Always on Duty:
A Principal’s Life

Being a principal means being on call 24 hours a day wherever you may be.

Robert Ruder

A mother in the Bronx walks into her son’s room and says, “Hey, get up, sonny boy, you’re late for school.”

And her son says, “I’m not going to school!”

“Why not?” his mother says.

And he says, “Well, for two reasons. All the kids hate me and all the teachers hate me.”

And his mother says, “Well, I’ll give you two reasons why you should go to school.”

And her son says, “Yeah? Name them!”

And his mother says, “One, you’re 45 years old, and two, you’re the principal!”

Source: Did You Hear the One About...by Soupy Sales

Some of us may have thought the perks of becoming a principal were glamorous, if not somewhat akin to the professional lives of our counterparts in other professions. We may have envisioned leisure time during the course of the day to close the door to our offices, sip a cup of coffee, and do some professional reading. We may have toyed with the notion of an occasional two-hour lunch or an afternoon round of golf with colleagues to finalize deals related to the overall operation of our schools. We may have dreamed of leaving work at a reasonable time each day and having dinner with our families.

In Brief

The author, a former principal, focuses on the four time frames that make up the principal’s day: Before staff and students arrive; during the school day; after the school day; and evenings, weekends, and vacations. In each, the principal plays a highly visible role that requires flexibility and the ability to balance professional and family responsibilities.

Unfortunately, this perception of the professional life of a principal and reality are not always congruent. As time passes, the perception and reality grow further apart. Determining how the reality of the principalship has come to exist in contemporary times is frequently a point of discussions when principals gather professionally or socially.

Being a principal, regardless of grade level, means having to hit the ground running every day. It also means that flexibility is critically important to your well-being and that planned meet-
ings and observations may need to be rescheduled. A principal’s 24-hour life can be compartmentalized into four realms that are linked by the commonality of the principalship but separated by time and physical location.

Before Staff and Students Arrive

Getting a jump start on the day might mean getting home earlier in the evening. Veteran principals acknowledge the large quantity of work they can get done if they have a period of undisturbed time before students and staff arrive. The secret is getting to work 30 minutes or more before the rush begins, keeping the door shut, and getting to business. Arriving at the same time as staff or students translates into staying late—plain and simple.

Once the staff begin to arrive, but before the students, your office door should be open for those with questions or concerns, or for pre- or post-observation conferences. This time also can be used for department or grade-level meetings, or meetings with parents.

During the School Day

Being highly visible as students arrive conveys the message that the principal is in charge. This will either eliminate some unwanted behaviors or allow students to resolve conflicts by sharing their concerns with the principal as they enter the building. Remaining visible until all the students have reached their classrooms will enhance their perception of an ever-present principal who affords them a sense of well-being and safety as the school day begins.

Getting the day off to a smooth start is a springboard for maintaining a safe and productive learning environment. But let’s not fool ourselves. The course of the day can change like the wind. Regardless of how calm and orderly the day begins, chaos can erupt in seconds. Plan as you may, the unexpected can wreak havoc on your school and sabotage the very best plans.

Provided the day remains windless and cloud-free, the principal goes about the routine of observations, conferences, parent meetings, calls from parents, disciplinary events, cafeteria duty, playground or recess supervision, parent advisory council meetings, bus duty, and interviews for staff vacancies that consume the day. As students prepare for dismissal at the end of the day, many a principal may ask, “Where did the day go?” or “Did I eat lunch today?”

After the School Day

After the students leave, the principal’s pace may slow, but the emotional and intellectual demands remain. More teacher or parent conferences may fill this time. Telephone calls will need to be made and returned, detention will need to be supervised, and the after-school clubs will need to be monitored.

Depending on the grade level and the season, attendance at team practice or sporting events may be an expectation. Keeping in mind that the principal is ultimately responsible for each child in the school, presence at these events also means remaining with students whose parents or guardians are late or forgot to pick them up. At some point during the late afternoon, the weary principal may again ask, “Did I eat lunch today?”

Evenings, Weekends, and Vacations

Principals are very much like the police, who are always on duty even when off duty. In addition to the official and weekend functions such as parent organization meetings, plays, concerts, dances, fun nights, back-to-school nights, sporting events, band competitions, and parades, there are a number of other activities related to the school that may require your attendance, such as science fairs and spelling bees.

The important thing to remember is that, even when not in school, you’re the principal at the local pizza parlor, supermarket, car dealership, lumberyard, and dry cleaner. You’re also the principal in the dentist’s chair, emergency room, gym, tennis court, golf course, church, synagogue, or mosque. You’re the principal in whatever you’re wearing, be it a suit or jeans, evening gown or shorts.

On vacation, you’re still the principal. You take calls regarding illnesses or deaths of students, parents, and staff members. You’re called day or night when the school’s silent alarm goes off or if the school is vandalized.

Being a principal means being on call all the time. It means enjoying the fast pace of the day and not remembering if and when you ate lunch. It means greeting students, teachers, and parents each and every day. It means getting to know generations of children and families. It means being recognized, respected, and trusted in the community in which you work. It means being passionate about what you do.

Being a principal also means not neglecting your family. It means being home for dinner at a reasonable time, not forgetting your anniversary, sharing your passion with the ones you love, and having an emotional storehouse available for them. It means monitoring what you can do and what you can’t do, and it means finding time for self-reflection and evaluation. It means balancing your life to find enjoyment in both work and family.

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WEB RESOURCES

Education World offers useful time-management tips from principals. www.education-world.com/a_admin/admin/admin436.shtml

NAESP’s Student & Community News Today has posted its 10 top time-management strategies. www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1825

The University of Texas at El Paso provides an abstract and text of a dissertation on time management by elementary, middle, and high school principals in West Texas. http://digitalcommons.utep.edu/dissertations/AAI3118652
A PRINCIPAL’S DAY

End of the Day with Cookies

It’s 5:30 a.m. The alarm has rung once and there’s no time to wait for the second ring. My husband has started a new project at his office and needs to be there early, which means I have to drop off my son Matt at the high school.

By 6:40 we pull out of the driveway for the 2.5 miles to the high school and I then prepare for a 30-minute drive to my school. My loud rock music and a travel mug of coffee keep me alert enough to deal with the usual morning traffic.

When I arrive in the city where my elementary school is located, I drive around a couple of blocks to see which children are at the bus stops—and obeying the crossing guards. Our students are pretty streetwise, but they’re still very young!

After parking my car, and dropping my laptop and handbag in my office, I go directly outside where four teachers are on morning duty. Several students say hello or want a hug. One has a new cast and is eager to explain “the bike incident.” As the morning bell rings and everyone files into the building, I check my e-mail quickly and pull up my Palm information to confirm my schedule.

I see that I have an observation of a classroom teacher scheduled and that I need to check with our nurse about her attending a field trip with our third graders.

In the morning, I wander around the building as often as possible, peeking into classrooms, sometimes stopping to answer questions or offer support to teachers. The lesson I formally observe is a good one; it meets the state standards, includes review and possibilities for follow-up, and is differentiated. The classroom is rich with literacy choices and learning centers.

All of our students stay in school for lunch, and about half enjoy the hot lunch made by our food service staff. The brown baggers chatter happily with lunch aides, and a few children who run into the lunchroom are sent back to the door to walk in properly.

At 2:30, a classroom aide stops to inform me she is going to start preparing cookies for our after-school tutoring program. Two afternoons a week, we offer an extra hour of literacy or math to any students who wish to stay. It’s my job to provide freshly baked cookies (donated by a business associate of my husband’s) and milk to each student—and most of the faculty.

When the cookie delivery is complete and the trays washed for tomorrow, I take a call from my son, who is at an orchestra event and needs to be picked up at 8:45 instead of 8:15.

As I drive to the gym for a 5:30 class, I think about what vegetables I’ll serve with our dinner. If I’m lucky, my husband and I will be at the gym at about the same time, we’ll eat at about 7 o’clock, and then one of us will get Matt at school.

By the time we’re all home and settled in for the night, I share my day and hear about my husband’s project. Once we slow down, none of us will have trouble sleeping!

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Andover-Morris Academy is an urban school serving 250 students in grades 3-5. It is a Title I school with 60 percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.