

The Assistant Principal

PATRICIA MCDANIEL DOMBART

Adios, Antigone

In August of last year, almost as unceremoniously as a moth shedding a cocoon, I left behind 19 years of teaching secondary English and became an assistant principal. In a day, I dispensed with two file cabinets of old grade books and folders on everything from transformational grammar (yes, transformational grammar) to Sophoclean tragedy. I acquired an office, a secretary, a telephone, and two new file cabinets, which rapidly filled with folders bearing such exotic labels as *In-School/Out-of-School Suspension*, *Fire, Weather, and Emergency Drills*, and *Bell Schedules—Assembly, Activity, Opening Day, Closing Day, One-Hour Delay, Two-Hour Delay, One-Hour Early Dismissal, Two-Hour Early Dismissal*.

These labels by themselves attest to the changes I have encountered, some as prosaic as schedules and fire drills. For example, on days when I am making such critical educational decisions as whether or not the track team may sell lollipops in the building (they can't), I become a bit wistful remembering that I used to stimulate heated discussions about the fate of Antigone. I find it ironic that I used to covet an office, a secretary, and access to a telephone when now I ask for calls to be held and struggle to find time to get out of the office and into the halls where the sea of students and the chance to talk to teachers remind me of my true function. Sometimes as I ponder a complex situation wherein I need to consider the needs and wishes of students, teachers, parents, counselors, and the restrictions of board policy, legal mandates, and central office directives (not to mention the personality of the custodian), I remember with nostalgia how easily in my classroom I used to make dozens of quick, unilateral decisions.

More drastic is the change I have

made by trading in literary drama for real-life drama. Dealing with discipline situations means being thrust into a miasma of personal problems. Questioning a student about excessive tardies turns into listening to a confession about a drug problem or a pregnancy. A call home about a class cut turns into a conversation with a mother desperately requesting advice because she has lost control of her 14-year-old. Like Wendy in *Peter Pan*, I find myself drawn into the lives of a tribe of lost children who reveal in my office their attempts—pathetic, harmful, sometimes comical—to escape into a never-never land where it won't matter that they're poor or lonely or abused or hooked.

Probably the most noticeable change for me—and one that I had not anticipated—is that I have lost control of my day. I miss the sweet shape of planned classroom days where, for the most part, I established the ebb and flow of events. Now I seem to spend my days reacting rather than controlling, for no matter how carefully I attempt to structure my time, events intrude. From the moment I enter the building (sometimes as I cross the parking lot), I begin to problem-solve. The issues range from the mundane to the critical—anything from a jammed locker to a suicide threat—but they are all immediate and absorbing.

On the rare occasion when I have the energy left at the end of a day to reflect upon these changes, I attempt to assess my new role. Do I regret leaving the classroom? I don't think so. I am enjoying the challenge of trying to shape a school rather than a classroom, and just as in the classroom, each day has its rewards. Providing positive feedback after a classroom observation, orchestrating a successful parent conference, even getting a locker unjammed bring satisfaction.

Especially rewarding are the times I have worked with teachers on a problem and been invigorated by their optimism and perseverance, and the times when such efforts have actually given direction to a lost child.

Still, I find it difficult to come to judgments about my new role. As a teacher I had reached a point of confidence and mastery. I could be definite, judgmental, even cynical. But as a principal, I am too new to be anything more than bemused. I hope that I am making a difference. I trust that by an accumulation of many small efforts and decisions I am creating an atmosphere of trust and an impetus for excellence. I am sure that I was ready for a change. Though my days are dizzying, they are never boring. And, frankly, I had just about had it with Antigone. □

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