The Teaching Principal

Ask any principal what he or she would like more time to do, and the response will likely be more involvement in teaching and learning. Many principals bemoan the loss of having a regular, direct connection with children. Serving as a teaching principal can restore this connection and be one of the most rewarding experiences of the principalship.

Some principals, especially those in small schools, are expected to teach. Recent budget cuts may force other principals to assume teaching assignments. But research suggests that overall, few principals have the opportunity to be a teaching principal. For many of us, our heavy administrative workloads preclude us from taking on the additional task of teaching.

According to Marilyn Grady, who conducted a study in 1990 of teaching principals, the foremost disadvantage to teaching is a lack of time. In addition to other administrative duties, principals must attend an inordinate number of meetings and conduct numerous teacher observations. Respondents in her study cited frequent interruptions to teaching due to phone calls, discipline issues, and parent/teacher needs.

Despite these challenges, teaching can provide a new avenue for principals to build rapport with students, parents, instructional staff, and the community. In her study, Grady found that 80 percent of teaching principals would recommend it to others. Researchers have found that a teaching principal builds camaraderie with faculty, while staying current with knowledge of the curriculum, as well as teaching methods, and techniques. Additionally, the teaching principal fosters a culture of continual learning. Above all, teaching principals get to know students better, heightening the enjoyment of the principalship overall. No longer a “spectator,” but rather a “participant,” a teaching principal works alongside the faculty, increasing the principal’s credibility, creativity, and collaboration with those teachers.

Profiles of Two Teaching Principals

Teaching as a principal can be done in a variety of school settings (rural, suburban, and urban) and at all levels (elementary, middle, and high school). Here’s how we both assumed teaching roles in our schools in the Niskayuna Central School District in Niskayuna, New York.

Differentiated Instruction—Debra Ann Berndt:

When I was hired into my position as principal at Birchwood Elementary, the teaching-principal component was already a practice there. Over the past nine years, I have continued this practice, teaching at least one math class each year in grades 2-5. Some years, my students were high-performers, while other years, my class was comprised of struggling math students. When that was the case, I co-taught with the Academic Intervention Services (AIS) teacher. A teaching assistant was also available for the duration of the class period. After school, and just prior to upcoming chapter tests, my AIS teacher and I offered an after-school study group to review and practice.

Typically, 40 to 50 percent of the class attended these sessions.

Smaller Class Sizes—Shireen Ann Fasciglione:

At my school, Hillside Elementary, I have voluntarily taught third-grade math for the past two years. I hoped to build stronger connections with kids, work alongside my teachers as an instructional colleague, and deepen my knowledge of the mathematics curriculum. My third section of math provided some relief to the other two classroom teachers, since assigning 14 to 16 students to my class shrank the other classes from 25 students each to about 19 students each. My students were higher performers who benefited from enrichment opportunities, which were possible to a much greater extent due to the smaller class sizes.

For both of us, our math classes ran for 60 minutes a day, five days a week. At times, it was hard to find locations to teach, but we used our offices, the cafeteria, or larger classrooms, when available.

Benefits

We found that serving as math teachers alongside our colleagues bred greater levels of collegiality, fostered a deeper understanding of an ever-changing curriculum (especially with the implementation of the Common Core State Standards), and sharpened our teaching techniques. We were better able to serve as contributors to grade-level professional learning community conversations at the grade level, throughout the building, and in our district.

Most of all, our relationships with students and parents were strengthened—even in unexpected ways. For example, we hosted a series of parent information nights with a dual focus on the new Common Core standards and our newly adopted approach to math instruction, based upon the principles of the Singapore Math method. This strengthened our connections with our parent community.
We support the idea that every principal should teach. But, to work it into an administrative schedule, principals need not assume the responsibility of teaching an entire class every day, as we did. Principals can schedule their teaching after school, before school, or during lunch. Other teaching options include focusing on students who need extra help, teaching motivation techniques, or serving as a mentor. A principal might choose a subject to teach that he/she knows well or a subject about which he/she needs to learn more.

**The Future of the Teaching Principal**

Despite its benefits, teaching as a principal can be threatened by new mandates and shrinking budgets. In an era of shrinking resources, school personnel are asked to assume ever-increasing responsibilities with fewer and fewer supports. Many districts, including ours, have adopted Common Core standards and higher expectations for teacher evaluation. The increased frequency of teacher observations, along with boosted professional development around the new standards, requires much more of our time.

Given these heightened expectations, principals who want or need to teach will have to find creative ways to do so. This year, we have had to tap into some innovative approaches to teaching to maintain our connection with students. These include teaching a small academic intervention group for 30 minutes a few days a week, and pushing into classrooms to provide re-teaching, when necessary. Remember, teaching augments a principal’s sense of fulfillment, efficacy, and credibility—but most of all, it is simply good practice.

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