

Principal

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A Challenging Role for the Principal—to Teach Again!

What better way to understand and support good teaching than to practice it?

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Every principal should teach. It increases your credibility, creativity, and collaboration with your teachers. It also sharpens and strengthens your teaching skills.

As a principal, I would read books about best practices, network with other principals and educators about what works, and analyze data from teachers who implemented the best practices. But I always felt more like a spectator than a participant.

That changed following an intense meeting at our school, where we expressed frustration with the lack of math progress for target groups of students in grades 3, 4, and 5. We had tried tutoring at lunchtime and in math study groups. We had reduced class size with small math groups. But the struggling students continued to fail. At the meeting, we passed around the idea of having a morning math prep session for these students, but most of the resource teachers had full schedules. Who could we get to take a fourth-grade morning math prep group of eight students? One teacher courageously asked, “What about you, the principal?”

I had worked with students to reinforce skills from time to time, and I knew these students needed practice and re-teaching on a daily basis. So I said “yes” hesitantly, hoping that it would work out somehow.

My first day was difficult. I had spoken to the teacher briefly about what skills needed to be reinforced and started there. I wanted my lessons to be hands-on, real-life experiences that would stimulate the learning and retention of math skills and make connections to other skills. I was challenged to provide the necessary time, concentration, and energy. But when I saw my students’ dedication to regular attendance, good behavior, and persistence with tasks, I knew I had to keep teaching.

Teach Who?

In every school, there are students who need reinforcement or enrichment. There are students who need motivation to learn.

There are students who need a mentor checking on their progress. There are students who need the opportunity to talk about their learning obstacles in a small group or one-to-one. These are roles the principal can fill.

Teach What?

It sharpens the principal’s knowledge of the curriculum to teach a subject area at a specific grade level. Choose a subject that you want to learn more about, or one that you know well. Teach one in which teachers are struggling, so that you can be a wise ear and knowledgeable voice. Teach one skill until the students learn it, or teach the same skill to all grade levels in workshop format.

Teach not only students but teachers. For example, teach one strategy for a week and have your teachers do two things: write questions about the strategy and observe its effect on the learning struggles of their students. Then suggest strategy modifications that may be needed.

Teach How?

In my experience, the teacher informed me of what strategies had been tried and what strategies hadn’t been tried. During my first week, I studied the students’ needs, listened to them explain their problems and mistakes, and helped them figure out solutions. For support, I resorted to peer teachers—students who were taught to teach others by talking aloud the steps for solving math problems.

Positive reinforcement through tangible rewards was one way I thought would keep my students motivated. I had a big barrel of candy and it got to a point that they would ask me for candy for every step in solving a math problem. When it became obvious that they were being motivated by the extrinsic reward, and not the joy of learning, I replaced material rewards with an intrinsic reward designed to help them feel more empowered as learners.

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Because they needed to show an interest in numbers, we developed a group goal based on a large number: 1 million. Every night these students did math problems, whose answers were then added each day to show how hard it was to reach 1 million. We also looked at the number of problems that were done to see how many we had to do to make 1 million. The students decided that they would be really smart after doing 1 million problems, and when they reached that goal, they were going to make a graph to show how long it would take to eat 1 million of something.

Every math session had to include something different. The students used mini-chalkboards, dry-erase boards, graph paper, large paper, small paper pads, colored chalk, markers, big and little pencils, crayons, colored pencils, and erasable pens. The variety of the math tools kept the thinking flowing, and acting out problems enhanced involvement by utilizing kinesthetic and tactile approaches to abstract thinking.

The morning sessions lasted 30 minutes, but the bonding lasted all day long. Touching base with these students at lunch, at the end of the day, and as I visited their classrooms all were opportunities to connect with these students about math. I would review math facts with them, or we would talk about using math in real-world situations.

Teach When?

Consistent practice in a variety of ways is a proven means of instilling skill retention, and so you must find the time to make additional practice a reality. For example, before, after, and during lunch are valuable times. A principal must be flexible in scheduling instructional time—and sticking to it.

Put it in writing on your agenda, and don't plan anything else during that time. If an emergency occurs, have your assistant principal work with the students. If you can't teach every day, select at least three days that will not be sacrificed for anything.

Teach Where?

A principal's office is usually small, but if you can rearrange furniture to provide sitting room on the floor you will find that students enjoy not sitting at desks. Or a mobile chalkboard can be set up at the end of the hallway or in the lobby for an instant portable learning environment.

Students are open to unique learning places. They react positively to an environment where the teacher cares about their progress, no matter where it is located.

Teach Why?

Reading about, hearing about, and observing teaching are quite different than actually teaching. Working through the kinks of a teaching strategy enables an educator to revise or recreate it in order to make learning successful.

As a result of my teaching experience, I now am an active participant at professional learning community meetings. I can problem-solve with the teachers comfortably and with confidence. I can collaborate with integrity and understanding. I have authentic knowledge about teaching techniques and I am more efficient in managing the school, knowing the needs of the teachers. I am current, innovative, and progressive when it comes to instruction, and I use this knowledge to make better decisions for the students, teachers, and parents.

Teach Again!

Principals must constantly be in a learning mode. Reading journals and books on current instructional investigations keeps the mind open. Taking classes, researching Web sites, visiting other schools, maintaining a journal of ideas, and vertical and horizontal planning with other administrators will take you and your school to a new dimension. Observing your teachers and asking questions about how they improved the learning of their students will strengthen the teacher/administrator bond.

But most important:

- Be a teacher who is learning with your staff;
- Be a teacher who is open to suggestions;
- Be a teacher who knows the good, bad, and ugly of teaching; and
- Be a teacher who is there for your teachers.

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