Breaking the Spell of the Wicked Principal

I have fond memories of my elementary school principal. Not only did he bear a striking resemblance to Ed Sullivan, but he also led our school with kindly delivered authority and the same welcoming tone with which Sullivan introduced his guests each week. Unfortunately, others may be more likely to compare the principals from their past to Cinderella’s wicked stepmother, one who misused power by frightening students into compliance. Although it feels like a change may be occurring in how principals are viewed, I am bothered by the fact that I still have encounters with students and parents who approach me as if I’m a wicked principal rather than a compassionate one.

Most principals have surely felt the power of their position. As I enter the lunchroom, some children sit a little taller and lower their voices as I walk alongside their tables. I also sense some students shy away from interacting with me, coming from a place of fear, unsure of how I might wield power over them.

One of my students recently reminisced with me that he had once feared starting school because he was terrified of the principal. When I asked him where this fear came from, he told me, “It’s all those mean principals in the books I’ve read.” I agree; there are far too many movies, cartoons, and other sources of entertainment that depict us as wicked.

Some of the wicked principal reputation stems from the lore in previous generations. For example, a parent recently thanked me for my attentiveness. She said that when she was growing up, attention from the principal was a bad thing. I’m on a mission to create a new view of principals by combating the negative images of principals in the minds and memories of all students and parents.

As I reflect on conversations with students and parents, I notice that students’ fear of authority, principals’ approach to discipline, and general opportunities for communication surface as factors that affect how people perceive principals.

“I’m on a mission to create a new view of principals by combating the negative images of principals in the minds and memories of all students and parents.”

Instill Respect, Not Fear

As a primary school principal, I am one of the first adult authority figures my students encounter. This position brings with it the responsibility of helping children view authority figures with respect, not fear. I don’t need everyone to be fond of me—but I don’t want to be feared. Part of a principal’s job is to maintain order, safety, and adherence to rules, and students can be made to follow rules by fearfully “snapping to attention” when they see the principal walk down the hallway. But I believe that students should also behave well when I’m not around. Just as I should make the choice to drive at a safe speed at all times, and not reflexively apply the breaks when I see a police car, students should also learn to make sound decisions at all times.

Help Students Make Responsible Choices in the Future

In my interactions with students, I’m always thinking: How can I help this child make a better choice about his behavior the next time around? My approach is far more about earning respect, developing relationships, and helping students gain a sense of internal control, than it is about demanding respect, instilling fear, and handling behavior with a focus on external control. Respect develops over time as children come to know that part of my role as principal is to help them learn to make responsible choices.

How we choose to intervene when students misbehave sends a strong message about what we value and how we are perceived. Instead of issuing stern orders when I see a student making an inappropriate choice, I choose to use the “Raise Responsibility” approach, asking a series of questions to help students reflect on their actions (Marshall, 2001). I want students to be motivated to make responsible decisions because it is the right thing to do, not because I’m the scowling authority ready to intervene.
Establish Parental Buy-In

I’ve also come to understand that in order to have any hope of changing the wicked principal perception, it helps to frequently communicate my vision of the principal’s role to parents. A parent once told me that she hoped that I never had reason to get to know her son. That comment made me realize that parents don’t expect me to interact with their children unless there is a problem. Developing a positive relationship with each child is at the top of my priority list, including knowing their names; and taking time to pull a chair alongside them during class to support their learning. Since I received that mother’s comment, I remember to include this message in my remarks at every new parent gathering.

Develop Relationships with Your Students

I also communicate who I am to the students. The Principal from the Black Lagoon is one of my favorite read-alouds, affording many opportunities to let children know what will happen when they come to my office to share a birthday cupcake, or if they are sent to my office by their teacher so that I can help them with a behavior problem.

I also invite each child to visit my office for a special birthday celebration. These visits give me a chance to connect with my students and gives them a chance to have a positive experience visiting my office.

While many now recognize my warm and caring qualities better than when I was a novice principal, there are still those parents who draw from their experiences with the wicked principals of their past, and some students who begin our relationship as if I might be like one of the mean principal characters they have encountered in the media. I, however, will continue to use each interaction as an opportunity to help students and parents know a different type of principal and to gradually break the wicked principal spell.

Jamie Sussel Turner is principal of Viola L. Sickles School in Fair Haven, New Jersey. Her e-mail address is turnerj@fairhavenbe.org.

Reference