

Chalk Is Cheap: Nurturing Teachers in a Famine Culture

Laurel Schmidt

Professional starvation is gnawing away at teacher motivation. Here are some ways for principals to provide needed nutrition.

Most of the teachers I know are intelligent, dedicated, and relentlessly optimistic. Many endure grueling rush-hour commutes each day to schools located in neighborhoods that range from unscenic to downright unsafe, where they squeeze their cars into tiny parking lots and navigate darkened corridors (“We’re conserving electricity”). Yet they unfailingly greet their students with enthusiasm and then tackle the enormously complex challenge of luring children into the world of learning, armed with little more than their creativity and a box of chalk.

Scarcity has been such a constant in education for so long that self-sufficient teachers routinely purchase classroom supplies at their own expense. Sometimes desperate measures are needed to obtain even the most basic equipment. I heard of a teacher whose chalkboard was so slick from years of use that it had become chalk-proof. Her first graders cringed every time she went for the chalk and produced a sound like squealing tires. When her pleas for a new board fell on deaf ears, she scrawled an obscenity across the surface with a permanent marker and promptly reported an act of vandalism. A new chalkboard appeared a few days later.

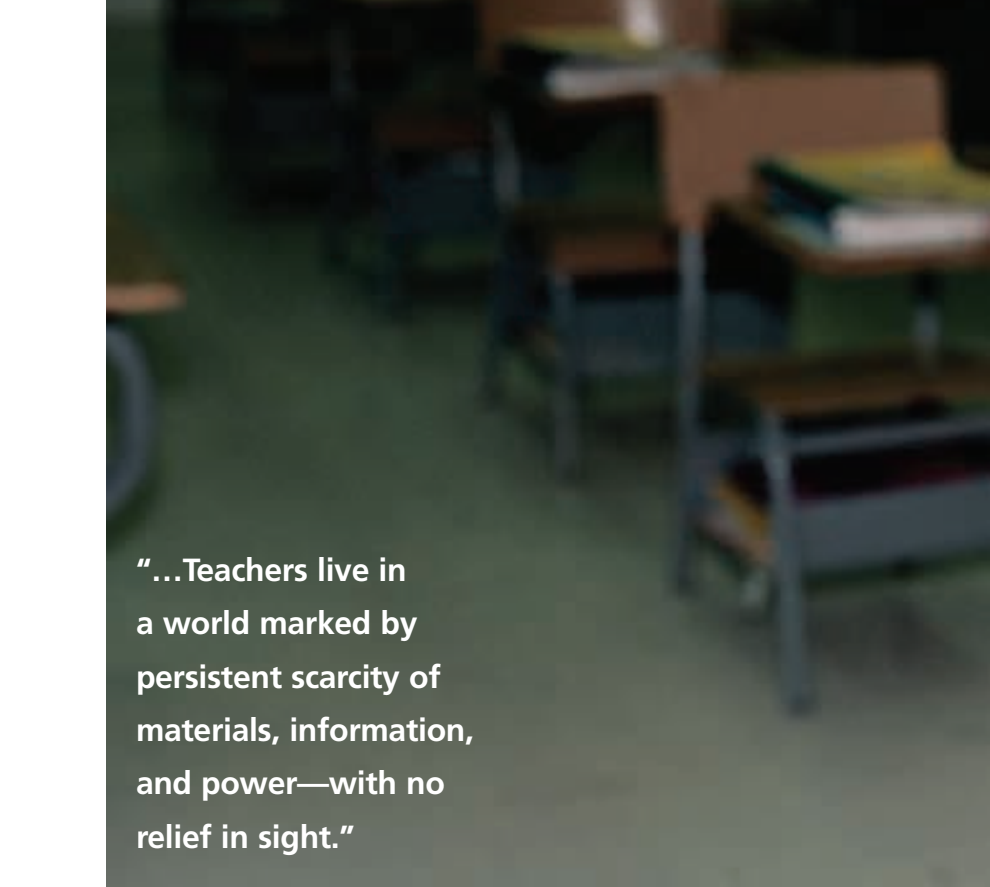
Hoarding and scrounging have become survival tools right up there with behavior management in the hierarchy of teaching skills. Colored markers, near-empty glue bottles, and dull scissors are prized acquisitions that are squirreled away like nuts for winter.

Surviving in a Famine Atmosphere

But beyond the lack of material resources are more serious conditions that create an atmosphere of famine, turning teachers’ thoughts from success to self-preservation—or simply survival. Teachers endure low salaries and low status, even in good

IN BRIEF

The author argues that a persistent lack of material resources and respect have created a famine-like atmosphere for teachers, resulting in a “what’s-the-use” attitude that is focused on self-preservation or simply survival. She offers principals a strategy of four R’s—recognition, relationships, rewards, and rituals—to provide the professional nourishment that teachers need.



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economic times. When the economy goes south, they can bank on having larger classes, smaller paychecks, and less professional development. Despite their degrees and credentials, teachers have limited autonomy over their schedules and instructional programs, and are often excluded from critical decisions that directly affect their work.

In short, teachers live in a world marked by persistent scarcity of materials, information, and power—with no relief in sight. As a result, many exhibit symptoms associated with people living in times of unrelenting famine. In his book, *Man and Society in Calamity*, researcher Pitirim Sorokin observed that famine victims feel they cannot change their situation, and that they are at the mercy of the elements and unresponsive political systems. Teachers often feel the same way, resulting in a “what’s-the-use” attitude.

Famine victims and teachers often feel they are forced to make choices that involve personal sacrifice. For teachers, this usually means giving too much of their time, money, and effort for too little return. So they may shut down, refusing to engage in professional growth activities—even when

offered extra pay or release time—in order to conserve their limited personal resources. Some teachers simply cannot go on without regular professional sustenance, so they quit the profession or endure the slow death of burnout.

Anti-Famine Strategies: The Four R’s

But some teachers never go hungry, even in a famine culture. They thrive through a combination of their own resilience and the support of enlightened principals who know how to use the four R’s—recognition, relationships, rewards, and rituals—to counter the effects of the famine culture and build a robust teaching force.

Recognition

Many teachers have raised positive reinforcement to an art form, convinced they can create a room full of enthusiastic learners with comments like “Good job!” Well, teachers are a lot like their students. They crave recognition, too. It’s not that they feel totally unappreciated. Their students may adore them, and the occasional parent actually thanks them. But communities as a whole are slow to praise and quick to point fingers when prob-

lems develop or test scores disappoint. Consequently, one of teachers’ most pervasive complaints is that they don’t feel respected or valued for their work. That’s where principals can help by putting teacher recognition on their daily to-do lists.

I often filled time during boring district meetings by dashing off encouraging notes to my staff. I would mentally replay the day, sifting for images of teachers who stood out during my classroom visits. Then I’d write two or three sentences about their effective instruction or the quality of their students’ work. Although it sometimes required a bit of head-scratching, I never met a teacher who didn’t have some redeeming feature. Those notes helped me build stronger relationships with all of the teachers, especially those who felt overlooked or disenfranchised.

Praise is good but public praise is even better. Here are some ways to applaud your teachers:

- Open your weekly bulletin with a headline like “Bravo!” “Well done!” “Congratulations!” or “Let’s hear it for...” followed by details of a special achievement by one of your teachers.
- Have a recognition column in the PTA newsletter.
- Post recognition notes in the staff lounge.
- Place recognition announcements on every staff meeting agenda.

Relationships

Teaching can be lonely work. The isolation may be reinforced by colleagues operating under the famine mentality who see power and knowledge as finite commodities to be hoarded, traded, or cautiously doled out. But there are also gifted teachers on every campus who believe in sharing ideas, especially with novices. With your encouragement, these teachers can collaborate with one another, in effect conducting their own professional development.

Management by walking around places you in a perfect position to

build relationships between staff members. As you visit classrooms, notice curriculum topics, projects, discussions, or upcoming events. Then share the information with teachers working in related areas to encourage collaboration.

Another way to defeat isolation and build teacher relationships is to have your staff fill out a simple questionnaire at the start of the year. Ask them about their hobbies, favorite authors, and current challenges. Then include a series of short biographies in your weekly bulletin until the whole staff has been introduced.

Rewards

I discovered the power of chocolate early in my career. Any time morale seemed to dip, I'd lob a chunk of chocolate into every mailbox. Inevitably, the mood would brighten. You may think this sounds patronizing, but in a famine culture any gesture, however small, is appreciated. I discovered dozens of no-cost or low-cost ways to show that I appreciated my staff's efforts. Here are some of my favorites:

- Convince a local restaurant to give discount cards to your staff.
- Order a subscription to the daily newspaper for the staff lounge.
- Issue vouchers offering to take over one recess or lunch supervision duty.
- Offer to take over some classes, freeing teachers to observe their peers.

Rituals

Rituals unite a school community and create a sense of family among colleagues. If your school doesn't have any rituals, make your own by taking advantage of the school year's cyclical nature.

My favorite was hosting a holiday breakfast. One morning, just before winter break, my assistant principal and I would bring tablecloths and candles into the staff lounge, where we would heap the tables with trays of pastries, cheese, and fruit. The festive mood lasted all day.

Here are some other ideas that can become rituals:

- Give flowers for special accomplishments.
- Give each teacher a journal and start staff meetings with time for reflective writing.
- Play music—all kinds—as staff arrive for meetings.
- Organize a faculty barbecue or a family picnic.
- Schedule student-faculty softball games or art exhibits.
- Host dinner parties for staff and significant others.

Advocating for Change

What can you do beyond recognition, relationships, rewards, and rituals at your school to change the conditions that have turned teaching into a famine culture? You can start by raising your voice.

- Encourage your district leaders to reward National Board Certified teachers with monetary stipends and public recognition.
- At budget time, advocate vigorously for a generous professional development funds.
- Invite, cajole, or drag the superintendent into your classrooms to show off your teachers' excellence.
- Petition your city council to proclaim an annual Teacher Recognition Week and ask a local reporter to highlight some of your exceptional teachers.
- Write an op-ed article championing teachers.

Finally, remember that as a principal you have the power to create an atmosphere of appreciation and abundance for teachers in a famine culture. By honing your repertoire of skills to recognize, reward, and motivate your staff, you will reap a rich harvest of renewed professional enthusiasm. ■

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WEB RESOURCES

Read "Living Well Is the Best Revenge" by Laurel Schmidt in the March/April 2004 issue of *Principal*. www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1175

Find more strategies in "Your Staff's Morale Is Very Important Business," the PR Primer article in the December 2000 *Communicator*. www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=228

Learn about National Board Certification through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. www.nbpts.org/

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