

## A Job to Suit Up For

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**I**t was two years ago when I received confirmation of my appointment as an assistant principal. I remember how I prepared myself to meet all the roles I expected to play as a building administrator. I reviewed Boyer and Sizer, Cogan and Hunter, Goodlad and Glatthorn, even Peters and Waterman. I bought a briefcase and suits. I was ready to become an educational leader.

Once school was in session it took only a couple of months for me to realize that I could have saved my energy and my money. Although I had been eager to supervise, motivate, organize, and mentor, in the minds of teachers, students, and even parents, I was there for one function — to discipline. I could have skipped the professional reading and the suits and concentrated instead on honing my interrogation skills and picking up such accessories as a bullhorn and ballbat.

Two years in the position have done nothing to change this expectation. Teachers welcome me into their classrooms and comment upon the reinforcement received from our conferencing on instruction. But we all know that the real measure of my success as an assistant principal depends upon what I do with the students they refer to the office. The message sent by faculty is clear (though often delivered through clenched teeth): "Here they are; I've had it. You fix 'em." I am deemed effective if students emerge from my office at least deadened, if not actually dead. The highest accolade I can receive in the teachers' lounge is that I've backed them up. The worst is that

I'm a soft touch.

Students view the assistant principal similarly. I am the enforcer. A summons to my office is received with dread. Even the most law-abiding student arrives expecting to be punished. They just aren't sure why.

Parents call and expect me to possess the attributes of Sherlock Holmes, Wyatt Earp, and Judge Wapner. I am charged with tracking down bullies, retrieving stolen jackets, and collecting restitution for broken glasses.

The scary thing is that I've really gotten into all of this. Not only have I accepted the role, but I've become good at it. I can catch the smoker and shame the dress code violator. I can track down the truant and wrest confessions from 16-year-old combatants. I cultivate informants, head off problems, and retrieve missing items. Police and probation officers treat me with respect. I begin to identify with all the characters on *Law and Order*. I assume an attitude. I'm cool and cocky. Yo, Cagney! Yo, Lacey! Let's do lunch.

Actually after a while, it gets more than scary. It's made me question my professional integrity. In carrying out the necessary duties of the building disciplinarian, have I forgotten that I am an educator? Am I sacrificing vision for expediency and a good reputation in the teachers' lounge? This is, of course, the core conflict of being an assistant principal — how to be the disciplinarian and still remain the educator.

I've found it can be done, but it requires all the skills and insights I've acquired through experience and training. I do need the wisdom of Sizer and Boyer, of Goodlad and Waterman, and more, in order to be able to carry out the absolutely essential tasks of disciplinarian while at the

same time working to create a climate where all members of the school community share responsibility for order and atmosphere. I, along with assistant principals throughout the country, resolve the role conflict by accepting all the gritty tasks attached to our positions and then using them as springboards from which to foster collaboration and involvement.

While we spend part of our day chastening kids in the office, we spend the rest forming student arbitration boards, teacher discipline committees, parent partnerships, and community mentorships. Minutes after we have handed down detention or suspension or behavior modification or whatever

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other gruesome punishments we have at our disposal, we are on the phone with counselors or tutors or student assistance teams to begin to fashion a net so that the student does not fall too far. We strive to create a web of building ownership and support so that office discipline gives way to self-discipline and pride.

It's rather like being the Wizard of Oz, working at creating fear and awe while at the same time attempting to instill courage and confidence. I've come to realize over the past two years that when I do my job well I function as motivator, organizer, and mentor. Actually, I've found that none of my advance preparation was wasted. It is a job I need to suit up for. □

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