A Principal Looks at 30

In Jimmy Buffet’s well-known reflective piece, “A Pirate Looks at Forty,” we catch a glimpse of a veteran seaman who has seen many challenges and has had varied experiences. One can just imagine a harried sailor recounting tales of fame, adventure, fortune, and loss to a sympathetic listener in an oceanside bar. Likewise, today’s principals sail the seas of school safety, rising accountability, increased public scrutiny, and parent and school community concerns.

Nonetheless, the bottom line is this: Principals must find time for reflection. Whether that inward glance takes place on a Caribbean pier or simply in a backyard hammock, today’s building administrator cannot afford to simply flitter about like a “butterfly on speed” (Connolly, 2007) for countless days, months, and years.

As an educator, I feel that I have moved from one task and challenge to the next without, perhaps, taking enough time to reflect upon what I have learned. I became a full-time teacher at age 21 and a principal at 28: education is a fast-paced job in which reflection does not always come easy. As I near my 30th birthday, I realize that there is much more to learn. Even so, at a relatively young age I feel that I have already experienced much to reflect upon and share with other educators, particularly those who aspire to serve as building administrators. Several key themes emerge in my mind that I have found particularly valuable.

Vision. As Covey, Merrill, and Merrill (1994) have written, “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” Do your staff, school community, and most of all, students, know what your school is all about? Do you? By introducing a simple, achievable mission such as, “All students will conquer challenges and realize success in math this year,” you can focus on one or two key growth areas, depending on the needs of your school.

Relationships. Perhaps the most obvious, yet easiest to neglect, facet of our role as building leader is maintaining relationships. Wagner and Kegan (2006) call strong relationships “the most important element in motivating students to want to achieve at high standards.” Strong relationships can also help bridge gaps among faculty members. At each of our two monthly faculty meetings, teachers acknowledge each other by awarding the Woody Bear Award, which includes a composed statement of appreciation and recognition of hard work, and a large stuffed animal. The teacher keeps the Woody Bear Award in his or her classroom until the next faculty meeting, and the cycle repeats.

Attention to details. Educators with an eye for detail appreciate a collaborative leader who doesn’t miss a beat. Principals can facilitate good organization by sending a daily e-mail to staff that contains the day’s events (assemblies, fire-drill time, special announcements, etc.) along with upcoming events and an inspirational quote.

By rolling up one’s sleeves and helping organize a teacher workroom, attending the majority of grade-level meetings, and consistently showing up on time for bus duty, a principal can lead by example, sending the message that “little things” count and make a big difference on the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the organization.

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I realize that I have much to learn in the years ahead. Thanks to a supportive faculty and school community, I have had a wonderful first two years as a principal. By reflecting on the things that make us great, by framing a clear, consistent vision, and by recognizing a school’s successful strengths, a principal can help to create a climate of sustainability and support for those in the community and encourage the practice of quality reflection. Through reflection, those unknown waves that lie ahead may indeed be less bumpy and more enjoyable as we sail the friendly seas.

William Sterrett is principal of Woodbrook Elementary School in Charlottesville, Virginia. His e-mail address is wsterrett@k12albemarle.org.

References