

Getting Out of the Office and Into the Classroom

New principals are enthusiastic about fulfilling the role of educational leader. They envision themselves visiting classrooms frequently and becoming integrally involved in curriculum and instruction. But it is not long before reality sets in. Principals learn very early that there is a constant struggle between the demands of the office and the demands of the classroom. Unless the principal has strong organizational skills and can establish a structure within a demanding and uncertain day, his or her effectiveness as an educational leader is diminished.

Here are some tried-and-true organizational tips that might help a new principal get out of the office and into the classrooms on a daily basis.

Organize a Routine

Although the unexpected happens not only daily but often hourly and sometimes minute by minute, principals must have an established routine to stay on track. Plan to be in the office before school starts in order to be available to teachers, parents, and students. Morning announcements should be made at the same time every day, and an early meeting with the secretary gives principals an opportunity to prioritize the tasks for the day.

If no crisis intervenes, principals are then free to visit classrooms during morning instruction in the most important subject—reading—before returning to the office to check phone messages and to be available to staff. Daily visits to the cafeteria during lunch break allow principals to be visible to students on an informal basis.

After the student lunch period is over, consider having a standing lunch date with the assistant principal or dean of students. This provides much-needed time for private discussions and facilitates smooth and efficient communication. After lunch, you may have some additional quality time in classrooms or in the office, followed by any planned after-school meetings.



Keep an Orderly Office

The office is where public and staff meet with the principal in an official capacity, and its décor reflects the principal's attitude toward his or her position. Clutter, disorganization, lack of furnishings, and sterile walls give the impression that the principal holds the position in low esteem. On the other hand, lack of clutter gives the impression of order and control, giving the principal more time to monitor instruction.

The greatest tool for minimizing desk clutter is the “in” basket, a container

sturdy and deep enough to hold several journals, as well as mail, notes, and other matter, that is hung outside the office door rather than placed on your desk. Periodically check the basket's contents, leaving anything that can be addressed later. This enables you to continue classroom visits without interruption.

Delegate

A successful principal knows how to give others responsibility and authority to do things that are normally part of the principal's job. One of the greatest barriers keeping principals from getting out of the office is the belief that if they want something done right, they must do it themselves. The result is that the principal is bogged down performing routine activities that can be delegated to others, losing valuable time that could be used to monitor and evaluate instruction.

Avoid E-Mail Overload

The time it takes to respond to e-mail eats into a principal's productivity. It is impossible to read and respond to all of the e-mail information most principals receive each day. Even an effort to prioritize what to read becomes a daunting task. Here are some ways to prevent e-mail overload from taking the precious time needed to visit classrooms:

- Request the staff to e-mail only essential information;
- Avoid checking e-mail when first arriving at the office;
- Group e-mail in batches and read them only two or three times a day; and
- Limit sending e-mail to avoid back-and-forth messaging throughout the day.

If you are unable to respond to a lengthy e-mail message due to lack of time, let the sender know that the message was received and that a longer response will be sent when time allows.

Communicate in Writing

In communicating with staff, using a notepaper that immediately identifies

the message as one from the principal gets the attention of the receiver. Your note can be attached to a teacher's request with a simple message: "Please stop in to see me about this."

A file folder labeled "Staff Memos" can hold your notes on items that need to be communicated to the staff, including those jotted down as you walk around the school. At the end of the week, open the folder, write a memo, and e-mail it to the secretary for printing and distribution.

Communicate by Phone

Another communication challenge for principals is returning phone messages in a timely manner. All such messages should be returned on the day they are received. But if this means taking time away from visiting classrooms, ask the secretary to call the sender to say that the message was received and that you will not be able to respond until the next day.

Get Ready for Tomorrow

The prime organizational time for principals begins after everyone has gone home. This is when those important items placed on your desk throughout the day are addressed, following the adage: "Always handle the most difficult task first." Once the most challenging item is eliminated, everything else becomes easy.

Kenneth H. Blanchard and Spencer Johnson's *One-Minute Manager* suggests that an efficient manager touches a piece of paper only once. By following this advice, principals do not become a slave to paperwork. Triple-file trays labeled for outgoing paperwork helps.

- The secretary's tray is for items that can be addressed when meeting with the secretary the next morning;
- The district office tray is for all forms, signed purchase orders, and other correspondence to be for-

warded to the district office, along with questions for the superintendent; and

- The "To Do" tray is for those items that you must take care of personally.

It was once written that a principal not spending at least 11 hours a day at the job is ineffective (Thomas & Ayers, 1998). Hopefully these organizational tips will not only enable you to get out of the office and into classrooms, but will eliminate a couple of those hours from the work day. □

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Reference

Thomas, A. R., & Ayers, J. A. (1998). Principal's interruptions: Time lost or time gained? *International Journal of Educational Management*, 12(6), 244-249.

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