The Eight-Hour Principal: Learning to Say “No”

Thinking about the theme of this issue, “The 24-Hour Principal,” took me back to when I first started out as an administrator, working 12 hours a day and often on weekends. Time didn’t belong to me; it belonged to everyone else. When I walked down the hall to visit a classroom, or when I was trying to finish a report, I’d hear those familiar words: “Dr. Riggins, do you have a minute?”

Over the years, I learned to go from being an 18-hour principal to a 12-hour principal to an eight-hour principal. (Well, maybe a nine-and-a-half-hour principal.) In looking back, I asked myself how I had learned to take control of my time—and my life.

When you start your career as a principal, you say to yourself, “My gosh, what will the teachers think if I’m away from the building?” You worry that without your presence, chaos will ensue. Teachers won’t teach, children won’t learn, and parents won’t find answers. You labor under the illusion that you and your school are one, and that without you education will not take place.

Sometime after the first five years or so, we come to see that illusion as being, well, delusional. But pouring ourselves into our buildings during those early years of our tenure is really necessary if we are to create a vision of the culture of learning that we so care about. That’s when we need to prove our commitment. Working a 12-hour day, “I started putting me first. I thought, ‘If I’m going to do this job and do it effectively, then I need to be healthy.’ Now, getting to school at 6:15 isn’t a priority; health and fitness is number one.” (Lillie has found a way to relate physical fitness and instructional leadership. Her school is a three-story building. “If someone on the third floor needs me, no problem,” she says.)

I asked Lillie what insight she had that allowed her to realize that she could begin to let things go. “I learned that the school isn’t going anywhere, unless a tornado comes up during the night. The building is there when I leave and it’ll be there in the morning—even if I take three days off.”

There are, of course, many ways that we can learn to organize our schools and our time so that saying “no” to many of the demands of our jobs doesn’t mean saying “no” to improved teaching and learning.

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Putting “Me” First

In 1999 she decided to invest the hour before 7:30 in walking five miles a day. “I started putting me first. I thought, ‘If I’m going to do this job and do it effectively, then I need to be healthy.’ Now, getting to school at 6:15 isn’t a priority; health and fitness is number one.” (Lillie has found a way to relate physical fitness and instructional leadership. Her school is a three-story building. “If someone on the third floor needs me, no problem,” she says.)

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As we gain experience, we gain the wisdom to know what’s really important and what’s less important. We learn to prioritize. And as we gain wisdom, we learn to delegate and to share our responsibilities with our staffs; after all, we’ve spent years learning to trust them and we know who can do what and how well. Just as Lillie Carter has done, we can learn to care for ourselves as well as we care for our students and our teachers: We can learn that we are important, too, and that it is possible, in the words of my friend and colleague Sherman LaPrade, to “breathe and be a principal at the same time.”

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