A Principal’s Guide to School

Benjamin Piltch and Robert Fredericks

A pair of veteran retired principals offer some practical advice on how to deal with school politics—and stay out of trouble.
As a principal, it is almost impossible to avoid situations where political considerations affect your decision-making. You learn to live with it, but it can be difficult when you have to deal with rumors, inferences, innuendo, exaggerations, and outright lies.

**IN BRIEF**

This article provides experience-based suggestions for principals on how to anticipate and avoid situations involving political considerations in dealings with parents, teachers, teacher unions, the central office, parent organizations, school boards, and community groups.
For example, we know of a principal who was summoned by the superintendent after he and a committee of teachers selected one of the school’s best teachers to mentor two new teachers. The problem was that two sets of very politically savvy parents of children in the teacher’s class didn’t want their children to lose her. They went to the school board and the board sent word to the superintendent to pressure the principal to choose a different mentor.

As it turned out, the only teacher who met the superintendent’s criteria— an outstanding veteran teacher who would mentor the new teachers for four periods a week— was the principal’s original selection. The issue was settled quickly, but not before this “mini-crisis” cost the principal a week of sleepless nights and anxiety.

Unpleasant situations like this arise all the time in schools, but there are ways for principals to minimize aggravation and stay out of trouble when dealing with their various constituencies.

Parents and Teachers

■ Establish uniform disciplinary procedures early in the year and make sure they are followed.

■ Meet with teachers regularly to “sniff out” potential problems and plan ways to prevent them.

■ Visit classes often so that if a parent complains about a teacher, you can state that you have observed the teacher performing correctly and be able to describe what you saw. For example, if the accusation is that the teacher gives no homework, you can say that you saw homework written on the board during each visit to the teacher’s classroom.

■ Discuss privately with teachers complaints about them that come to you from parents and children, but try not to reveal the identity of those making the complaints. If you must reveal this information, make sure the teachers do not punish children for their complaints or those of their parents.

■ Make certain that teachers understand that they are never to leave a class unsupervised. A teacher who was sued for negligence when a child broke his ankle in the gym was able to win the case when she could prove that she had told the class three times as they left the gym to stay in line. The boy had ignored her instructions and returned to the gym to shoot baskets when he was injured.

■ Teachers should also be told that...
they are not to meet alone with a child outside of a normal classroom setting during school hours, such as during lunch or preparation time. False accusations can be hard to disprove in such circumstances.

■ Ensure that all your teachers receive training in keeping with district policies and community values in such controversial areas as corporal punishment, verbal and physical harassment, and sex education.

Teacher Unions
■ Keep the union leaders in your school informed of potential changes before the changes are introduced.
■ Gain the trust of union leaders by being honest with them and involving them in discussions of new programs and current problems.
■ Meet with union leaders at least once a month and exchange agenda items a few days in advance to avoid surprises. These meetings will keep you informed of the union’s concerns and give you opportunities to make necessary changes.
■ Involve the union in setting up plans to help weak teachers. This can help minimize opposition when it becomes necessary to initiate the termination process for an incompetent teacher.

The Central Office
■ Read your superintendent’s memos carefully and share them with your secretary, your assistant principal, and a few trusted teachers. Their insight, advice, and input will be helpful in framing your responses.
■ Be sure to respond to all central office communication in a timely fashion.
■ Contact the central office immediately if there is an emergency. Don’t wait until after the event.
■ Develop good relationships with the central office staff so that they will respond to your concerns quickly.
■ When attending required meetings with your superintendent, ask questions regarding situations about which you are unclear. But if you have complaints or serious concerns, see the superintendent or an appropriate central office administrator privately.

Parent Organizations
■ Keep your school’s parent organization fully informed of current issues as well as any proposed changes.
■ Attend their meetings and help them obtain interesting speakers on current topics. For example, one
principal was able to get a central office speaker to describe the structure of the school’s physical education program after parents raised concerns about whether it was in compliance with state and district regulations.

- Pay attention to concerns expressed by members of your parent organization and follow up. If you don’t have the answers, get back to them when you do.

School Boards
- Although most school board members are sincerely interested in seeing to the needs of the schools in their district, there are some who run for a school board seat because of the power involved. Their requests often become very political and principals need to be extremely cautious.
- You don’t want to offend school board members by openly defying them, but you still must be ethical in responding to their requests in an honest and straightforward way.

Community Groups
- Local organizations can be very helpful in obtaining funding for school programs and equipment, providing volunteers, and supporting your school’s reputation. But keep in mind that the leaders of these organizations are not experts on education and that you need to be careful about allowing them to make decisions on sensitive matters. Even the perception that they are making educational decisions can be problematic.
- Attend as many meetings of local civic associations and community groups as you can.

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- Get to know the key leaders and ask to speak at their meetings. Give them annual updates on school events and activities. A community group that initially opposed busing because members felt it would hurt neighborhood property values changed its mind after the principal, who had spoken at each of their last six annual meetings, explained why busing would be good for the school. They had learned to trust his judgment.

Universal Suggestions
- Be honest at all times. Keep everyone in the loop with regard to concerns you know they will have about ongoing or future programs.
- Be aware of what various constituencies—parents, teachers, the central office, and the community—feel about your school and what they would like to see in the near and distant future.
- Maintain an open-door policy and welcome those with concerns they wish to discuss with you.
- Whenever you leave the building during the school day, be sure you to inform your secretary and designate your assistant principal, if you have one, or a lead teacher to act in your absence. Make sure your faculty knows who your designee is and let the office staff know where you are going so you can be notified in an emergency.
- Notify all concerned when there is a crisis. For example, if there is an outbreak of pediculosis, notify teachers and parents to assure them that the school nurse has the situation under control.
- Encourage all constituencies to seek out all the facts, separating out political implications, before jumping to conclusions on any issue. Set an example by being knowledgeable, fair, understanding, tolerant, sincere, even-handed, and compassionate in your behavior and decision-making.

Benjamin Piltch and Robert Fredericks are retired principals who are co-authoring a book on the principalship. Piltch’s e-mail address is bpiltch@bellsouth.net. Fredericks’ e-mail address is nbfred@aol.com.

WEB RESOURCES

“Dismissing the Incompetent Teacher,” published in Streamlined Seminar in March 1999, has advice for checking the political climate before beginning the dismissal process.

www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=766

Public Agenda reports on a national survey of concerns expressed by principals and superintendents in Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk about What’s Needed to Fix Public Schools.

www.publicagenda.org/research_reports_details.cfm?list=9

In “The Embattled Principal,” NAESP Executive Director Vincent Ferrandino addresses some of the political barriers faced by today’s principals.

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