

Some Things Never Change

Today's principalship is often characterized as being complex, convoluted, and filled with paradoxes and ambiguities. These qualities frequently surface during a day that may include more than 500 interactions. While the resulting tension can be a source of excitement, keeping the principal's work fresh and rewarding, it also can produce a lack of certainty that often creates stress and anxiety.

Fortunately, the principal's day is also characterized by an element of predictability. There are certain behaviors that, regardless of the school's demographics, seem to be constant for students, teachers, and principals. Although these behaviors are not always positive, their predictability makes them a normal part of the schoolhouse culture.

Consider the following behaviors:

Students

- When unsupervised children are instructed to go from Point A to Point B, they will get there by running—a phenomenon that is even more likely to occur if the school has a rule prohibiting running.
- When students are reported for some type of rule infraction, 90 percent will deny doing it (and most of their parents will agree with them).
- Within five minutes of a class bathroom break, some kid will ask to go again.
- The average kindergarten student thinks the principal lives at the school, is married to the assistant principal, pays the teachers with his or her own money, is never seen in shorts, and is older than most living things.
- At least one student will be perceived as a troublemaker in every classroom. If the student leaves, another youngster will take his or her place.
- "I left it at home" is the most frequent explanation for forgotten lunch money, parent permission slips, and much-needed medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
- When a misbehaving student is asked, "What are you doing?" the typical response is "Nothing."

"...the principal who begins a sentence with 'Research shows...' immediately loses his or her credibility regardless of the validity of the information."

Teachers

- In a post-observation conference, most teachers, after hearing 10 of his or her effective instructional practices and one area of concern, will begin a lengthy discussion on the area of concern.
- Teachers who complain the most about classroom discipline problems will tend to act out in faculty meetings.
- At faculty meetings, first-year teachers will smile, sit in the front, take notes, and refrain from grading papers.
- Teachers evaluate the effectiveness of a professional development session based on the following criteria: quantity and quality of refreshments; presence of handouts, binders, and freebies; and whether the session concludes early.
- Teachers who continually complain about students' irresponsible work habits will be the most negligent in completing administrative paperwork requirements.
- When asked to identify concerns in their schools, a preponderance of teachers will respond with "discipline" and "communication," with "instructional quality" seldom mentioned as an area for improvement.
- The biggest teacher lie occurs when a new student arrives in an

already crowded classroom and the teacher says, "Hello, I'm your new teacher and I'm so happy you are here."

Principals

- When talking with a teacher, the principal who begins a sentence with, "Research shows..." immediately loses his or her credibility, regardless of the validity of the information.
- The questions most often asked of the principal during a school day are: "You got a minute?" and "Are you busy?"
- Most principals have an impressive ring of keys, but they cannot tell you what most of them belong to.
- Paperwork on the principal's desk, if left for a sufficient length of time, will cease to be important.
- Genuine feelings and honesty, while not always observed in the district office principals' meeting, are often present in the parking lot conversations following the meeting.
- After explaining to the faculty the importance of the staff development session and introducing the presenter, the principal will be summoned from the meeting and will not be seen again.
- The superintendent will choose to do a school walkthrough at the very moment when either the principal is handling an irate parent in the front office, there's a report of a gas leak in the kitchen, or an oppositional-deviant student chooses to validate his condition.
- When the principal is away at a meeting and calls the school to check for problems, there always are some.

Change in today's school is the norm and the presence of unpredictable situations, events, and behaviors is highly predictable. In the midst of such often chaotic and hectic demands, it is the wise principal who understands that some things never change. ■

John Halfacre, a retired elementary school principal, is a private consultant in the areas of principal leadership, school learning communities, personal qualities of effective educators, and the role of humor in education. His e-mail address is halfacrj@bellsouth.net.



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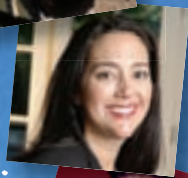
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