

I'm in the Principal's Seat, Now What???

Five Things You Can Do Tomorrow To Create an Exemplary School

VISIBILITY

If you listen to nothing else, you need to internalize the importance of the leader's **VISIBILITY**. This has to be the number one thing on your mind as you enter your school each day. Unfortunately, most principal's put this on the back burner, especially in today's high pressure environment. So, what do we mean by visibility?

Do the students and parents see you even before the start of the day? Are you in front of the school, weather permitting, supervising and greeting? At the end of the day, are you out and about where parents pick-up their children, or at the bus loading area? Is there an opportunity for students, parents and teachers to ask you a question or make a comment while you are out and about?

Are you visiting classrooms on a daily basis? Classroom Walkthroughs have become a popular topic at conferences and in education journals, but often become cumbersome and detailed when taken to the extreme. It is a simple and enjoyable activity for a principal or assistant principal to "pop-in" to classrooms for just a minute or two on a daily basis. My school was large and included several wings and floors and even a group of portable classrooms. What I did was to select a particular area each day for my visits. I loved seeing what was going on in each classroom and then could follow-up casually with a remark to a teacher or student, later in the day. Teachers love to hear, and deserve to hear, "your students were really involved in the science lab you were conducting today". Students never forget when the principal says something like "I saw that project you were presenting to class today. The students really liked it".

Depending on the size of your school, VISIBILITY in the hallways, when students are moving about, is crucial. With 1800 middle school students, this was a priority for our school. Change of classes was not a time for administrators to be office-bound. As principal, I set the example, not only for the assistant principals, but for the counselors and teachers as well. All teachers need to be at their classroom doors, up and ready and greeting students.

Since my school had a reputation for food fights in the cafeteria, before my arrival, I knew that had to be a VISIBILITY priority for myself and my team. Most school leaders tend to shun cafeteria/lunchroom duty and leave that responsibility to monitors or aides; however, it can be an area of great rewards. What better way for administrators to get to know students than when they see them interacting with each other on a daily basis? And, where else would students be able to get to know their principals in a relaxed manner?

DELEGATION

In order to be a truly visible leader, you must free yourself from trying to do everything yourself. A principal needs to be like a band leader, orchestrating the goings-on of the players. This is where DELEGATION comes into play. A smart delegator will always look to the strengths of the team players. Who on your team is great with data interpretation? Who is a master at curriculum? Who has expertise in the area of special ed? Who likes to work in the area of parent education? Etc., etc., etc.

I recall a principal colleague of mine who retired early, telling me that she could no longer take the continual parental complaints, and that her days were filled with one parent conference after another. She could have been a wonderful educator and could have done much for her school, but unfortunately did not learn to DELEGATE. It is true that very often a parent will come into the school asking or even demanding to speak to the principal. In most cases, these parental issues would best be handled by a counselor or an assistant principal who may be closer to the issue and more aware of the circumstances.

Delegating to others is also a wonderful way to provide professional development to your staff by letting others learn and become involved in the varied aspects of running a school. I had a wonderful assistant principal who

learned all there was to learn about the area of special education because I chose to offer that responsibility to her. She even was selected as the Assistant Principal of the Year in the district's Special Education division and went on to replace me as principal when I retired.

CELEBRATION

CELEBRATION goes a long way in building a school family. Think for a minute about your own personal family, either the one you are in now or the one you grew up in. What and how do you **CELEBRATE**? Is it birthdays, school accomplishments, athletic awards, graduations, sport events, milestones like learning to drive or read, etc.? How do we feel when we **CELEBRATE**?

Obviously, in your school, you can celebrate faculty members' birthdays. I had a list of everyone's birthday and would put a card personally signed by me in the recipient's mailbox. If a teacher had a birthday on a faculty meeting day, we got a cake and all celebrated together. Teachers do have babies and grandchildren; both reasons to celebrate. Teachers earn degrees or their family members do. Good things happen in the lives of school people and these things should not be overlooked.

Morning announcements are another great way to **CELEBRATE**. We had closed-circuit TV and did live daily programs. Homerooms with top attendance were featured regularly. Sports teams who did well the day before were highlighted in person. Clubs coming back from competitions were celebrated. Honor roll students were recognized quarterly in an assembly program with parents in attendance. I do leadership coaching now with school principals and we always start our sessions with **CELEBRATIONS**. What are you feeling good about? What did you accomplish that was a milestone? What event brought some joy into your life? Our faculty and staff members need opportunities to feel good, especially in today's hectic school environment.

COLLABORATION

We hear a lot about collaboration today. The days of principal as ruler/dictator and top-down management are over, or should be. So, what do we really mean by **COLLABORATE**? Simply put, everyone needs to be a part of the team. When I first became principal, my school had just been accepted

into the district's School Based Management/Shared Decision Making model. This meant that everyone was invited to be a part of the vision and mission of the school. There were no secrets; not even about the budget or about new hires. All faculty members selected a committee to be on based on their particular interest and talent. The budget committee worked on allocation of funds, the personnel committee reviewed resumes and helped in interviewing. A math teacher would be involved in selecting the new member of the math department. The calendar committee worked on school-wide events and testing dates. Bottom line, everyone collaborated and everyone felt a part of our school and there was complete trust and respect.

The wonderful part about COLLABORATION is that we begin to realize how brilliant our people are. Hopefully we have hired great people and are in the process of hiring more super stars. When our folks are not crushed, as a result of a top-down management style, they begin to thrive and to bring ideas to the table. People need to be respected and appreciated for their knowledge. After all, we work with one of the most educated work forces there is. All of our teachers are college graduates and most have done post-graduate work. Google and Facebook and Apple have become successful by utilizing the brains of all their people. They even provide time for collaboration and time for thinking up new ideas and strategies.

CULTURE & CLIMATE

Everything I have said previously, and more, makes up what is a school's CULTURE & CLIMATE. Visibility brings about a climate of openness and acceptance. Delegation and collaboration and celebration make up a culture which says that this school is committed to a success for all philosophy. Obviously, there is a positive and a negative side to culture and climate. We have all heard it said that a visitor can feel something about a school when entering and when briefly walking around. So, what does it take to create that positive culture and climate which makes everything happen?

A good place to start might be with caring and respect. Do we as leaders show that we care about our teachers and our students? Are we interested in their lives and do we know their personal side? Do we ask questions that show we care and are truly interested? Do we respect them by refraining from derogatory remarks? Are we welcoming of their ideas? Do we treat everyone we come in contact with as equals?

I can still remember when the Principal of the Year committee came through my school to assess my worthiness for such a prestigious honor, and a student was asked what made me a good principal and the student answered, “He cares about us”. Another student commented that I respected them. Interesting, as I recall this, both students were part of our “at-risk” program. I think they were not used to being cared about or respected.

I got a beautiful card from a teacher, upon my retirement, who said that she would miss my seeing her class off on their field trips and that she would miss my inquiring about her husband who was having some health issues. This is what culture and climate is all about. It’s about everyone feeling good about where they are and what they are doing. It is the principal who sets this tone and walks the talk.

We hear a lot today about teacher effectiveness. It is said that all schools must have effective teachers in all classrooms. Colleges and universities are being asked to revisit their teacher education programs to ensure that graduates are prepared to be effective teachers. Do we hear about what effective teachers need from their schools? They need an environment where they are appreciated and respected and cared about and this is the job of the exemplary principal. We are in a people business and must protect our day to day activities so that we preserve this. The renowned German writer, Goethe, said “Those things which matter most must never be left to the mercy of those that matter least”. It is indeed being a visible leader and building a collaborative culture that matters most in developing an exemplary school.

Allan R. Bonilla, Ed.D

www.coaching4educators.com

abonilla1@yahoo.com

512-992-1663