The Challenge and Necessity of Nonrenewals

When I began as a principal eight years ago, I went in understanding that my role was to improve instruction, not fully aware that this meant the possible nonrenewal of teacher contracts. After all, this is a person’s livelihood.

But following years of formal and informal observations, I began to understand that nonrenewal wasn’t as much about the teachers’ livelihood as it was about children’s lives. With this in mind, my observations began to take a more critical and analytical approach. I began to meticulously document what I observed, summarizing activities, dates, and actions.

As I altered my observations, I also shifted my understanding on how to support teachers to truly aid their growth and development. In the process, I began to meet more frequently with teachers to discuss what was observed. Years later, after making some adjustments, including improved professional development, I noticed that some teachers were still not measuring up as expected. I found myself confronted with the decision of whether or not to renew their contracts.

The Importance of Documentation

When going through the nonrenewal process, it is important to provide supporting documentation. It is in this documentation that you show the teacher’s strengths as well as his or her weaknesses. In both formal and informal observations, the evaluator should take meticulous notes documenting not only the teacher’s instruction but also the classroom behavior of both teacher and students.

Once you have collected the documentation, you need to confer with the teacher to correct his or her performance. This is not a time to be punitive. Provide feedback that is supportive, including additional training that can include professional development, modeling of correct instructional practice, additional in-services, and instructional videos. This support is critical because it provides the teacher an opportunity to correct his or her behavior, or to make an earnest attempt.

Next, you should re-evaluate the behavior documented in previous evaluations. If you continue to find deficiencies in the same areas where they were first identified, you are faced with the challenge of determining whether this person can improve. If the determination is that this individual is not able to make the requested changes, then comes the daunting task of recommending nonrenewal.

While going through the nonrenewal process, it is important to be aware of all timelines. Each state is different regarding notifications and procedures, which can vary depending on whether a teacher is tenured.

Avoiding Backlash

After not renewing a teacher’s contract, a difficult task takes shape. You must determine if your action is creating morale issues at your building. When teachers lose one of their own, a whisper of fear can plague your school, damaging the very foundation of positive instruction you are trying to build.

It is important to continue to support your remaining teachers, instilling in them the utmost confidence that what you are doing is in the best interest of the children and the school.

Visibility is one way to show your support. Showing them that you are there to support them can speak volumes. It is also important that you recognize the positive accomplishments of those teachers who have been able to perform up to the standards set forth by the district and administration. The inability to recognize and positively reinforce staff can lead to a devastating backlash, which is why identifying the cause of any ill feeling and stemming the source of discontent is critical in moving forward with your mission and vision.

With legislation such as No Child Left Behind increasing the level of accountability, it is our job to be courageous in the decisions we make about who we have in our classrooms. Teachers are critical to the instructional quality of the education our children receive, and research has shown that the leading indicator of student achievement is teacher competency.

Therefore, as principals it is our job, no matter how disheartening it may be, to remove those individuals who do not meet the standards that we set for our children’s success. While dismissing a teacher might not sit well on your conscience, it cannot be the focus of your decision, which must always be on performance and the teacher’s ability to meet the standards you have established.

Louis Laffitte Jr., a former principal, is director of special services in the Cartwright School District in Phoenix. His e-mail address is llaffitte1@cox.net.
We have no good schools without good principals.

– Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education

THE PRINCIPAL STORY

A PBS Documentary Film and National Media Outreach Project

Being a school principal conjures different images: disciplinarian, building manager, bus scheduler – maybe the lonely hero trying to save a troubled school. This one-hour documentary portrays the real story as seen through the eyes of two dynamic principals.

Order the film DVD: www.nomadicpix.com

The film DVD includes THE PRINCIPAL STORY documentary, outtakes and an interview with the filmmakers, as well as a short documentary on North Grand High School in Chicago.

For related video and print resources: www.wallacefoundation.org/principalstory

- Clip Reel of scenes from the film
- THE PRINCIPAL STORY Field Guide
- Leadership Matters: A Call to Action
- Video vignettes and conversation guides

THE PRINCIPAL STORY and its national media outreach campaign are made possible by a grant from The Wallace Foundation, a source of ideas for improving school leadership. For more information and research about education leadership, visit the Wallace Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

NAESP is proud to be a national outreach partner. Visit www.naesp.org for more resources and information.

© Ethno Pictures 2009. All rights reserved.