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Your Role As Principal

"All Things to All People" or "Principle-Centered Leadership"[1]

Ask any elementary school principal to describe her role, and that principal is likely to respond that it depends on what's needed at the moment. Within any given period, a principal might be an instructional leader, a gatherer of supplies, a nurse, an arbitrator, a disciplinarian, the chairperson of an important school district committee, or a message taker. The school leader's role is so diverse that a single description cannot fully capture the nature of the position. The term *principal* in a school context is derived from the notion of a "principal teacher." Most principals would cherish this function, but the role is much more complex and all-encompassing.

THE NATURE OF THE PRINCIPALSHIP

The principal is the focal person in a school—the person who must be aware of the water leak in the library, the child who is struggling with math concepts, the teacher who is preoccupied because her son is at home ill without good supervision, the youngster whose parents are in the midst of a bitter divorce, and the first grader who just "discovered" how to read and is now reading everything in sight. School leaders are faced with everyone's problems, but they also have the joy of working with lively, interested students and adults, witnessing the exhilaration of learning, and helping people identify and solve problems.

Note: All forms, letters, and checklists included in this chapter can be found at corwin.com/elementarysurvivalkit.

As principals, we often find ourselves in a "squeeze play" between parents, teachers, and students. We would like to think that we all have the children's best interests at heart, but there are times when the needs and wants of these constituencies do not mesh. For instance, a parent might demand (preferably ask) that a teacher make certain accommodations for her son's learning style. The parent feels that the teacher should record her son's homework in his assignment pad as the youngster often forgets to do it himself. The teacher may not see the situation in the same light as the parent, might feel pressured by the demand, and wonder how such accommodations can be made when working with a group of 25 other students. She may insist that the child learn to assume this responsibility for himself. Without a meeting of minds, this clash of positions will more than likely wind up in the principal's office. Wanting to do the right thing, the principal must negotiate a path for a solution—understanding the nature of the child's learning style and problem (if there is one), the level of flexibility and skill of the teacher, and the parent's perspective. Such situations call forth the best elements of tact, diplomacy, instructional leadership, and problem-solving skills. Often, the actual solution is not as important as how the principal can help others to see opposing points of view and find the ground for compromise. (By the way, a simple solution in the above case might be for the teacher to remind the boy to record his assignments and then have him show his pad to her at dismissal time.)

DEFINE YOUR OWN BELIEF SYSTEM

It is often difficult for principals to find their grounding in the complex demands that they face day in and day out. Many principals want to please everyone. After all, the role is often perceived as being "all things to all people." This does not always work, though, and trying to please everyone can bring principals into direct conflict with competing views and demands. What is the best approach to take? Which underlying assumptions should guide decision-making? How do opposing views become reconciled? School leaders must find their own footing and apply their best instincts and skills to each situation. It helps, though, to define a basic belief system with which to judge all decisions. This set of guiding principles will not be the same for all, but the exercise of defining them for yourself is worthwhile. What do *you* think are the most important functions within a school? Many principals declare that it is best to always judge situations by applying the rule, "Is it best for children?" There may, of course, be varying views of what indeed *is* best for children. It is often best to define a belief system involving all stakeholders in a school (see Chapter 3), but for our purposes here, you might begin by asking yourself the following questions:

- What are the most important functions of the school?
- What are the best practices and attitudes evident at school that promote these functions?
- What evidence do I have that these functions are being fulfilled?
- What do I do that enhances or impedes the realization of these functions?

Reflecting upon these questions can help to clarify a few guidelines for decision-making.

Clearly, different principals in different schools will find unique answers to these questions, but the exercise itself is instructive. A simple belief system we have developed for our own use is as follows:

- All children can learn and benefit from an active, engaging, quality learning environment.
- Do what is best for all students, that is, for the *community* of learners.
- Promote the best practices that are consistent with sound research.
- Support the close ties that we value between home and school.

Some may argue with that belief system; clearly, it won't work for all in all schools. It can be argued, for example, that our emphasis on the community of learners might serve to diminish the needs of an individual. Usually, however, if an action is good for the group, eventually that decision will be good for the individual. Let's see how these key principles could have been applied to the situation discussed above. The school leader might have understood and shared the parent's concern that her son was not recording his homework assignments. The school leader might also have understood the teacher's point of view that it would take too much time away from the group if she were to record his assignments each day. By suggesting that the teacher provide a reminder for the child to enter his homework and then check it at the end of the day, the needs of the group were protected and the importance of honoring the parent's concerns also fostered the preservation of close ties between home and school.

Keeping your own set of priorities in the forefront of decision-making helps to build consistency and reliability. People like to know that a school leader's behavior is somewhat predictable. Acting from your own belief system can also give you the peace of mind of knowing that you are treating issues fairly and objectively. Holding to your beliefs does not mean that you are inflexible; rather, it implies that you have a yardstick against which to measure actions and decisions.

SYSTEMS THINKING, THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION, AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

Progress, planning, and problem solving in any organization can be viewed through the systems thinking approach. Best articulated by Peter Senge in his landmark work, *The Fifth Discipline*,[2] systems thinking implies that the component parts of any organization can best be interpreted in the context of their relationships with one another and how they affect the total picture. In systems thinking, the approach focuses on how the various components (lets say parents, students, central-office administrators, teachers, teacher organizations, the board of education, state education officials, and so on) are linked, interconnected, and affect one another. A decision that seemingly involves only one constituency may, when put into place, have effects that reverberate through the entire system. For example, a neophyte principal decided to change the lunch schedule thinking that adding an extra lunch shift would reduce crowding in the lunchroom and also reduce the density of children on the school grounds during lunchtime recess. It made good sense. She had no idea that a unilateral decision of this nature would have caused such a stir! Everyone was upset—teachers, lunch aides, parents, and students. After weeks of consultation and the inclusion of all parties, a far more effective pattern of lunch scheduling emerged. It was a tough lesson, but an important one. Clearly, this principal was not applying the principles of systems thinking. School leaders may think that they are taking systems thinking into account instinctively, but a deliberate sense of awareness of how the system operates can aid in the planning and response process.

In schools, systems thinking is often used and promoted through a "learning organization." A learning organization is a group of individuals who seek to continually enhance their capacities to envision and create the results that they want. Structures are put into place in which the members of groups see divergent points of view, are committed to shared goals, and feel free to suggest a wide variety of ideas and approaches to achieve the stated mission. Membership in a learning organization often includes representatives from several positions that may contribute divergent, yet helpful, points of view. They learn to solve problems together. Their involvement fulfills a sense of personal meaning and commitment.

One of the important tools often used in systems thinking and by the learning organization is strategic planning. Simply put, this approach identifies where the organization wants to be at some point in the future and how it is going to get there. Strategic planning determines the mission, philosophy, and goals of the organization and the design and roles of how to achieve these essential guiding principles. The plan sets performance goals, specifies objectives, defines roles, and allocates resources to achieve the plan, and then sets guidelines for how you will know when you have gotten to where you wanted to be.

The mission, philosophy, and goals of an organization become a decision screen through which a principal and stakeholders can decide whether a program or strategy is congruent with the shared views of the school community. It is easy to see how systems thinking, learning organizations, and strategic thinking can all apply to a school as an organization. These applications are further discussed in the next two chapters.

INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

Most school leaders would say that, first and foremost, their role is to be the instructional leader of the school. This means that we stay focused on what is being learned. Countless distractions may keep us from this primary task, but the goal is to maintain instructional focus. This is always a challenge in the midst of the unique demands of our positions, yet there are several deliberate actions that we can take to provide instructional leadership.

Work With Staff to Develop Curriculum

School leaders invoke committees to study or reassess existing aspects of the curriculum. There will always be volunteer teachers to serve on such committees, and some staff members may be willing to assume leadership of the effort. (Whether or not parents are included in such a committee is a matter of the tradition within the school or district.) Studying curriculum is a healthy activity in any school. Even if the staff and the community seem to be reasonably well satisfied with a curriculum, periodic examination of content, practices, and materials will engender interesting discussions, new insights, and a genuine sharing of ideas.

Define, clearly and from the outset, the goals of the curriculum study group. (Figure 1.1 is a sample of a flyer asking for volunteers to work on a curriculum committee.) Are you looking to conduct a brief examination of the curriculum? Is the expectation to conduct an intense review, including a survey of staff, students, and parents? Is there a need to simply update the curriculum, or is a complete overhaul in order? Do you need to consider a new approach or set of materials? The principal does not necessarily have to be involved in every aspect of curriculum work, but leadership is provided by orchestrating and defining

Figure 1.1 Sample Flyer Seeking Volunteers for a Curriculum Committee

WE'RE LOOKING FOR A FEW GOOD VOLUNTEERS!

Elementary school science is the curriculum area next up for review within our school district. In September, we will enter Phase I of our three-year Curriculum Renewal Cycle. In Phase I review, our goals will be

- to read current literature about science content and practices;
- to study the best practices currently employed in the field;
- to examine our current curriculum by comparing it with national and state standards for science education, assessing teacher and parent opinions about our current science program, and studying the results of student achievement in the area of science;
- to confer with colleagues in surrounding communities to gain information about their science programs;
- to meet with publishers' representatives to see what new materials are available; and
- to make recommendations for Phase II (Pilot Projects) for the following school year.

The Science Curriculum Study Group will meet once every month throughout the next school year. It would be best if we had one teacher representative from each of our grade levels and two parents on our committee. If you would like to suggest specific parents, please indicate their names on the slip below and I will contact them.

If you would be willing to serve as a volunteer for our Study Group, please return the slip below to my office May 31.

_____, Principal

Chair of the Science Curriculum Study Group

☐ I would be willing to serve on the Science Curriculum Study Group next year.

☐ I would also like to suggest the following parent(s) be asked to participate:

_____ _____

Name: _____ School: _____

the work of the committee. Providing motivation and inspiration are other aspects of the principal's role. The results of any curriculum study should be reported to staff, school district administrators, and the community.

Provide Resources for Curriculum Development and Implementation

One of the most important resources a school leader can provide for curriculum development is time. Teachers will ask when in the day they will be able to do this important work. If funds are available, hiring substitutes to cover teachers is a popular alternative. In

many school districts, teachers are required to remain after school on certain days for meetings and professional work. Curriculum work could be accomplished at this time. Another possibility is to cover the items required at faculty meetings by memo, e-mail, and response forms, and save faculty meeting time for curriculum development.

As committees look at curriculum and practices, new materials and information about approaches must be provided. School leaders call publisher representatives to acquire sample copies of books or kits for examination. They secure relevant articles and distribute them to the study group. Instructional leaders also bring new approaches and practices or state requirements to the committee's attention.

Supervise the Implementation of Curriculum

Through formal and informal observations, the principal should check on the implementation of curriculum. If a new program is adopted, you can ask to witness a lesson in which the new practice or material is incorporated. Feedback to teachers is essential. When observing the implementation of new programs, though, it should be remembered that teachers are taking somewhat of a risk.

Just how much latitude teachers have in how they deal with the stated curriculum is a matter that is decided within each school district. If you need to know that an adopted curriculum is being covered, then classroom observations are a sound way to supervise curriculum implementation. Chapter 4 is devoted to the process of supervision and evaluation.

Assess the Impact of the Curriculum

As the instructional leader, you have the responsibility to assess how well a curriculum or particular practice is being accomplished. Assessment devices are generally embedded in lessons or units of study. Also, there is usually some form of summative evaluation that can inform teachers and administrators about how well the objectives of the program are being achieved. Along with teachers, principals discuss what standards are appropriate for class attainment and how to interpret an individual youngster's achievement.

The success of any curriculum is judged on the basis of achievement on a wide variety of measures. Performance assessment and portfolios of student work should be incorporated into the view of a curriculum's impact. Samplings of teacher satisfaction, ease of implementation, quality of materials, and parental reactions can also provide valuable information about the effectiveness of a curriculum. All of this translates into important commitments for school leaders; however, the time and involvement devoted to the process of curriculum development and supervision is essential for instructional leadership.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIPLOMACY

The principal must be a diplomat. As we negotiate the minefields often set before us, we may not always have a choice of *what* to say, but we do have a choice about *how* to say it. There are many occasions when we must convey information to parents that they might not be happy to hear, but if we demonstrate sincerity and a genuine concern for the dignity and integrity of the person to whom we are speaking, the most difficult messages can be delivered. When talking about their children's learning or social difficulties, parents may feel that they are in some way responsible for the problem. In such discussions, we should be ready to say what the school personnel will do to help the child who may be struggling.

Parents or teachers who meet with the principal may be angry about one thing or another. How we handle this anger can affect the outcome. Sometimes, people just want to ensure that their views are heard. You can acknowledge that you have understood a sentiment or viewpoint by restating it or paraphrasing it in the conversation. Understanding someone's position does not necessarily mean that you agree with it, but it's a way to promote open communication. With such an approach, parents or teachers will more than likely leave your office feeling that they have been heard, even if they did not leave with the outcome they may have originally wanted.

Any school system has its own set of politics. Educators often bemoan the fact that the educational process can become politicized, but this is a fact of life. School board members often run for office endorsing a specific ideology or approach. They may want to "bring back memorizing math facts" or are in support of some favored innovation. Principals cannot avoid being brought into the fray, but tact and diplomacy are needed in these situations. Again, it is wise to acknowledge that you understand the point of view. Clarification of your own position, while respecting the reality that people of goodwill may disagree, will help to ease the way through such situations.

In all dealings with the various constituencies you face, and especially when confronted with problems, try to achieve a "win-win" solution. This requires artful negotiation, a respect for divergent opinions, and a true desire to find a compromise that embraces each party's core beliefs. Such a compromise is not easy to accomplish, but with a will to solve problems and the desire to be viewed as someone who can be flexible and truly listens, even the greatest of challenges is not insurmountable.

THE NEED FOR POSITIVE COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The principal is a leader who fulfills many community functions. In many respects, the principal represents the school and the school district. This role comes with important responsibilities. Education and the schools that provide it are increasingly under public scrutiny and attack. This is a fact of life that we must face. We all hear parent and community member memories of a more orderly, well-disciplined society in which everyone learned to read, write, and compute with great ease and simplicity. (We're not certain that such a world ever existed, but times have become more complex.) The cost of education has also been a matter of heated public debate. Increasingly, there is a cry for accountability and a summary of the results of educational initiatives and practices. Citizens expect proof that their tax dollars are working for them in their schools. All this means that the principal must be aware of the need to promote and explain what schools do and to foster positive community relations. There are several deliberate actions that we can take to accomplish this.

Promote Your School

When talking about the school, it is important to be positive and upbeat. Convey all the good things that are happening and the opportunities that exist for children. Use every opportunity you can to talk about the school, a particular program, and what you believe in. Invite parents and other community members to the school for special days to witness firsthand the activities that occur. Open school days, in which visitors can sit in on classes, are particularly effective. Special programs, such as grandparent days, writing

celebrations, assemblies, field days, and class plays, provide ideal ways to involve the community in school events.

You should ask to be put on the agenda as a "guest speaker" at PTA meetings. This is a good chance to explain the school's programs and gain support for new initiatives. Send out flyers publicizing the event and always leave time for a question-and-answer period. The members of the PTA will provide a captive audience and can serve as a sounding board to gain a sense of community perceptions.

Newsletters are essential communication tools. Use them to promote the school and explain its programs. If the PTA produces a monthly newsletter, make sure that a principal's column is a regular feature. If the school office produces a newsletter, focus on educational practices and items of interest to the entire parent body. Student writing samples, classroom news, special events, and community happenings all deserve ample coverage. It is often useful to have a friend, spouse, or neighbor read your column and offer feedback to make sure that the terms used will be understood by those who do not live and breathe school concerns.

Bring Your Community Together

Schools can be the center of community life. Few towns and neighborhoods have the close-knit associations these days that they had in the past. Some people prefer anonymity; others miss the sense of community they enjoyed in earlier times. There is much that we as principals can do to bring people together and develop a sense of community. School fairs, picnics, and other special events unite parents and their neighbors. The school can be the glue that holds everyone together. Of course, such events will attract the parents of schoolchildren, but there is no reason why other citizens—not necessarily associated with the school—should not be included. Flyers announcing these events can be posted in nearby stores, supermarkets, and libraries. When neighbors come together, they are likely to associate, share common interests, and appreciate the uniqueness of their community.

In many neighborhoods, schools are used for a wide variety of community functions; after-school programs, recreation programs, Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts, and adult education classes may all be held in school buildings. Just how you relate to these various groups is also important. Although each school district will have its own policies on this matter, in most communities, school buildings are viewed as public resources, to be used for a wide variety of functions. School leaders are expected to cooperate with outside agencies or community programs in making the school available. School leaders who feel that they have no role in this area are likely to be tried in the court of public opinion.

View Parents as Partners

Principals and schools benefit when parents are viewed as partners. It is important to build enduring alliances so that parents and school personnel work together to promote school goals and programs. PTAs often provide funding for school equipment and initiatives. Parents expect, and are entitled to, reports or demonstrations of how their fundraising efforts have benefited the children. For example, when parents in one of our schools purchased GPS (Global Positioning System) devices for student activities, we took part of a PTA meeting one night to show how the children were using this new technology.

Parent education is also necessary if we hope that parents will understand and support school programs. This is particularly true in the case of pilot programs or new initiatives. It is always best if the individuals closest to the new program provide the demonstration.

Teachers are generally happy to attend such meetings, share their views about a new program, and explain how it is affecting the children. Such practices go a long way toward building credibility and support. Figure 1.2 is a sample of such a program announcement.

Figure 1.2 Sample Flyer Announcing Information Meeting About New Instructional Program

LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR NEW SCIENCE PROGRAM

As a part of our regular PTA meeting on November 17 our principal and members of our school faculty will make a presentation on our new science program.

Some of the issues that will be addressed include the following:

- How is our new science program different from the program used in the past?
- What is "inquiry learning" anyway?
- What can you expect to see at home as a result of our new science program?
- How can parents support children as they explore science?
- How are current issues in science and technology incorporated into the program?
- How will student learning in science be assessed?

A question-and-answer period will follow the presentation.

Where: School Library

When: Tuesday, November 17, at 7:30 PM

Refreshments will be available following the meeting, courtesy of your PTA.

Organizing seminars or discussion groups on topics of interest to parents can also promote positive parent relations and involvement. An approach that can be most helpful is to develop (along with your parent leaders) a survey of topics that parents would be interested in learning more about. Issues such as child development, discipline practices, homework expectations, sibling rivalry, and drug resistance skills are generally of interest to parents. It is not hard to find individuals who are willing to lead a discussion on these topics. School personnel, community leaders, and local professionals can all be approached to conduct such meetings. Programs of this nature go a long way toward building good relations and promoting the school as a center of community life.

Work Actively With Families

All school leaders realize the importance of being available to families. Demonstrating an interest in the lives of children and their families can make the difference between a principal who is perceived as being distant and aloof with one who is viewed as warm, accessible, and compassionate. School leaders who show a genuine interest in the lives of children are appreciated within their school communities. Some children simply want to share that an aunt is having a birthday, or to discuss their anxieties about the arrival of a new brother or sister. We know that in many ways there are no limits to the role of the principal. We are often called upon to be an advisor to youngsters and their parents. When families are troubled, it is important to exercise good listening skills to get to the heart of a problem. But it is

also necessary to know our limits. We cannot provide family therapy, but we can maintain a list of local agencies that will provide assistance and support to families in crisis. Figure 1.3 is a sample letter to families in which an assistance program for students is offered.

Figure 1.3 Sample Letter to Parents About Pupil Assistance Committee

November 23, _____

Dear Parents,

At our school, we have a standing Pupil Assistance Committee, or PAC. This committee is a school-based problem-solving team designed to assist teachers in developing intervention strategies that help students who are for any reason experiencing difficulty at school. The PAC serves as a vehicle to develop instructional goals, accommodation plans, and assessment plans through collaborative discussion and planning.

WHAT CAN THE PUPIL ASSISTANCE COMMITTEE DO TO HELP?

- Offer structured support and assistance to teachers, students, and parents.
- Plan a program of assistance to meet individual student needs.
- Foster positive communication between the student's parents and the school.
- Assist teachers in developing alternative strategies to promote student competence in basic skills and socioemotional areas.
- Provide a means for teachers to share and increase their skills and knowledge.
- Track the student's response to intervention in terms of targeting assessment techniques.

The core committee is composed of the principal or her designee, a member of our child study team, the school nurse, the speech/language teacher, a guidance counselor, and support-services staff. In addition, the teacher of the child for whom we are seeking assistance is always a part of the group.

If you would like additional information about our Pupil Assistance Committee, or if you would like to schedule a meeting to discuss concerns you may have about your child, please contact your child's teacher or me.

Sincerely,

Principal

Most school systems require that principals participate in the development of a crisis response plan—a systematic procedure for dealing with family or community tragedies. Typically, a crisis response plan will spell out those individuals (usually the principal, teachers, a counselor, a school nurse, parents, police officials, and sometimes religious leaders) who will be called in case of an emergency. Such events might include the death of a student, staff member, or parent, or a natural disaster like a severe storm or earthquake that leaves families disrupted. Assembling the group is one matter, but predetermining the ways in which the group will respond is not only at the center of the plan, it is the most important aspect. Who will notify the parent body? Who will deal with the media? Which community representatives will be called upon to help? How will a communications center be established? Where will the children be evacuated in the event of an emergency

during the school day, such as a furnace explosion or fire? These are just a few of the items that need to be addressed in a crisis response plan. Often, principals conduct simulated or "mock" crises to gain practice in walking through the steps of the plan. The plan should be well publicized, and the community will undoubtedly appreciate the initiative the principal has shown in developing this level of preparedness in the event of a crisis or community emergency. (More about crisis response planning appears in Chapter 16.)

Get Out Into the Community

Another part of community relations is the alliances created outside of the school building. Many school leaders are members of local service organizations like Rotary, Kiwanis, or Lions Club. Speaking at meetings, or simply mingling with local business and professional people, can do much to promote goodwill for the school in the community.

It is also helpful to establish relationships with local businesses and institutions in the school vicinity. Through such links, principals are often able to garner services or equipment for their schools. Even if nothing material is gained from such associations, local proprietors are often willing to come to school to speak with children about their business or craft, to read to youngsters, or to become involved in other ways.

Ties with senior citizen groups can be mutually beneficial for the students and the seniors. Children can perform at senior centers and, if possible, the seniors can visit the school. Many school leaders have spearheaded "grandparent" programs by matching seniors with students at the school. The youngsters can host a breakfast or lunch and interview the seniors about their occupations, life experiences, or memories of the area. Students can also visit and develop interchanges with residents in local nursing homes—a positive intergenerational experience.

There are countless ways in which you can reach out into the community, invite involvement, and establish positive public relations for the school. It would be a mistake to underestimate the importance and the benefits that can be derived from fostering good community relations. This is key to the role of the elementary school principal.

LEARN FROM EXPERIENCE

As in all life processes and positions, experience is a great teacher. As we wend our way through the obstacles and opportunities that are inherent in the principalship, we must be alert to the signals that inform our practice. Many school leaders have learned the hard way that introducing a new program, curriculum innovation, or new school procedure without involving (or at least listening to) those individuals who will have to live with the decision can lead to resistance, blocking, and even deliberate undermining of the effort. For example, a neophyte principal reasonably concluded that having a Halloween Parade during the school day simply took too much time away from the instructional program—a whole day was essentially wasted. A few teachers had put this idea into his head, and it seemed like the right thing to do. He announced that this year there would be no parade. He had no way of gauging the uproar in the community. Aside from the parents, the students, and other school personnel, neighborhood residents with no official ties to the school always came out to view the students marching around the school grounds. This principal learned, rather quickly, that such decisions, despite their apparent justifications, may indeed fly in the face of long-held traditions and backfire. Of course, all of us will make mistakes, but the benefit of making mistakes is to learn from them.

EFFECTIVE TIME MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

How do active, involved school leaders juggle all the simultaneous demands and priorities that are a part of the position and still keep their heads above water? Time management is key. Each one of us must find the system that works best for her to keep all the balls in the air and not let them fall. A few tips and techniques can help to organize and apportion time within the day.

Get to know the "ebb and flow" of the day. It is a good idea to record your activity in 10- or 15-minute blocks each day for a few days, and then analyze your patterns of interaction. A few predictable time slots may emerge, including

- returning telephone calls;
- meeting with the school secretary and/or office staff;
- working on correspondence;
- doing walk-throughs of the building;
- attending to building and site needs;
- completing teacher observations;
- working on special projects or reports;
- supervising the lunchroom; and
- attending meetings within and outside of the school.

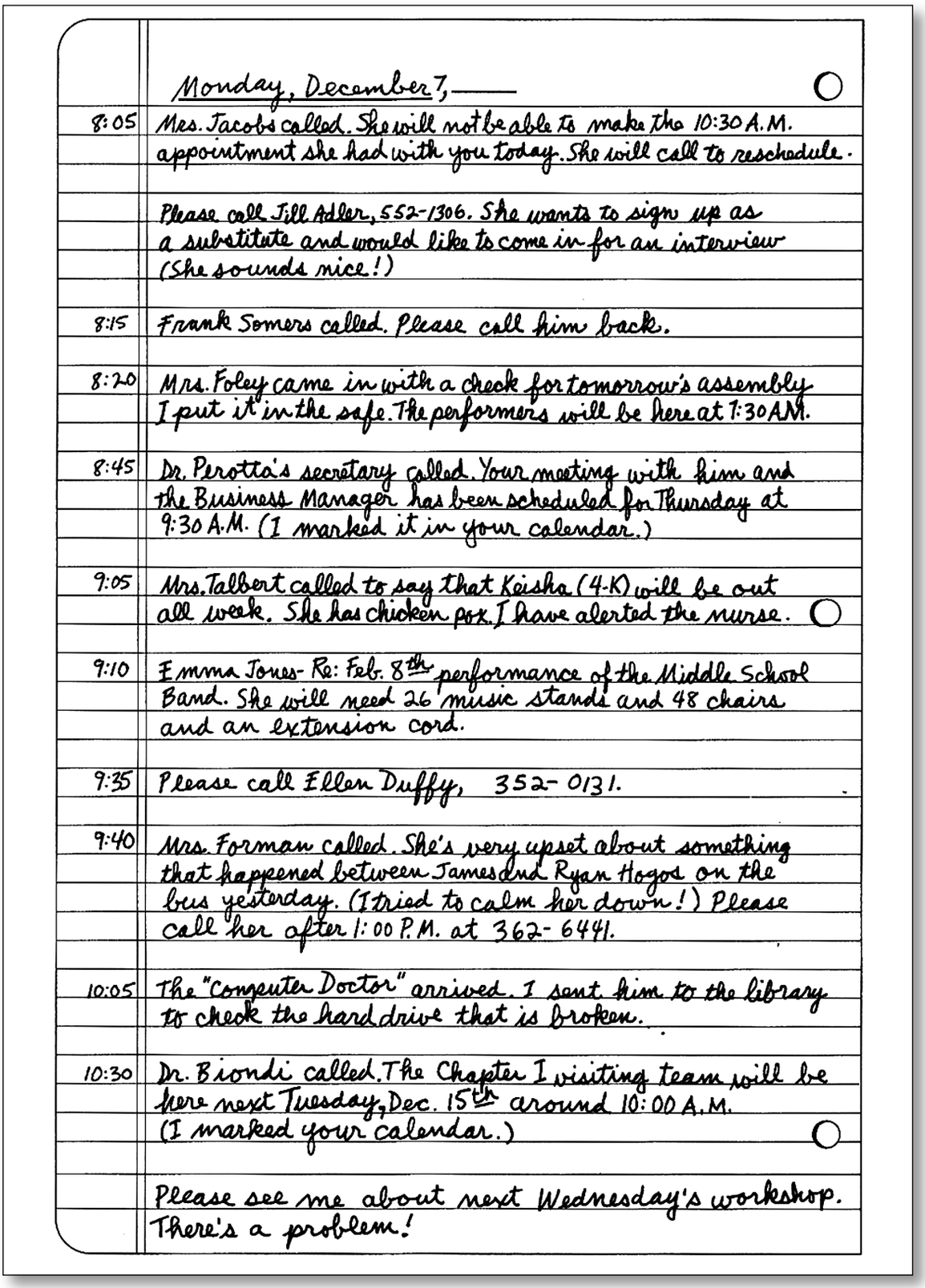
Some school leaders decide upon a specific time of day to meet with their secretaries. For example, once all of the children have settled into their classrooms, you might sit down with the school secretary and go over correspondence, outline jobs for the day, and review schedules and the week's activities. Secretaries generally appreciate having time devoted to outlining priorities and regular meetings to review the stream of tasks that need to be accomplished. Finding a specific time of day to return telephone calls has also helped some principals to develop a sense of order to the day. If possible, being available to chat with teachers at the end of the school day can be very rewarding. Again, this creates a predictable time within the workday. Teachers learn that you are available and appreciate the opportunity to discuss concerns, triumphs, or frustrations. While we all know that school days are highly unpredictable, the extent to which we can build in a level of routine will help to organize our time.

Maintaining a calendar is another important dimension of time management. Record appointments the moment they are made. (Many principals like to maintain their calendar electronically or in pencil since so many meetings and commitments are often changed.) It has worked well for some principals to keep their calendars on their desk and allow the secretary to record any appointments that she makes. Appointments can also be posted electronically in e-mail programs. As an additional reminder, whenever an appointment is recorded, it is also noted in an office log—a notebook in which you and your secretary can record important notations for one another.

The office log is an extremely useful tool. In it you can record times of telephone calls, internal messages, the names of parents who come in to sign their children out, important incidents, and other items that require attention. Make sure that you check it frequently, as it serves as a running log of important events and reminders in the school day and can be referred to as needed. It is a comprehensive account of all office activities. Figure 1.4 is a sample page from an office log.

Another important time management device is the "to do" list. Sometimes, this is incorporated into the calendar alongside times for appointments or in an electronic

Figure 1.4 Sample Page From an Office Log



Monday, December 7, ——

8:05 Mrs. Jacobs called. She will not be able to make the 10:30 A.M. appointment she had with you today. She will call to reschedule.

Please call Jill Adler, 552-1306. She wants to sign up as a substitute and would like to come in for an interview (She sounds nice!)

8:15 Frank Somers called. Please call him back.

8:20 Mrs. Foley came in with a check for tomorrow's assembly I put it in the safe. The performers will be here at 7:30 A.M.

8:45 Dr. Perotta's secretary called. Your meeting with him and the Business Manager has been scheduled for Thursday at 9:30 A.M. (I marked it in your calendar.)

9:05 Mrs. Talbert called to say that Keisha (4-K) will be out all week. She has chicken pox. I have alerted the nurse.

9:10 Emma Jones- Re: Feb. 8th performance of the Middle School Band. She will need 26 music stands and 48 chairs and an extension cord.

9:35 Please call Ellen Duffy, 352-0131.

9:40 Mrs. Forman called. She's very upset about something that happened between James and Ryan Hogos on the bus yesterday. (I tried to calm her down!) Please call her after 1:00 P.M. at 362-6441.

10:05 The "Computer Doctor" arrived. I sent him to the library to check the hard drive that is broken.

10:30 Dr. Biondi called. The Chapter I visiting team will be here next Tuesday, Dec. 15th around 10:00 A.M. (I marked your calendar.)

Please see me about next Wednesday's workshop. There's a problem!

calendar. This list guides the work of the day, and the tasks included can be given time allocations. When you leave the office, take your "to do" list along with you. As you walk through the school, invariably you will come upon things that will need to be remembered. Simply add them to your growing list. The kinds of items in the list might include a need to prepare a work order, a phone call to make, something that must be ordered, and so on. If we don't mark down reminders as we think of them, a busy school leader can often forget them.

At the end of the day, it is beneficial to review the day. Which tasks were accomplished? Which tasks need to be recorded on tomorrow's to-do list? Take a moment to reflect upon the day, preview the next day's calendar, and reprioritize the to-do list. Prioritization is an important activity, and there is no one formula for all school leaders. Some school leaders like to begin the day by accomplishing a few relatively simple tasks to gain momentum and obtain a sense that they already have something under their belts; other school leaders like to forge ahead into the most time-consuming and complex task first and work intensely and uninterruptedly for a while. Each of us must consider various approaches but also know our own work style and personality and make appropriate changes and adjustments to task commitment. Sometimes, it is really useful to force yourself to attempt a new way of doing things, trying out a new working pace or prioritization. This may require moving away from your comfort zone, but the results may be surprising.

MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE

Maintaining perspective and a sense of humor are essential to success as an elementary school principal. It is easy to become lost in the problems that we all face. Some are truly important; others are really trivial. If we choose to focus on the obstacles (and we encounter many within the course of a day), we are likely to get bogged down and not see the true joys of working with children. We cannot always solve every problem, but if we tell ourselves that we are only human and continue to work to the best of our capacities, there is much pleasure and fulfillment in the sense of accomplishment that accompanies a day in the life of a principal.

When encountering a funny incident with children, teachers, or parents, nearly every principal has at one time or another said that they are going to record it in the book he's going to write when he retires. Cherish these moments and incidents. They are truly special and they bring joy to our work. As you review your work at the end of each day, think of one positive achievement or triumph and one thing from which to learn. Our jobs are indeed difficult to define, but if we continually ask ourselves if we are trying to be "all things to all people" or if we are leading by keeping a few basic principles in mind, we will probably all sleep better at night.

NOTES

1. The phrase "principle-centered leadership" is attributed to author Stephen R. Covey. This concept is best articulated in his book, *Principle-Centered Leadership* (New York: Summit Books, 1991).

2. Systems thinking is often associated with the work of Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).