



The Middle Man – April 2008

Being a principal takes courage.

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by Mark Terry

A recent *Principal* article addressed the need to recognize the courage of educational leaders. This is an important issue and I want to offer a middle-level perspective. I recently had the opportunity to observe a sixth-grade English teacher lead students through a prewriting assignment on courage. Students discussed what courage meant to them and quickly ran through the predictable descriptions of members of the military, police force, and fire department. The teacher prompted the students to consider other examples of courage, like being steadfast in their beliefs, standing up to bullying, and doing the right thing when others won't.

Naturally, my thoughts on courage turned to the principalship. Most folks never think of the principal's job as one in which courage must be demonstrated weekly, if not daily. Each time you see a police reality show, a tragic neighborhood event, or a news story of a drug arrest, there is a school nearby with a principal who deals with the children left in the wake of tragedy. Have you thought about all that you have done to consistently demonstrate courage as you help students and families?

Courage When Faced With Danger

Have you made home visits to check on the living conditions of a student or parent? Principals are often compelled to go into neighborhoods experiencing urban blight or to homes in remote rural areas. I have spoken to several of you who have checked on students in dangerous neighborhoods that police have advised against visiting because of their danger. How can we do that? We do it because those are our kids and our neighborhoods. Take necessary precautions, but those kids need you. That's courage!

How many of you have had a parent or another person enter your building and present danger to students? Whether a parent is involved in a contentious divorce, angry with a teacher, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol, you stand between that risk and your students. Whether you are using your negotiation skills or just your moxie, you face these folks when others think you must be crazy. That's courage!

Many of you have been the calming force in times of calamity. It fills me with pride when I see a principal who is experiencing a crisis stand tall and maintain an air of control. Control does not mean the principal does not show some emotion—it means that he or she is exercising leadership. We often witness schools struck by tornadoes, fires, and deadly attacks. In these situations, principals exhibit courage.

Courage Every Day

Not all examples of principal courage have imminent danger attached. We have all supervised employees who did not work in the best interest of kids or who were deficient in instructional ability. Principals must have the commitment to address the needs of unsatisfactory employees and to make decisions that will improve the educational setting for kids. Making these types of decisions is difficult, especially when friendships are involved.

Perhaps the most courageous moments in the principalship involve making decisions that impact a student's educational setting. Often, principals are the first point of contact for parents with children who have profound learning difficulties. We worry about children with their parents, but we are called upon to lead in planning and implementing educational plans that meet the child's needs. Sometimes our determinations are not in line with the parents' desires. Principals are called on to develop a working relationship with all parties so that the best interest of the student is met. If you don't think that is courageous, you aren't a principal.

You've come face to face with gun-toting gang members, biting dogs, inebriated citizens, angry parents, concerned citizens, upset teachers, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, floods, remote domiciles, and panicked kids. You do so with missionary zeal instead of vests, escorts, or weapons. You know your students are looking for acts of courage and someone to look to for hope, cling to, and confide their most horrific experiences.

I am so proud to be one of you! Each and every one of you is a profile in courage. Thank you for serving the children of your school, your city, your state, and our country!

Please share your acts of courage made under difficult circumstances by e-mailing me or commenting on the [Principals' Office blog entry about courage](#).

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark Terry". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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