Voices

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, 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.

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 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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INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

ASCD Professional Development
Opportunities..........................67,87

ASCD Human Resource Development
Program..................................90

Birn, R. & Smith.........................C-4

Center for Critical Thinking...........1

Computer Curriculum Corporation.....C-2

Effective Schools Products.............64

Getty Center for Education in the Arts 80

HarperCollins Publishers...............49

Learnball League International........66

McDonald’s..............................96

Metropolitan Life Insurance...........C-3

National Staff Development Council..39

Phi Delta Kappa..........................43

Teachers College, Columbia University 60

Walden University.....................70

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