerment and peer evaluation gets too far along. If we do not, the reforms that now seem so promising will be corrupted by the same old political skulduggery that has brought us to so many sorry passes.

The panel members who created *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* probably did not consider

these myths and self-deceptions before putting forward their revolutionary reforms. Perhaps this was a hidden blessing. But their recommendations are going to be instituted within the Byzantine world behind the school-house door. It's a world of fantasy, myth, and rumor. We can create a more realistic and productive future only when we confront and deal with our dirty little secrets □

#### *Reference*

Knoll, M. (March 1988). "Does Peer Coaching Leave the Principal on the Bench?" *ASCD Update*.

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