

The Principal

ALLAN S. VANN

The FRIWAFTT Award . . . Revisited

In a "Voices" column (May 1988), managing editor Anne Meek described a supervisor who had the courage to do something about an ineffective classroom teacher. Anne related how she had admired that supervisor for doing his duty, but also noted that he deserved to receive the FRIWAFTT (Fools-Rush-In-where-Angels-Fear-To-Tread) award.

As difficult as it may be to "rush in," to take decisive action with an ineffective teacher, this is precisely what a building administrator must do. Not only is it the principal's right, it is the principal's most important responsibility to do so. The principal must first take action to try to bring that ineffective teacher up to a level of satisfactory performance. However, if such efforts are unsuccessful, then a principal must act to remove that teacher from the classroom.

Despite all the ill will that may arise among otherwise loyal and accepting colleagues, despite all the personal gut-wrenching that is sure to accompany such action, the bottom line is that every building principal holds a sacred trust—a covenant with the public, if you will—to safeguard the education and development of children. If a teacher is not providing that education or nourishing that development satisfactorily, then the principal must take decisive action.

On two occasions in past years, I have earned my FRIWAFTT award by taking action against ineffective teachers new to the building. I worked continuously with one teacher over the course of the year, during which I assembled multiple observation reports detailing recommendations and suggestions for improvement. Although she had only come to my building that year, that person was up for tenure, and I refused to recommend her for tenure to the Superin-

Sometimes a principal must take decisive action against popular, long-time teachers, some of whom may have been master teachers but whose prime years have passed.

tendent. Never before in that school district had a principal refused to recommend a teacher for tenure. Much was said in the faculty room about how I could be "doing this" to this person but, because she was relatively unknown to most of the staff, the reaction was not overly negative toward me. And, because this was my first year in the district and there was also a new superintendent, many teachers assumed I was just "carrying out orders" from district office.

Another teacher who had taught in every other school in the district was then placed in my building. This teacher was moved around frequently because of his ineffectiveness, yet no principal had heretofore documented his deficiencies in writing. An unflattering reputation built up in other schools had preceded the teacher's arrival. Within a few days his eccentric personal habits were already confirming "grapevine" rumors that this per-

son was really "strange." His eccentricity didn't bother me, but his appalling lack of classroom management skills and productive teaching techniques did. Beginning the second week of school, my observation reports documented a strong case for dismissal. Since he was already eligible to retire, a leave for the purpose of retirement was arranged by the end of the first quarter of the year.

Sometimes a principal must take decisive action against popular, long-time teachers, some of whom may have been master teachers but whose prime years have passed.

"Isn't it terrible what he's doing to poor dear old Lillie?" was the most common refrain from one wounded teacher's colleagues, who quickly united behind her. I found I could not expect either sympathy or support, understanding or respect for my actions. For one thing, I was powerless to counteract faculty room gossip. Having to adhere to the highest standards of confidentiality, principals cannot "give their side," not that it would probably make much difference.

Sometimes I wanted to burst out, "Sure she's a wonderfully nice person, but she is completely burnt out. She's using totally inappropriate teaching techniques, using inappropriate curriculum materials, and children are running amok inside the classroom. Parents are in my office every week to complain about her poor teaching skills, her lack of control, and her unfair punishment of children, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for me to defend her actions because in most instances the parents are right and she is wrong! Should I simply look the other way while the kids waste a year that will never come again?"

It hurt tremendously to hear about fellow teachers who unhesitatingly gave her their support while they crucified me. None of the teachers who

did so had any direct knowledge of what was happening inside this person's classroom, and they had no knowledge of how hard I had worked with her for three years in an attempt to improve her skills. With her own approval, I had asked the union representative to join me in observing lessons and offering suggestions for improvement. Her colleagues never knew about this or the other efforts I made to help Lillie improve her skills. They only saw that I seemed to be "forcing into retirement" a colleague not yet ready to leave the profession.

Some reactions were virulent. Anonymous cartoons began circulating, one showing me in an airplane pushing teachers out of the plane without benefit of parachutes, through a hatch door representing my vision of warmest wishes for a happy early retirement. Another cartoon had me holding an ax over a pool of blood, with names of all teachers I had "cut" over the years on droplets of blood dripping from my ax. The teachers' union printed a front page editorial on me in one issue of their publication. While never referring to me by name, they simply spoke of a cold-hearted administrator who seemed to be intent on forcing teachers into premature retirement.

There are substantial rewards, however, for the principal courageous

Having to adhere to the highest standards of confidentiality, principals cannot "give their side," not that it would probably make much difference.

enough to undergo such a painful process with ineffective staff members. After a few years of carefully "weeding out" unsatisfactory teachers, a principal will have a staff of uniformly high caliber. And, if that principal is lucky enough to hire some "new blood" as well, he or she will end up with a simply marvelous staff, a blend of outstanding veterans and promising newcomers. This is the type of staff that will allow a principal not only to look himself straight in the eyes in the mirror each morning before coming to school, but allow him to look with pride and pleasure.

Of course, principals must be as demanding of themselves as they are of their staff. If "my time" comes—if I begin to "burn out" while still on the job—I hope I will recognize it. But if the situation must be pointed out to me by another, I hope I will exit gracefully with wonderful memories instead of fighting the inevitable and trying to "hang on" for an extra year or two. The trust is simply too sacred. □

Allan S. Vann is Principal, James H. Boyd Elementary School, Elwood Union Free School District, 286 Cuba Hill Rd., Huntington, NY 11743.

INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

Apple Computer	C-2, 1
ASVAB	112
Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique	12, 13
Childrens Press	31
Computer Curriculum Corporation	104
Curriculum Materials 1991	15
Effective Schools Productions, Inc.	30
The Getty Center for Education in the Arts	96
IBM	16
Informed Curriculum Leadership	37
League of Women Voters	86
McDougal, Littell and Company	26
Macmillan Publishing Company	8, 101
Memphis State University	65
National Association for Science, Technology, and Society	68
National Professional Resources	42
National School Conference Institute	83
Nova University	45
Readup, Inc.	9
Walden University	86
Zaner-Bloser	C-3, C-4

In the December-January issue . . .

"Choice"

Educational Leadership examines the pros and cons of allowing parents to choose among schools. Look for:

★ Mary Ann Raywid's criticism of ASCD's new issues analysis paper on choice, with responses from two panel members, Paul Heckman and Richard Elmore;

★ Ron Brandt's conversations with:
—Sy Fliegel, who helped develop a menu of exciting choice programs in New York's District Four, and
—John Chubb, author of a new book that argues for choice on the basis of research showing higher achievement in autonomous schools;

★ Descriptions of choice programs in Boston, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, and other communities.
Plus a lively interchange about the applicability of Madeline Hunter's lesson design in science instruction.

COMING IN FEBRUARY: "Standards"—Issues involved in the effort to raise educational standards in the U.S. and other countries, including the need to improve assessment techniques.

Copyright © 1990 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.