

A Principal's SURVIVAL

The **demands** of today's education system are leaving many principals feeling overwhelmed and discouraged.

Jim Grant

You are struggling to survive in a strange and challenging environment, where the rules of the game have been changed and keep changing. The people who are supposed to be on your team spend much of their time pursuing their own agendas and may even be plotting against you. The local customs, attitudes, and values seem foreign to you at times, and some of what you see and hear is downright incomprehensible. In addition, many of the policies and procedures you are responsible for implementing no longer make sense. At best, they do not meet the needs of those directly involved. At worst, they seem designed to result in failure rather than success.

For some principals, the preceding paragraph may sound like a paranoid dream caused by watching too many reality TV shows. But for other principals, the descriptions are all too real and often lead to burnout, despair, and early retirement. A fundamental lack of common sense in our education system is leaving many principals feeling overwhelmed and discouraged as they struggle to survive while meeting the needs of their students. At the same time, principals also must contend with the financial and political competition among the various stakeholders in our schools, including taxpayers, community organizations, district personnel, state and federal education officials, politicians, business executives, and media pundits.

The good news is that there are ways to survive—and even thrive—in today's high-pressure, high-stakes school systems. While ideological mandates, extreme points of view, and overblown conflicts often make common sense seem like a

IN BRIEF

The author identifies major demands that schools face today, including challenging childhood conditions, high standards, and high-stakes testing, and offers practical, common-sense solutions for principals to survive—and thrive—in today's high-pressure environment.

thing of the past, there are effective solutions and strategies that can and do result in sustained, successful instruction and learning. By clarifying the realities we are all struggling with, and then devising and implementing practical, child-centered approaches, we can overcome the challenges and reinvent schools that actually make sense.

The Condition of Our Children

You need a firm grasp on reality in order to survive, but when considering the challenges we face in educating our children, it's easy to feel not just bipolar, but tripolar as well. In many districts, whether urban or rural, we must overcome the multiple effects of poverty, which can have a severe physical, emotional, and educational impact

VAL Guide



on students. In other districts—and sometimes in the same districts—we also must overcome the problems of affluent students, who may either be unmotivated and overindulged, or hurried and harried, with “helicopter parents” hovering nearby, waiting to swoop in for a rescue or attack. A third category of students lies somewhere in the middle, neither rich nor poor, not total failures and not perfect students, but still with their own real and pressing needs.

Some of the challenging childhood conditions we face can be found in almost every school. These include:

- Students impacted by premature birth or prenatal exposure to alcohol, drugs, or toxic substances;
- Students suffering from poor health that affects their ability to see, hear, speak, behave, or even breathe;
- Students struggling with food-related issues ranging from obesity to insufficient nutrition, and from severe allergies to eating disorders;
- Students who have grown up with different cultures and/or languages, and therefore need help with our schools’ language and culture;
- Students coping with family issues, such as divorce, dysfunction, and transience, that inevitably carry over into the classroom; and
- Students influenced by various media, including television, movies, video games, and the Internet.

Most of these problems stem from societal issues over which we have little or no control, but because they have such a significant impact on what is happening within our schools, we need to provide our own common-sense solutions, such as:

- Offering and supporting a range of differentiated interventions, class structures, materials, and support systems for different types of learners;
- Building alliances and networks with community-based organizations and individuals that can offer access to

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the diverse services and experiences today’s students need;

- Establishing or updating school policies regarding nutrition and media usage, and educating staff, students, parents, and other community members about them; and
- Protecting or even expanding recess, gym classes, and lunch periods, as well as field trips and arts classes, to develop healthy, active, creative, and engaged students.

High Standards and High-Stakes Testing

To survive in an educational era dominated by state standards and standardized tests, it would be very helpful to have a highly standardized student population. As just described, however, the extent and diversity of today’s students make meeting all the standards and performing well on state tests an extreme challenge. As we struggle to help huge numbers of nonstandard learners fill in the correct bubbles during the specified amount of time, we face such issues as:

- Large numbers of English-language learners and special education students, plus unclassified and irregular learners, as well as many students who simply do not respond well to standardized test formats and time pressures;
- A curriculum based on standards escalated to a level at which many students cannot perform well, thereby setting them and their teachers up for frustration and failure;
- A standards-based curriculum that in many states has also become so broad

it is now “a mile wide and an inch deep,” requiring teachers to cover it in shallow, fast-paced, and uninteresting ways that leave no time for stragglers and teachable moments; and

- The replacement of valid, engaging, and meaningful projects with extensive test-prep skill drills, bubble-filling exercises, and the teaching of test-taking strategies that help students learn to “game the system.”

The resulting frustration and failure on the part of students and educators make survival more difficult for principals, while also increasing the risk of elevated student dropout and teacher attrition rates. To help everyone involved survive in our schools, we need another set of common-sense solutions that include:

- Additional learning time for students who need it, provided through before- and after-school sessions, weekend and vacation sessions, and summer school (without decreasing or eliminating lunch, recess, gym, and art classes);
- Supplemental materials that meet our diverse students’ full range of needs and interests, rather than textbooks or programs that claim to be perfect for everyone, but really are too general and bland to engage anyone;
- Staff-generated solutions developed through a school culture that emphasizes ongoing professional development, continuous improvement, and focused problem-solving;
- Education and advocacy by principals who are willing to lead by example and help their supervisors, staff, and community push for the ongoing improvement of standards, tests, and the people who create them, not just our schools and scores.

Differentiating Instruction

Given the mismatch between our diverse student population and our standards and standardized tests, something else that is unlikely to survive is the more traditional way of teaching. “Give ’em the lecture and then hand

out the worksheets” never worked that well to begin with, and today’s students are even less likely to listen attentively for long periods of time and then fill in all the blanks correctly. As the instructional leaders of their schools, principals need to help change such practices as:

- Mono-teaching methods that assume “one size fits all,” thereby preventing many students who have different strengths and needs from achieving success;
- Overuse of whole-class instruction in an effort to maintain control and use time efficiently, which inevitably results in some students losing control and wasting time;
- Classes that lack participation, collaboration, and the joy of learning, because students are expected to learn and do only what the teacher tells them to; and
- Too much reliance on short-answer tests to obtain assessment data and measure achievement, leaving many students unknown and unable to show what they know.

Common sense should tell us that the diversity of our instructional strategies and techniques needs to match the diversity of our students. By differentiating instruction effectively, our teachers can help their full range of students learn successfully by:

- Using a variety of assessments before, during, and after instruction, to identify students’ needs and continually monitor their progress;
- Combining whole-class, small group, and individualized instruction, so that students’ various and varying needs are met in a variety of ways;
- Teaching to and through all modalities, so that students can learn by seeing, listening, feeling, moving, talking, and thinking; and
- Implementing a range of practical strategies while continually developing and testing new ones, so that teaching is as dynamic and reality-based as students’ learning.

Unlike reality television shows, survival as a principal does not require you to eliminate rivals or stir up drama. Instead, you can focus on using cooperation and teamwork to help your staff and students improve through the development and implementation of policies and procedures that actually make sense. That way, everyone in your school can be a winner, not just a survivor. 

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This article is adapted from *The Death of Common Sense in Our Schools and What You Can Do About It*, by Jim Grant. Crystal Springs Books, 2007.



WEB RESOURCES

Principal published “Differentiating for Diversity” by Jim Grant in January/February 2003. It can be downloaded from the NAESP Web site.

www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=639

Internet4Classrooms provides valuable links to a number of differentiated instruction sites.

www.internet4classrooms.com/di.htm

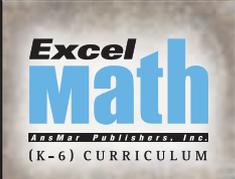
The California School Boards Association has made available an informative interview with Ruby Payne on educating children of poverty.

www.csba.org/qa/payne.htm

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