A Principal’s Job Is Never Done

Each 24-hour cycle of the principalship ebbs and flows with a life of its own.

Mary Ann Chapko

IN BRIEF

As principal of a suburban, relatively affluent, mid-size elementary school, I feel a principal’s job is child-oriented, unpredictable, mentally stimulating, physically demanding, and never done. Just when you think you finished that last state-mandated report, hired that last teacher, dealt with that last parent phone call, or disciplined that last naughty student, someone or something will demand your attention. The excitement of this job flows like a veritable fountain from the uncertainty of what tomorrow will bring, coupled with all the routine management jobs that simply must be done.

In my 10 years as principal, I have had the privilege of building and bonding a great team, leading the curricular challenge to boost my students’ state test scores to exemplary heights, and working in a true partnership with outstanding parents and colleagues. However, I have also dealt with broken urinals, power failures, dumpster fires, roof leaks, saving chicks during a snowstorm, and a renovation that reduced my building to a hollowed-out bomb shelter.
The principal’s role as instructional leader is not always as glamorous and exciting as it may look. As I start my 11th year as an elementary school principal, I now clearly realize that the lazy days of summer vacation are as much a fairy tale fantasy for principals as being able to take an uninterrupted break for lunch. After completing 10 cycles, I can confidently state that each new school year now seamlessly flows into the next, when one academic year ends and the next one starts.

A Daily Obstacle Course

The longer you are in the profession, the more you realize that each 24-hour cycle of the principalship ebbs and flows with a life of its own. Your job as principal is simply to control and direct your “educational vehicle” and all its occupants down the slippery obstacle course of individual student achievement, state and federal mandates, corporation politics, professional development, team building, and parent expectations, without losing control. At the end of my day, it definitely helps to have a good colleague and a good husband to get me through.

My day looks something like this: 6 a.m. wakeup followed by 15 minutes of intense aerobic exercise while scanning the news and recess-time weather forecast. While thoughts in the shower, at breakfast, and dressing in front of the mirror revolve around the day’s activities, it is impossible not to think about certain students, parents, and staff who will need my assistance today.

I arrive at school about 45 minutes before the teachers. This is my quiet time—maybe my only truly reflective time of the day. The bulk of managerial tasks, including the dozens of e-mails and voicemails, can be plugged into this time slot. As the first teachers arrive, I try to take the time to help them begin their day on a positive note. I often find it difficult to turn away from all the paperwork in order to socialize, but I know that team-building is paramount to my school’s success.

A number of different people grab and grope for my attention in those magical minutes before school begins. There are always teachers, staff, irate parents, not-so-irate parents, bus drivers, and custodians who need just a minute. Alas, the madness of these minutes ends with the bell sounding the start of another day. I hurriedly dash to pronounce the Pledge of Allegiance and announcements on the intercom, followed by a state-mandated moment of silence.

Early in my principalship, I was told that if you just get your school started, your “educational vehicle” and all its occupants down the slippery obstacle course will run itself. I optimistically hung on to that thought in my early days as principal, and there is some truth to it. For just as good planning and preparation lead to great classroom management for teachers, so does extensive preparation and proactive decision-making lead to great school management for principals.

The never-ending excitement of this job, however, lies in the unexpected events, life-altering decisions, and controlled chaos that occur at regular intervals throughout the day. As principal, my best defense is to control what I can control, for example: selling 12 kinds of ice cream at lunch, consistently greeting my afternoon kindergartners at 12:40, or scheduling a monthly “Make Your Own Sundae Birthday Party with the Principal.” Scheduling events from which I rarely deviate allows me to better deal with the multitude of unscheduled events that occur daily. At the very least, it leaves me with the feeling that I have some control over my day.

An Afternoon Reprieve

If I can survive the madness of the lunch hours, a peaceful patch of time will be my reward. I find I can finally touch base with my secretary, catch my breath, and review what has occurred and what needs to happen before this day can be a wrap. I enjoy some moments in the classrooms, walking and talking with students and teachers, and basking in the glow of my students’ growth and curricular development. A principal wears many hats—leader, manager, mother, nurse, counselor, friend, and confidant—but the main hat is always that of a teacher. It is in these quiet afternoon moments that I get to share the teacher’s domain, which brings the most satisfaction to my day.

Quiet moments rarely last, however, and misbehavior always seems to precede dismissal. It is at these times that I put on my counseling hat. Consequences and discipline write-ups tend to follow as we move on to the most exciting time of the day: dismissal. It is an unfortunate reality that I can only be in one place at a time as buses, car pick-ups, walkers, and patrols all require my attention. I get aerobic exercise at

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Principal  November/December 2006

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Transcending from public school administration to heading an independent boarding school involves some profound adjustments to living among and constantly interacting with the students you serve.

At Hawaii Preparatory Academy, my family and I are entering our fourth year of living the boarding school lifestyle. While there is no “typical” day, we strive for routine and balance even while we live, work, eat, socialize, and spend seven days a week among our students.

Early mornings are “my” time. I head out for a jog before sunrise, clearing my head and planning my day. I return to spend time with my 5-year-old daughter and my wife as they begin their day. After 20 years of battling traffic to get to school, my commute is now a 100-yard walk.

Once in the office at 7:45, I check in with my assistant and listen to voicemail for urgent messages. Next, I usually call the assistant headmaster to coordinate schedules as needed. That’s when the “routine” ends!

In its variety, pace, and unpredictability, the particular workday I’ve logged is not unlike my days as a public school administrator, except that we have a six-day school week for our Upper School students, and our boarders are on campus 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

At 9 a.m., I meet with a teacher about questions concerning on-campus housing for faculty. Then I slip out to visit classrooms before my 10 a.m. appointment to be interviewed for a community promotion highlighting our school.

At 10:40, I join a meeting in progress about updating the school’s Web site before driving to our K-8 campus two miles away, making cell phone calls en route. I check in with the K-8 school head, eat lunch with students, walk around the cafeteria, swap bad jokes with clusters of children (a ritual that the children and I enjoy), and visit classrooms.

By 12:35, I’m back at the Upper School campus, where I check on a campus construction project before a 1 p.m. meeting to discuss a parent’s concerns. At 2, I take a half-hour to return phone calls and check e-mail before sneaking out to visit classrooms, only to be intercepted by students concerned about a change in the school’s conduct policy.

At 3, I meet with the business manager to discuss budget and operational issues; at 3:30, I have a meeting with a teacher, which becomes emotional and extends longer than anticipated.

It’s 4:30 when I check my mailbox, sort mail into “now,” “later,” or “never,” and file accordingly. At 4:45, I walk to our athletic complex to watch practices and chat with students before going back to the office to return calls, read e-mails, and begin replying to pressing messages.

At 5:35 p.m., I head to the dining hall to have dinner with some students, after which I walk home and spend an hour reading to my daughter and putting her to bed.

But my day isn’t over. At 7:30, I walk to the gymnasium for a girls’ basketball game.

It’s 9 o’clock when I get home again to catch up on the day with my wife, watch some news on TV, check e-mails, and work on my newsletter.

At 11 p.m., my day done, it was time to shower and off to bed.

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Hawaii Preparatory Academy is an independent, coeducational K-12 school serving 610 students from 15 states and 16 countries on two campuses. About half of the high school students and about 30 middle school students live in campus dormitories with faculty families.
loose ends of parent phone calls and teacher concerns, as well as preparing for the next day of adventure. It’s exciting when there are no after-school meetings or evening events and I can come home to my husband, who intuitively knows when I am most in need of a hot dinner or a hot bath.

It is sometimes difficult to make the transition from leader, disciplinarian, and boss to spouse, partner, and friend. Fortunately for me, my husband is a patient saint who realizes I really don’t mean it when I direct him to sit down and clean up his mess, or use my “principal stare” on him. Regardless of the hundreds of conversations at all levels throughout the day, it is the final conversations at dinner and before I fall asleep that best prepare me for the next day with my students, teachers, and parents. It is at these times that I am better able to reflect, correct, and plan for another day in the life of the 24-hour principal. And even as I drift off to sleep, I can never stop asking myself, “Am I making every decision in the best interests of children?”

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“Daddy, Where Are You?”

“Daddy, where are you?” echoes a 5:45 a.m. reso-
nation across our house in a manner that only a
2-year-old could successfully manage.

“Good morning, sweetheart. I’m right here,” is
Daddy’s favored reply. “I love you,” I whisper. “Let’s get
back to sleep. Daddy needs to get up and go to school.
It’s very important for you to help Daddy help the kids.”

And then the day begins: A morning prayer, a quick
breakfast, and a big glass of water to kick-
start the day. Picking out a favorite tie
that the students have not seen for
a few weeks will likely render
again the question of “How
many ties do you have?” later
in the day.

I look over a checklist
of the day’s events and a
folder of last evening’s
work and reports, and
I’m out the door. Twenty
minutes of drive-time
thinking later, I have
the first chance to greet
my early-bird students
and staff members busily
preparing for the day. Our
breakfast crowd arrives short-
ly thereafter, followed by a line
of yellow buses and a stream of
parent drop-offs.

Arrival time marks the excitement of
a new school day, with high fives and “Good
mornings” accentuating this part of the day. After chas-
ing in a wandering tardy, I walk the halls like it was the
first day of school all over again. The excitement of a
new day remains even after 20 years. Following a cup of
coffee, the usual day unfolds with a packed assortment
of meetings, phone calls, and various-sized fires.

Every day brings something new. An occasional child
stops by to have his thinking reordered; a grade-level
meeting requires a review of assessment results or
an explanation of a new initiative; detective work is
needed to determine how a fight started; a conference
is held to discuss accelerating a student with high math
abilities.

Lunchtime brings a welcome midday break, when I
pretend to barter for a neatly packed sushi roll or some
Cheetos from student lunches. (On the very rare occa-
sion that a student actually says, “Sure, go ahead and
have some,” I reply, “Thanks, but I’m on a diet.”) A
knock-knock joke or two later, and the next
group files into their seats for a repeat
performance.

As the school day winds to an
end and the buses file into their
usual order, I again have an
opportunity to exchange stu-
dent debriefings. “How was
your day?” “Have a great
night.” “Smile.” “See you
in the morning.”

By the time a slew of
e-mails are answered,
phone calls returned, fires
extinguished, and ques-
tions answered, I make
another regular “I’m run-
ning late again” call to my
thankfully understanding
wife. On nights when evening
activities do not prevail, home for
the evening entails welcomed hugs
and news of the day’s events. But on this
particular night, a PTA function marks the
13th and 14th hours of the school day. Upon arriving
home, my son is asleep.

“Goodnight, my dear, and I’ll see you when the sun
comes up,” I whisper. “It’s very important for you to
sleep well. That’s how you help Daddy help the kids.”

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Meadowbrook Elementary School is a suburban school serving 487 students in grades K–5.