Looking Back After 40 Years

I worked in public elementary schools for 42 years, 26 of them as a principal. I never wanted to be anything other than what I was: a principal teacher in an elementary school. The word principal is usually used as a noun, but I have always considered it to be a modifier. Although I had many other responsibilities, I was primarily the principal teacher responsible for leading, encouraging (and occasionally discouraging), counseling, developing, and nurturing other teachers. Sometimes I got tired in the job, but I never tired of the job, and I got a great deal of personal satisfaction from the job.

Teaching Is Job One

In September 1963, fresh from college, I was hired to teach fifth grade in Atlanta at a salary of around $3,600. Moreland Avenue Elementary School, in one of the older sections of the city, was not air-conditioned and all female teachers wore dresses and male teachers wore coats and ties. The students, from working-class families, were expected to work hard and to do what their teachers told them. The culture of the day allowed me to paddle unruly students, a task that I performed occasionally with little enthusiasm.

My first principal was a former coach who sat in his office most of the day reading Field and Stream magazine. My fellow teachers eased me through the transition from college to the classroom with wise counsel, and I have watched similar tutoring take place year after year in every school with which I have been associated. It is a system that accelerates the learning curve for young teachers who take advantage of it.

One of the things that concern me as I approach the end of my career is how little time many principal candidates spend in the classroom. Some seem so anxious for an administrative position that they give the impression that time spent in a classroom is merely a requirement that must be endured. But if you aspire to be a principal teacher, extensive experience as a teacher is a necessary prerequisite. It is in the classroom where you learn to deal with irate, abusive, or overly protective parents,
Many children took their lunch to school. There were no free lunch programs in the schools where I taught in the early years. Instruction in social studies, history, and geography included a year studying the state and nothing on the Middle East except its listing on a large map of the world.

Schools themselves have changed a great deal since I began my career in public education. Back then, we did not want to leave any child behind, but some children could not, or would not, keep up. Today, people who have never taught are imposing conditions on the public schools that will be difficult to meet, and the immediate consequence is the rapid development of a two-pronged educational system: one public and one private. The private schools can be selective and creative; the public schools are inclusive and restricted.

The Best Job in the World
I believe, as I have for a long time, that the leadership of the principal is reflected in the competence of the teachers, the morale of the faculty and staff, the discipline of the students, the appearance of the building, and the school’s reputation within the community as seen through the eyes of parents.

For me, being a principal was the best job in the world. I have touched and been touched by the lives of thousands of boys and girls, most of whom are now men and women. I recently received a wedding invitation from a woman who, as a young girl, spent a great deal of time in my office throwing tantrums. She is now a teacher. What other profession can regularly provide this kind of feedback?

But the light at the end of the tunnel could no longer be ignored. Over four decades, the students I have served continue to give me such pleasure that it was hard to say good-bye.

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