

# When Principals Lose Touch with the Classroom

Olaf Jorgenson and Christopher Peal

Closing a perception gap between principals and teachers is critical if they are to work together for their mutual benefit and that of the children they serve.

*“What does she do all day, sitting in her office?”*

*“Raising test scores, that’s all that matters to him. He just doesn’t get it!”*

*“She doesn’t understand what her teachers deal with every day.”*

*“Maybe he needs to go back to the classroom for a taste of reality!”*

## IN BRIEF

The authors describe a troublesome perception gap between principals and teachers regarding the principal’s role as an instructional leader. Based on extensive interviews with veteran, mid-career, and novice teachers, as well as their own experiences, they suggest ways that both groups can help close the gap.

Such perceptions arise when teachers feel that their principals have distanced themselves from the day-to-day challenges of teaching. Whether spoken or unspoken,

accurate or not, such comments reflect teachers’ beliefs that their administrators have lost touch with life in the classroom, and the resulting gap is a serious concern.

The gap can lead to negative stereotypes of principals: that they are motivated more by self-interest and salary than serving children, or that their priorities and allegiances lean more toward bureaucracy and budgets than teaching and learning. Teachers feel that administrators don’t “get it” and this perception feeds an “us versus them” mentality.

For this article, we asked a group of veteran, mid-career, and novice teachers, comprising more than 240 years of combined classroom experience, to reflect on the perceived gap between principals and teachers that all acknowledged existed to some extent at their schools.





We asked each respondent:

- Why does the gap occur?
- How do perceptions of the gap affect your school's climate and the relationship between faculty and administration?
- What can principals do to help close the gap?
- What can teachers do to help close the gap?

### Why Does the Gap Occur?

Most respondents acknowledged that administrators are extraordinarily busy with noninstructional responsibilities, and that they can become office-bound. Perceptions of disconnect are compounded when principals don't visit classrooms regularly. Teachers perceive that principals' infrequent visits demonstrate that other priorities outweigh the value of maintaining a classroom presence. As one teacher explained: "I think the gap occurs when the principal's focus is on the logistics of running the school and not on what occurs between the four walls of the classroom. The perception grows that the principal doesn't care about what goes on in the classroom."

In another common interview theme, teachers believed their principals avoided classrooms because they lacked ability or confidence in their knowledge of instructional methods. Some teachers didn't view their principals as qualified teachers—undermining the principal's role as instructional leader. Among teachers in Western and Southwestern states, administrators' unfamiliarity with English as a Second Language methodology was a recurring area of concern.

Regardless of why principals lacked presence in classrooms, teachers consistently shared their belief that administrators' absences limited their credibility among the faculty. One teacher described a principal who seemed to spend as much time in her office or away from the building as possible. "When she said [to faculty or parents], 'Great things are happening in classrooms at [our school],' teachers rolled their eyes because they knew that

she was never in classrooms to truly see what was happening.”

Another teacher commented: “I often have students ask, ‘Who is that person?’ when the principal comes into our room or passes our class in the hallway. It’s embarrassing to tell them he’s their principal.”

A third consistent theme in our interviews involved teachers’ perceptions that principals place exaggerated emphasis on test outcomes, excluding what teachers felt were other authentic measures of student progress, such as students’ improvements in effort, engagement, confidence, and enthusiasm for learning (Protheroe, 2006).

### How Gap Perceptions Affect School Climate

The teachers we consulted agreed that perceptions of the gap profoundly impact the working environment by creating a sense of isolation among the faculty. In Blase and Blase’s (1998) study of effective school leadership, teacher testimonials reflected isolation and disappointment, resulting mostly from principals’ absence from the classroom and perceived abdication of their instructional leadership role. A sense of being left alone in the classroom frequently resulted in a loss of respect for the principal and subpar performance by teachers.

### What Principals Can Do

**Increased Visibility.** The most effective way for principals to combat perceptions of the gap is to establish and maintain regular visibility and engagement in classrooms. We recommend that principals schedule time so that walking around and interacting with teachers and students becomes a routine part of the day.

Acknowledging the extraordinary challenges of time management and the bottomless nature of the principal’s to-do list, it’s still possible to set aside time each day for short classroom drop-in visits. At schools we’ve led, we made sure everyone in the office treats the principal’s classroom visitation time as sacrosanct, holding calls and schedul-

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ing appointments around that time as much as possible.

Drop-in visits alone may not be enough, however. Teachers appreciate administrators who read stories, act as instructional aides, and occasionally offer to relieve a class. In fact, principals should take every opportunity to be guest teachers, demonstrating their skills and engagement in classroom life. As a 30-year teaching veteran observed: “Telling a teacher what should happen in the classroom is one thing, but modeling what should be happening is extremely beneficial. Principals must not feel afraid to get their feet wet.”

**Time Management.** In administrative certification programs, time management is repeatedly stressed, but in practice it’s challenging for even the best-organized principal to make time for everything. Robbins and Alvy (2004) recommend a time audit, in which principals keep a daily half-hour activity record for at least a week. The goal is for principals to compare what they value with how they actually spend their time, and then work to bring the two closer together.

Some principals have closed the gap by increasing the amount of time they meet with teachers to articulate curricula and plan together. Giving a teaching team common planning time also says a lot about the value a principal places on planning and collaboration.

**Study Groups.** One school’s administrative team implemented study groups with faculty, using staff meetings to discuss professional texts. The principal and assistant principal joined in the dialogue about improving professional practice, according to suggestions provided in the book.

**Building Trust and Relationships.** Trust emerges from a relationship between

principals and teachers that is essential to developing a harmonious school environment. Costa and Garmston (1994) cite teacher perspectives about what makes principals trustworthy:

- Principals took responsibility for their own behaviors. They admitted mistakes and did not blame others.
- Principals were perceived as people. Trusted principals revealed personal information about themselves so others had a sense of who they were away from the job.
- Principals were perceived as non-manipulative. Trusted leaders influenced directly, not covertly, and had no hidden agendas.

Building relationships is critical in minimizing the perceived gap between administrators and classroom teachers, and communicating appreciation to staff members is essential. Daily notes to thank, compliment, or share observations with faculty and staff are valuable relationship-builders. One respondent said: “The notes should give specific feedback. When a note is specific, it says that the administrator knows what’s happening in my classroom.”

One innovative principal provides coverage for a teacher’s class for all or part of a day, allowing the teacher to shadow the principal and gain a better understanding of the principal’s experience and responsibilities. The gap narrowed over time as teachers learned about the “real work” of their principal, directed as it was toward the welfare of children and families and teachers themselves. The strategy also helped counter the efforts of several influential teachers who devoted considerable energy to cultivating anti-administrator stereotypes.

### What Teachers Can Do

When asked, “Are teachers responsible for closing the gap?” interviewees agreed that the widening distance involves drift on both sides of the relationship. It may seem obvious to teachers that principals should be in classrooms, but from the principal’s

perspective an ever-expanding job description, coupled with teachers' lack of understanding and appreciation of what principals do on a day-to-day basis, results in mutual frustration. Respondents agreed teachers should take the initiative to invite administrators into their classrooms to observe and engage in activities with students.

Another strategy shared by the interviewees puts the onus on teachers to build relationships with their principals. "A teacher must feel comfortable to stop by the principal's office to talk about instruction," one interviewee asserted. "When teachers say, 'at this school,' they must realize that they are a part of 'this school' and bear responsibility to make it better."


Another commented: "Ideally, teachers will appreciate the tremendous responsibilities and pressures placed on administrators. Mutual respect means just that, and teachers who expect to be appreciated without returning the gesture will always be frustrated."

One teacher offered a strategy to facilitate shared understanding: "It's very important that teachers assume leadership roles in various schoolwide projects and programs so that they can begin to view the educational environment from an administrative perspective. And administrators should be sure to provide ample opportunity and incentive for teachers to participate."

### Looking Ahead

The principalship is sometimes a thankless, isolated job. As school leaders, we often find ourselves balancing opposing demands of multiple constituencies, while struggling to maintain our optimism and professionalism. We are challenged to make time for family and personal nourishment while surrounded by teachers and support staff who rarely comprehend the complex and taxing nature of the principal's role.

We hope that by recognizing the root causes of administrative drift, and employing some of the strategies that school leaders and teachers can implement in improving collegiality, we can begin to close the gap—to the mutual

benefit of teachers, principals, and the children and families we serve *together*. 

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### WEB RESOURCES

All Things PLC provides research, articles, data, and tools to educators who seek information about professional learning communities.

[www.allthingsplc.info](http://www.allthingsplc.info)

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory has a briefing paper, "Professional Learning Communities: What Are They and Why Are They Important?" on its Web site.

[www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html](http://www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html)

Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning has a section on its Web site devoted to leadership and organization development.

[www.mcrel.org/topics/leadership](http://www.mcrel.org/topics/leadership)

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