

Can You See Me?

The Power of Structured Visibility

It is very important for a school leader to have VISIBILITY as a top priority. To be a visible leader means that not only are you being seen, but you are seeing firsthand what is happening in your school. Unfortunately, in today's climate, it is becoming more and more difficult for the school principal and/or assistant principal to free himself from the demands of an office surrounded by emails, memos, cell phone calls, voice mail, texts, paperwork, conferences, meetings and drop-in visitors.

As philosopher and poet Goethe said, in the 1800's, "those things which matter most should never be left at the mercy of those things which matter least." What matters most in establishing an exemplary school is using visibility as one important method.

- **Maintaining an orderly environment where students know the rules and abide by them.**
- **Awareness of the physical plant and its appearance as well as needs for improvement.**
- **Knowing what is actually going on in the classroom. Are the students actively involved or merely bored spectators? Is the teacher up and**

about guiding students? Are materials available? Is technology being used appropriately? Is the classroom attractive and in good repair?

- Are teachers' needs being met and are support people open to hearing them? What is the general climate of the school?**
- How does the office staff relate to visitors and parents? Are parents welcomed and are their voices heard?**
- Are the administrators and support staff aware of accomplishments of students and is recognition a priority? Does the staff support and occasionally attend student extra curricula activities, sports and special musical events?**

Looking at the above areas of concern and applying a management style of structured visibility can be the difference between a truly successful school and a failing school. Unfortunately, we are reading and hearing daily, about the dismal state of the schools in the United States. Could it be that many of our school leaders have forgotten what is really important in creating a winning environment?

Let's look into what is meant by structured visibility and how one goes about accomplishing it. Visibility is really a two way street, meaning that the school leader can be seen regularly and at the same time can see/observe the ebb and flow of daily school life. What a wonderful way for students, or parents dropping off students, to be greeted each morning by an administrator at the front of the school. What a positive feeling for teachers when an administrator looks approvingly into their classrooms.

Adding the word “structured” to “visibility” means that being a visible leader is not taken for granted. It means that there is a plan, almost like a lesson plan, whereby the school administrators go through a daily routine of seeing and being seen. Let’s look at what a sample “lesson plan” might look like.

- An early arriving principal or assistant/vice principal might begin the day with a quick tour of the building/s and school grounds to make sure everything is in order for the start of the new day. Were rest rooms cleaned properly? Are floors and walls clean? Are the grounds litter free and outside walls acceptable? An extra check of a few classrooms might be well served. No one wants to start a day with an unexpected “surprise.” An added bonus to these early morning walk-throughs is that those early arriving teachers become aware of the deep concern their administrators have for their wellbeing and this goes a long way in building school pride and positive school culture.**
- Being outside, weather permitting, before school starts is a crucial part of the visibility plan and should be practiced by the entire administration team. Naturally there will be times when a team member is at a meeting or involved in a parent conference or on the phone with a board member or superintendent, but that is precisely why you want to use the team model. Depending on the size of a team, there will always be someone out and visible, even when another may be called away. The positive effects of this visibility have far reaching**

benefits. Parents love to see school personnel in a supervisory mode when they are dropping off their children. This clearly says to them that people care about the safety of their children. This early morning visibility provides an opportunity for parents to perhaps stop and ask a quick question of an administrator thus satisfying the parent and relieving the administrator of later on returning a phone call. Students become used to being greeted by people who care about them. Schools have different procedures for start of the day arrival, but if it is one in which students are outside until time to enter, the administrator has an excellent opportunity to observe and monitor student behavior.

- Most schools begin the day for students with some form of opening exercises perhaps over a public address system or closed circuit TV. This provides a great opportunity for the school principal to be heard and/or seen by all. If a school is working on attendance improvement, the principal might announce those perfect attendance groups from the previous day or even outline the standings in an attendance improvement contest. There are also occasions when a student is at the microphone.**
- All schools are different in the way they are run, but the central core is the teacher and students in that classroom. So, a major part of structured visibility has to be the daily walk-throughs or drop-ins done by the school administrators. This can be as simple as just entering a classroom without fanfare and observing what is going on**

instructionally. Are all students involved in the lesson and is the teacher actively monitoring and assisting or presenting material? Is the room attractive or in need of maintenance? Not only does the observer have a “snapshot” of teaching and learning, but also has a wonderful opportunity for feedback to the teacher and students which can be informal and natural and impactful. For example, when the principal or assistant principal sees a teacher later in the day, or even the next day, a positive comment about what was seen in the drop-in can make a teacher’s day. The same can be said for a student when the administrator can say “great work you were doing in science class today.”

- Regardless of the size of one’s school, one thing all schools have in common is lunch time, and the cafeteria is usually a hub of activity. Administrators, in some cases, tend to shy away from “lunch duty” and want to leave that area of supervision to perhaps lunch monitors or security personnel. The reality is that time spent in the school cafeteria by administration and support staff can prove to be some of the most valuable use of time in one’s day. All students use the cafeteria or lunch room, thus giving the administrator a wonderful opportunity to see all students on an almost daily basis. Remembering that structured visibility means seeing and being seen, all students will have an opportunity to see school personnel other than their classroom teachers. The time spent in the school cafeteria can give the principal or assistant principal a wonderful chance to**

interact on an informal basis and to provide students with an opportunity to ask a question or to share a thought. So, not only is there quality supervision in the cafeteria, but there is interaction between child and adult. An added bonus to one's presence in the cafeteria is that teachers always know where to find at least one administrator if they need a quick answer to a pressing question or they merely want to pass a thought by their principal. Just imagine the time saved for a school principal when the faculty can make contact while the principal is wandering around the cafeteria, as opposed to lining up at the office door or making an appointment. Teachers love knowing where their support people are every day at lunch time and students are proud to say, "I see my principal all the time".

- The end of the day, dismissal time, is a crucial time for proper supervision and should be an important part of one's Structured Visibility plan. Things should not be left to chance. Are people assigned to the bus pick up area? Is someone at the parent pick up area? How about the bike area, if there is one? Depending on the size of the campus, are people assigned to various strategic locations? Again, all schools are different and have varying needs, but dismissal visibility goes a long way in showing parents that this school really cares about students. Remember that office work can wait and phone calls can be returned later, but student supervision is now.**

- **Another issue at middle schools and high schools is that of class changing and students passing in the halls. There are also some elementary schools and K-8 campuses which see student movement throughout the day. Depending on the size of the student body (Are we talking about a few hundred or more?), this area of needed supervision is most crucial and requires the participation of all personnel. Structured visibility mandates that change of class time is not the time for support personnel to be office bound. This is the time for all staff to be out and about in a supervisory and interactive mode. It might be wise to assign people to certain areas of the building or campus so all students are seen as they move about on their way to their next class assignment. It is interesting to observe that when students become aware that adults seem to be around at all times, they are much less likely to engage in unacceptable behavior, as well as see that the staff cares about their safety. Teachers become a part of the plan. The classroom teacher is at his or her doorway observing student passing and most importantly greeting students as they enter class. An occasional personal comment to a student from the teacher as that student enters helps in establishing positive relationships.**
- **Teachers today are often required to participate in team or group meetings. There are general faculty meetings, department meetings, team meetings and professional learning communities. Teachers, at times, may feel that the requirement to attend meetings comes from a mandate outside of their control. The plan for structured visibility**

must include time for administrative staff to actually “drop in” to teacher meetings and to pay attention to teachers who feel overwhelmed. It is also a time to show interest and involvement in what is going on. Attendance by the principal or assistant principal at a PLC (professional learning community) can give the administrator a “snapshot” of what some current concerns might be. Attendance by an administrator at, say, a science department meeting may highlight the need for additional lab materials. A counselor attending a team meeting of 8th grade teachers may put the counselor in a position to help with some challenging students. Of course, school leaders need to be present at all faculty meetings and, when possible, at workshops and trainings held at the school. Participation, even for as little as five or ten minutes, in any teacher group activity, helps develop a collaborative school culture.

The plan for visibility needs to be focused on students as well as staff. Remember, it’s all about students, and students want to see their administrators in attendance at after school clubs and sports and musical events and competitions. When possible, school administrators should drop in on clubs which might be meeting in classrooms after school. Again, the name of the game is to see and to be seen. Teacher sponsors want to know that their administration is interested enough in what they are doing and students are eager for their principal to see their involvement in extracurricular activities. Many schools have band

and chorus programs held after school. These activities often include parents who much appreciate the presence of school leaders. Most schools have athletic activities or have competitions with neighboring schools. Naturally, some activities, especially at the high school, require a structured supervision plan for security and crowd control. There are also many opportunities for a less formal visibility and support on the part of the school principal or other administrator.

An exemplary school with true collaboration and high student achievement always has visible leaders. A principal may be a master at data disaggregation and interpretation, but will not be a success without true interaction with faculty and students. Education is a people business and neglecting the team will not do it. A leader may be a whiz at master schedule building, but will miss much by not viewing and assessing the fruits of his labor through actually seeing classes in action. A school leader's job can be lonely and overwhelming when handled strictly from an office, but can be an exciting and stimulating and rewarding experience when being an active and involved participant in the daily life of teachers, students, and parents too.

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