A day in the life of this principal requires juggling many hats.

Joan M. Gardner

**IN BRIEF**

The author, a principal, describes a typical day at her school as she must take on numerous hats and roles—among them listener and confidante, parking lot attendant, PR and marketing manager, accountant, and coach.

It is barely 9 a.m. and school has been in session for only 40 minutes. My desk is covered with things needing my attention—all with priority sticky notes on them—and the voice mail button is blinking like crazy on my phone.

A typical start to the week you might ask? Oh, yes—this is the world of administration. It’s the beginning of a busy day and a busy week ahead.

Like the peddler in the children’s book *Caps for Sale* by Esphyr Slobodkina, I have many hats to wear. Some fit very comfortably; others are very snug and, at times, difficult to wear. There are some hats I am prepared to wear and some that do not fit well at all.

**A Good Fit**

The hat that fits the best is the one that I have been wearing for a long time. It is comfortable, easy to put on, and I never grow tired of wearing it. I like to picture this hat being large, oppy, and soft yellow with pretty
owers. I wear this one in my role as a listener, a confidante, and a friend. This is the hat I always want to wear when I am walking down the hallways or stopping in classrooms to see learning taking place. I wear this hat when I lean over to speak to a child, to marvel at his or her writings, or to hear that special story. I wear this hat when a staff member or a parent stops in to talk, to share a suggestion, or to ask for advice or assistance. This is a good hat and one that I wear often!

Today, though, this hat is still sitting on the shelf because I have yet to leave my office. Instead, other hats have plopped themselves on my head. First there is the traffic controller cap—congestion in the parking lot needs to be addressed. Someone has to figure out a way to facilitate the morning drop-off since today there is orange fencing surrounding a large hole where an oil tank is being dug up. “Could they just drive around?” I ask. Although there are others who could wear this particular hat, it seems that the question inevitably is asked of me. I think back to when I was about to don a mortarboard as a degree candidate and to all the administrative classes that I’ve taken—parking lot attendant was not described in detail in any of them.

Nor was the next hat ever mentioned: a gardening hat. The town tercentennial committee needs a decision: Where are the daffodil bulbs going to be planted so that the schoolyard will be suitably covered with a multitude of yellow blooms come spring? This decision seems to require a degree in botany since the light, soil, and drainage are not to be taken lightly. In addition, the view from the road must be considered. And did I mention I also have to find the perfect spot for 500 bulbs to be planted—one for each student? I jump at the chance to don the next hat. Waiting to take its place on my head is a hardhat. Construction zone?

No, just a trip into the boiler room to check for storage space for the extra furniture that needs to be saved for that rainy day I am sure will happen. In a small school with space problems, any little unused space is up for grabs, and the head custodian and I finally agree to share some of the space downstairs.

A Snug Fit

Back upstairs with the hardhat still on, I begin the first walkthrough of the day. Maybe it’s closer to a security guard’s hardhat that I have on now as I begin to check the outside doors and clear some boxes away from the fire exits. One look inside the elevator and I make a note that it’s still not operational and a call to verify the repair date is needed. Now I’m an engineer. Same hat, but with a different title.

I feel like the neighborhood cop
walking the beat. Rules and expectations must be reinforced. The students must be reminded of our positive behavior supports and encouraged to follow the posted procedures: “Be Responsible. Be Respectful. Be Safe.” I walk through the hallways smiling, saying “Good morning” and “Have a good day” to the students and staff I pass—this is more like it. Where’s my yellow hat when I need it?

A nurse’s cap is waiting for me as I arrive back in my office. A large number of students are in the nurse’s office needing attention and I’m ready to assist her in making phone calls home. Chickenpox has appeared on several students and parents must be notified. My secretary arrives to help the nurse. I delegate some tasks and I pass on the nurse’s hat. Before I know it, a new hat is beckoning.

A straw hat with red- and blue-striped ribbon around the brim would be suitable since my next task takes me into the world of public relations. As a member of the community relations board for the local branch of our credit union, I meet with the branch manager to plan for our student banking program. We also discuss his ideas for displaying student work in the bank and ways to inform the parents of the bank’s contributions to the school. The fundraiser hat is next as I inquire about support for our Birthday Book closet and Family Literacy Night. From marketing to public relations and community relations, one hat after another falls on my head. These roles are becoming increasingly important in my daily schedule. Business contacts provide a vital link to the community, and without local support and donations many of our events at school would not take place. It is also a vehicle for getting the word out in the community about the good things happening in the schools. Wearing this hat creates the opportunity to exchange information and ensures positive communication between the town and school system.

I’m not quite sure what type of hat I need to wear now, but a French beret comes to mind. I have a meeting with a community member who is eager to start an after-school French program. This is a wonderful opportunity for our students, and we make arrangements for grade levels and set about scheduling the classes.

In the next hour, the hats on my head change quickly from a cowboy hat as I round up children on the playground, to an accountant’s visor as I fine-tune the budget, and then to a chef’s hat as I help serve a special lunch to a class of students and guests.

Too Tight
Perhaps the most uncomfortable hat I am asked to wear is the helmet that signifies the need for protection. I wear this hat when a serious disciplinary incident takes place, when I am called to handle a disruptive student, or even when an angry confrontation is happening with a parent or staff member. It is only natural to try to protect oneself, but as principal I am charged with protecting everyone in the school family—students, staff, and parents. Emotional stress can be hard on everyone, but when children are involved it is critical that the situation be handled tactfully and quickly. Fortunately, this is only a temporary headpiece and is usually replaced with a gentler, friendlier chapeau.

Just Right
Next to my oversized, soft, cushiony yellow hat hangs the best hat of all. This is the most versatile hat. I can wear it with any outfit. It goes everywhere with me. The cap is one that I can wear both with children and adults. It sits atop my head as a symbol of my most important role as a principal, that of instructional coach. My role is to guide and facilitate the professional learning community within my school. Coaching teachers to reflect on their instruction, to try new strategies, and to collaborate with their colleagues is a critical component of my job as principal. It is up to me to set the tone for a culture of professional respect and professional growth for my school family. This cap signifies my role as a member of the team as well, and I wear it with pride. Wearing the coach’s cap comes with the responsibility of providing the teachers with proper equipment—the right resources and materials—to make their instructional tasks easier.

Others also can wear this cap. Sharing the leadership role is not always easily achieved. It is not always easy to find just the right person to encourage into a leadership position. Knowing how to identify teacher strengths and weaknesses is part of my daily job as the instructional leader in the building. The coach’s cap fits well on those I have chosen to be instructional mentors in the building. Wearing the same caps pulls us together as a team. It builds a strong interpersonal, professional, and collegial relationship within our ranks. New leaders join the team, taking on new positions, and the team becomes even stronger. Sometimes
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the cap is passed to district consultants such as the language arts consultant or math consultant. Sometimes it is worn by the special education director. I do not hesitate to find my in-house experts and give them opportunities to develop their instructional skills by working with other experts in their field. This expands or widens the field for learning. The collaboration time that teachers spend with their coaches is invaluable. My data team leaders all wear the team cap at our meetings. Wearing the same caps represents our collective commitment to improving instructional practices and increasing student achievement.

Along with my coach’s cap come pompons. The time I spend each day in the role of cheerleader encouraging students to work harder, to learn more, to enjoy what they are doing, to succeed, and to celebrate their new achievements gives me the greatest satisfaction. This role, or hat, fits naturally as I interact with students throughout my day. While it is important to motivate and encourage my teachers, it is equally important that my students feel accomplished and hear positive comments about their efforts to improve.

Listening to first graders read their first books, and listening to kindergartners read the book they’ve written is as rewarding as sitting in a collaborative teacher-team meeting where new strategies are being discussed and interventions are being planned. Watching fourth graders handle the production of our daily TV newscast, and remembering back to their earlier years, provides the job satisfaction that I need to continue in my profession. For I truly believe that this is not just a job, but a professional position that I hold with pride.

It’s almost 6 p.m. and time for me to put my hat on and go home. I’ve left all my other hats hanging neatly on the rack in my office. They’ll be there waiting for me tomorrow. I try to put on a very ordinary, comfy hat as I leave for home, but sometimes I am almost home before my family hat rests comfortably on my head. As a wife, mother, daughter, and grandmother, I need to remember the importance of wearing my family hat.

Weary? Yes. Disillusioned? Not one bit. There isn’t one hat I would trade; I enjoy my job with all of its wardrobe changes. There are not too many jobs that allow you to be so fashionable at a moment’s notice! Perhaps a few new ones will join the collection tomorrow.

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