Losing a Child, Healing a Community

I feel so humbled to have had the experience of mentoring a new principal, even though she was already a leader in her own right with 10 years in the classroom and 10 years as an assistant principal. Initially, Jodi Clark and I had to establish a relationship built on friendship to develop the trust needed to mentor. It took a short while to learn that I truly was here to be the ear she needed and the one person she felt comfortable sharing feelings with when the demands of the principalship became heavy. Jodi experienced the depths of our relationship when we talked through the death of one of her students.

I will never forget the shock I felt the day Jodi called to tell me that one of her students had lost his battle with cancer. Since I had never lost a student in my 30 years as an educator, I initially felt inept at counseling Jodi. First, we needed a moment to just cry over the loss of this precious child. But after giving Jodi time to grieve and talk through the shock of having an event like this occur, I knew my role as her mentor was to guide Jodi through the next steps. We talked about the importance of calling the district supervisor to ask for the system crisis team to support students and faculty, and we discussed the best way to notify parents. We determined it would be best for teachers and administrators to personally call each parent in fourth grade to let them know the sad news and to follow up with a letter sent to each home.

The next day, I called Jodi to check on her and to see how I could help. We talked about the importance of letting those closest to the student and his father, a member of the faculty, attend the funeral and different ways the school staff could show their love and support.

Several weeks later, Jodi called me and we were able to talk about the importance of closure by remembering this student in a special way. We brainstormed ideas together and came up with several ideas, including students donating books to the library, planting a tree in his memory, dedicating the yearbook to his valiant fight, creating a special scrapbook of school memories for his family, and participating in the Relay for Life, lighting a candle in his honor.

I know Jodi is blessed with a close-knit faculty who helped her through this tragedy. She also had tremendous support at the district level. I can only hope my support comforted her.

—Patricia A. Witt

As I sit and reflect on the completion of my first year as a principal, I can only think of one phrase: Oh my goodness. There was nothing in my experiences to prepare me for the loss of Kenny, a fourth-grade student who was also a staff member’s child. The students were saddened, and the faculty and staff, who had fought this battle with the family for five years, were grief-stricken. However, the support of counselors, colleagues, the central office, and my mentor helped our school to move forward during a very difficult time. My mentor, Pat Witt, and I usually spoke at least once a day to share concerns, frustrations, and ideas. But during this time, especially, it was a great comfort to talk with her as a veteran at this job.

Past experiences with students passing away prepared me a little for this situation; however, every situation is unique. Pat talked to me about what needed to be done, focusing on communication as an integral part of helping everyone involved with this situation. Pat and I agreed that every parent of each child in fourth grade would be called since these students had been in school together for several years with Kenny. The school district crisis team came to the school to help our teachers and students express and understand their feelings about Kenny’s illness and death. Letters were also sent home to every fourth-grade parent to explain the situation and to inform the parents about the availability of the crisis team. Throughout Kenny’s illness, our faculty assembled together several times to keep abreast of his condition, to help to meet the family’s needs, and to pray for the family.

Pat and the district office were very supportive during this heart-wrenching, devastating situation. Kenny’s passing touched each grade level, every faculty member, and every family. His bright eyes and mischievous grin will be etched in our lives forever. We will miss him.

—Jodi Clark

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Patricia A. Witt and Jodi Clark are mentor and protégé in the NAESP Mentor Program, where experienced school leaders mentor new and aspiring principals. For more information, visit www.naesp.org.
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