

# The Eight-Hour Principal: Learning to Say "No"

Thinking about the theme of this issue, "The 24-Hour Principal," took me back to when I first started out as an administrator, working 12 hours a day and often on weekends. Time didn't belong to me; it belonged to everyone else. When I walked down the hall to visit a classroom, or when I was trying to finish a report, I'd hear those familiar words: "Dr. Riggins, do you have a minute?"

Over the years, I learned to go from being an 18-hour principal to a 12-hour principal to an eight-hour principal. (Well, maybe a nine-and-a-half-hour principal.) In looking back, I asked myself how I had learned to take control of my time—and my life.

When you start your career as a principal, you say to yourself, "My gosh, what will the teachers think if I'm away from the building?" You worry that without your presence, chaos will ensue. Teachers won't teach, children won't learn, and parents won't find answers. You labor under the illusion that you and your school are one, and that without you education will not take place.

Sometime after the first five years or so, we come to see that illusion as being, well, delusional. But pouring ourselves into our buildings during those early years of our tenure is really necessary if we are to create a vision of the culture of learning that we so care about. That's when we need to convince our staff and our parents that we're really serious about the quality of education practiced in our classrooms.

Our teachers need to have trust that we will be there for them; and that we always can find time for them. And we need to convince *ourselves* that this enterprise we've chosen is so important that we're willing to sacrifice a lot for it. During these early years, we need to prove our commitment. But eventually we need to learn to "let the building go."

## Working a 12-Hour Day

"When I was a zero [on the 1–5 scale of principal self-confidence], I would get to work at 6:15 and work until 6:15—a 12-hour day," my friend Lillie Carter, the principal of Pulaski Heights Elementary School in Little Rock, Arkansas, recently told me. "And I'd work on Saturday and sometimes Sunday. Taking a lunch break was unheard of. I didn't sit down and



eat lunch for the first five years. I was always chewing and swallowing while I talked on the phone or filed reports.

"This went on for four years until one morning when I walked into the office and the phone was already ringing. My secretary asked me, 'Should I answer that?' And for the first time, I said 'No!' You don't call your doctor at 6:15, or your lawyer. Why should you be able to call a school? We're going to start keeping business hours, just like normal people."

It was an important moment for Lillie. I asked her if, after 13 years in her school, she still got in at 6:15. "No," she said, "I changed. One day I woke up and looked in the mirror, and I thought, 'I can no longer do this.' I was working all these hours, never eating a decent lunch, coming home half-dead."

## Putting "Me" First

In 1999 she decided to invest the hour before 7:30 in walking five miles a day. "I started putting me first. I thought, 'If I'm going to do this job and do it effectively, then I need to be healthy.' Now, getting to school at 6:15 isn't a priority; health and fitness is number one." (Lillie has found a way to relate physical fitness and instructional leadership. Her school is a three-story building. "If someone on the third floor needs me, no problem," she says.)

I asked Lillie what insight she had that allowed her to realize that she could begin to let things go. "I learned that the school isn't going anywhere, unless a tornado comes up during the night. The building is there when I leave and it'll be there in the morning—even if I take three days off."

There are, of course, many ways that we can learn to organize our schools and our time so that saying "no" to many of the demands of our jobs doesn't mean saying "no" to improved teaching and learning.

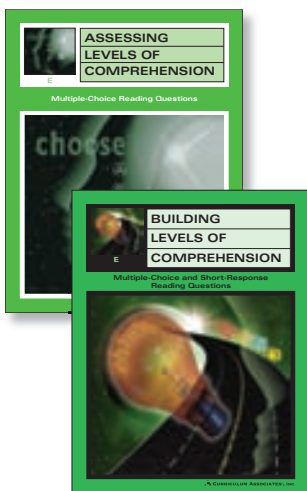
As we gain experience, we gain the wisdom to know what's really important and what's less important. We learn to prioritize. And as we gain wisdom, we learn to delegate and to share our responsibilities with our staffs; after all, we've spent years learning to trust them and we know who can do what and how well. Just as Lillie Carter has done, we can learn to care for ourselves as well as we care for our students and our teachers: We can learn that we are important, too, and that it is possible, in the words of my friend and colleague Sherman LaPrade, to "breathe and be a principal at the same time." ■

Cheryl G. Riggins is NAESP's associate executive director for the Leadership Academy and Urban Alliances. Her e-mail address is [criggins@naesp.org](mailto:criggins@naesp.org).

# Think Outside the Bubble



## New Programs!



▲ FREE! Online inservices  
CAtraining.com

## Spend less time on preparation — more on higher-level thinking skills

Though we deliver tens of thousands of TEST READY® books each year, our primary goal, like yours, is deeper than “the test.” Helping teachers to improve student performance has been our mission for more than 35 years.

Our newest series—*Assessing Levels of Comprehension* and *Building Levels of Comprehension*—help students progress from literal to critical thinking. If you have students from grades 1–8 who teeter just below reading proficiency, these programs are guaranteed to give them the boost they need.

Use *Levels of Comprehension* right away, the right way with **CA101® e-Training for Teachers**. Other FREE online resources include:

- Information on how the series reflect the research and taxonomies of Bloom, Marzano, and others
- Sample lessons
- Series brochure

## WIN a FREE Classroom Set!

Log on to [www.CurriculumAssociates.com/bubble14](http://www.CurriculumAssociates.com/bubble14) and enter our monthly drawing for a classroom set.

Last day to enter: December 31, 2006



FROM THE PUBLISHER OF THE:

CARS® and STARS® • TEST READY® • BRIGANCE® • WRITE!® • QUICK-WORD® Programs