

## The Three Obsessions of a Principal or Division Director

This article is specifically for the person in charge of the academics at a school. It may be the Principal who is in charge of everything (!) and thus this as well. You may be large enough to have someone under the Principal or Head of School who leads the academic charge of the school either for all teachers and students or for one division, elementary, middle, or high school. Throughout this article, we will use DD to refer to this person, although it may be a different title in your own school such as Dean of Academics, Principal, or Director of Learning.

Our finding consistently is that the DD is too distracted to do the job they are there to do. Typical distractions are:

- Curriculum – new initiatives, new textbooks, articulation vertically and horizontally
- Students – discipline, monitoring their progress, meetings about them
- Program – outside the classroom program including field trips, mission trips and the like
- Teaching – taking one or more classrooms because it brings ‘credibility’

These are distractions because they do four things:

1. Disempower the teachers who are actually responsible for all of the above
2. Avoid the fact that, having taken on an administrative leadership responsibility, you are refusing to actually lead
3. Fragment your time so that you can do nothing to a level of excellence
4. Keep you focused on students as if you were still in the classroom

Instead of these distractions, here are the three obsessions of a DD:

### **Keep Your Parents Happy**

If you are a first year DD, you would be wise to spend a lot of times developing and deepening relationships with your parents. If you are an experienced DD, you should by now know every parent by name, sight, and car type. You should know their children’s names and be able to connect children and parents in your mind. You should know the parents’ favorite restaurant, ice-cream, movie, and where the grandparents live. You should be communicating with them on a regular basis formally and informally – formally through the weekly or bi-weekly e-letter and informally through text, email, and phone call. Every parent should receive at least one ‘good news’ phone call from you each semester. You should be planning the back-to-school night so that it is riveting and talked about for two weeks after; spending time on your first letter to the parents such that they pass it to their relatives, running parent information sessions telling them about what is going on in the academic life of the school, coordinating with the philanthropy director to help craft the message for your division’s parent appeal. Every parent should know who you are and know that you are there to support them through the

many years of child-rearing that lie ahead. They should know that you pray for them each day, mention them in prayers at every weekly chapel, are concerned for their spiritual and emotional health as they care for their children. They should also know that you will not hesitate to confront them (with kindness) when they behave in a way that does not support the school's mission, will enforce the school's rules with humor and justice, and will ask them to support you and the school whether in dealing with their children or in volunteering. You will be totally child-centered when it comes to discussing their children, not making it personal about them and not judging how they go about parenting but, rather, demonstrating that you love their children and will do everything you can to support, encourage, guide, and direct them in a mission appropriate way. Your parents will not be your friends, but they will think they are. They will not be family, but they will regard you as just as important. They will not be able to curry favor with you but will try to. You will build a relationship that leads to trust, respect, and retention.

### **Make Your Teachers Better**

Your job is not to teach children but to teach adults. When you observe students, it is to provide insight as to how to help teachers improve their practice. When you observe teachers, it is to support them in becoming more and more effective every year of their teaching vocation. When you go to sleep at night, the last thing you will do is to pray for them and for yourself as their leader:

O God, I pray for myself as a leader of teachers that I may be able to listen better, see more clearly, build relationships more deeply and only then speak with more wisdom. I pray for each one of my teachers that they may feel the heart of each child, listen to the heart of each child, know, love, and respect the heart of each child and so may influence a generation for Jesus. Amen.

Every teacher you lead needs your full attention. They are in an exhausting profession and need you to provide opportunity for replenishment through their own Professional Learning Journeys. They are in an emotional profession and need you to provide opportunity for balance in their lives through a well-constructed calendar, cleverly scheduled days, spiritual retreats twice a year, and social emotional development. They are in an intellectually demanding profession and need you to lead well-supported and resourced initiatives that are completed before you start another one. They are in a high conflict profession and need you to act as their bulwark against unreasonable and over-demanding parents, to teach them conflict resolution skills and how to talk to adults. You will build a relationship with them that is mutually respectful, collaborative, professional, and that leads to outstanding mission-driven child outcomes.

### **Get and Maintain Full Classrooms**

Maybe surprisingly, enrollment and retention is not the job of the admission and marketing director. It's actually your job that they support you in (if you're blessed to have them). Most classrooms are not full and you must ask why that is so in your school / division. Are your teachers not good enough to achieve outstanding mission-driven child outcomes? Are your parents not happy enough to talk about you in the community to their neighbors, co-workers, and random people on the street? Ask yourself these questions:

- What does full mean?
- If it was full, how else might I impact these children's lives?
- What can lead to my teachers being exceptional? What can I do to lead them in that direction individually and corporately?
- How happy are my parents and how do I know? How skilled am I at communicating in a variety of ways and how am I improving my own skills?

Being willing to interrogate reality is a key leadership virtue. Being able to chart my own progress along the continuum of parents, teachers, and enrollment reflects my ability to be self-aware and to seek to be what I am not yet.

**Final Thoughts:** it is easy to 'hide' behind the need for curriculum, program and to deal with miscreants. Curriculum, students, program, and teaching are all symptoms of the disease – you are focused on the wrong thing and doing what your teachers should be doing. Good to great teachers want to develop excellent curriculum and program; insightful and knowledgeable teachers know how to handle student issues without recourse to 'the office'. These things are, of course, very important. They are just not important for you. If you spend your time supporting teachers so they could do these things, while developing relationships with the parents so they didn't have to deal with them, and filling your classrooms so you had the money to provide the resources and compensation your teachers needed, you would find the time to do whatever you wanted.

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