



Middle

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS *Serving All Elementary and Middle Level Principals*

The online resource for principals with students aged 10 to 14

Matters

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Despite the stress that accompanies their positions, principals must remain positive and encouraging.

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Many years ago, as an assistant principal at a large high school, I was called upon to find the mother of a student who had been involved in a serious car accident after school. Having been called earlier to the hospital emergency room, I knew that the student had died. I drove from the hospital to a nearby middle school, where the mother was attending a football game in which a younger child was playing. When I arrived at the game, I could see that many of the spectators were parents who had students at our school and recognized me immediately. When I asked the mother to step aside to speak with me, I could feel many pairs of eyes on us. I tried to be as vague as possible, telling her that her daughter had been involved in an accident and we needed to go to the hospital. She looked directly into my eyes and asked, "She's dead, isn't she?" To this day, I am still haunted by that incident. I often wonder what my face revealed to the mother, how I could have made the news less devastating—and why me?

In my 26 years as an administrator, I have often been called upon to bring assistance and comfort in helping parents, kids, and teachers work through devastating scenarios. I have dealt with parents and students who have died suddenly, been murdered, suffered through long, agonizing illnesses, been abandoned, abused, and battered; and faculty members who have died, been admitted to rehabilitation centers, and suffered through bitter divorces.

There is an emotional toll involved with being a principal. How do you comfort a student whose mother or father has died? How do you deliver the news to a faculty member that her spouse has been involved in a fatal car accident? What do you say to a mother of a child who was murdered? How do you control your emotions when listening to a student who has come to you for help in a case involving sexual abuse? The emotional stress of the principalship is not something I hear discussed. But, in my opinion, it should be.

Emotional stress does not just involve horrific scenarios like those described above. It also is evident when your school is struggling with state test results that are lower than your school system expects, even though you know that there are circum-

stances that impact your ability to lead the school to higher test scores, such as changing demographics, poverty, unrealistic expectations, and unfair comparisons to schools in different socioeconomic areas.

How about the emotional carnage that comes when you have a poor teacher who is negatively impacting students? You are pressuring him or her to either improve or leave the profession, but that teacher will present notes of support from parents and peers. You may find yourself vilified in public—but thanked privately—for your efforts.

Yet, despite the stress that accompanies their positions, the principals I talk to are upbeat, even happy. How can principals continue to be positive and encouraging in so many difficult situations? I believe it is because you keep the well-being of your students at the forefront while handling trying situations. You have a commitment to serving the best interests of even the most emotionally scarred student.

I am sure there are studies out there that can explain how principals handle gut-wrenching situations while remaining positive, friendly, and caring. Personally, I feel like I have a purpose in being a principal. The students and the learning community look to me for guidance, direction, and strength. Even in the most uncomfortable of settings, someone must care for the child at all costs.

What are your thoughts? How do you cope? Do you share your emotions with a trusted friend, or do you internalize situations so that the pressure is only on the inside? I'd love to hear your stories of perseverance under difficult situations.

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