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Since then, the AJC has cleared out its archives, so it is now only available in the form in which I originally submitted it to Maureen Downey's Get Schooled education blog.

What makes a great school leader?

Peter Smagorinsky

Rep. Edward Lindsey recently invited a group of teachers to meet with him and discuss the state of education in Georgia. I was fortunate to be included in this group of impressive, knowledgeable, and provocative Georgia educators. Among the challenges they identified in Georgia schools was finding effective leadership. A good principal is priceless; a bad one is a disaster.

In my years as an Illinois teacher in the 1970s and 1980s, I had pretty much the same experience. I worked for 6 principals at 3 schools over 14 years. One was great; some were mediocre; the rest were a fright. Each made a difference in how students and teachers experienced the educational process.

A bad principal destroys morale building-wide and makes it hard for teachers and students to want to go to school. I'll next provide an inventory of bad principal types. If you've worked in schools, you'll recognize them immediately.

The laissez-faire mediocrity (Motto: Anything to keep my job)

The my-way-or-the-highway martinet (Motto: Y'all are replaceable; I'm not)

The weasel (Motto: I'll take credit for the good; the bad is all yours)

The finger-to-the-wind politician (Motto: Whatever you say, parents)

The career-climbing carpetbagger (Motto: Doing you harm so that I can do better)

The hey-y'all glad-hander (Motto: Appearances matter most)

The bully (Motto: Right or wrong, I'm right and you're wrong—end of story)

The corporate number cruncher (Motto: If you can't measure it, measure it anyway)

The good-old-boy ex-coach (Motto: It's time to re-sod the football field, while teachers tape newspapers to the window as curtains)

What's a school to do? How does a school find and cultivate a principal who earns the respect of the school's faculty? What kinds of qualities are present in the sort of outstanding school leader that everyone agrees is vital to the success of students and teachers?

I'll give a personal account of the sort of leader I think that a great school needs. As a high school teacher, I worked for one great department chair and one great principal (although both had their critics, as all leaders do). My beliefs about school leadership follow from the example they set and the way in which they created work conditions for students and teachers that produced a favorable learning environment.

First, a great school leader is personally accountable for everything that happens in the building. No pointing fingers; the buck stops here.

A great principal strives to create great work conditions for teachers so that they look forward to coming to work and doing their jobs. Teachers can then enable students to get the education they deserve. The great principal I worked for announced at the beginning of the year, “My most important role is to hire the best teachers possible and then get out of their way so that they can teach.” Getting out of the way did not mean doing nothing, however. It meant creating a professional work environment that supported teachers in teaching as effectively as possible.

Part of creating a great work environment means hiring well, and dealing directly with teachers who aren’t working out. Weak or unprofessional colleagues undermine staff and student morale and harm the school’s teaching mission. Supporting quality instruction includes the difficult chore of thinning the ranks of the relatively few weak performers who somehow slipped through the hiring process.

Great principals also back up their teachers during conflicts. I once had to fail a very unhappy young man, who responded by throwing the classroom podium at me. At the suspension hearing, parents kept trying to shift the blame to me, but the principal was steadfast in saying, “The teacher is not on trial here.” I felt secure and trusted knowing that the administration was behind me.

A great principal stays in touch with teaching and kids by teaching a class in his or her certified area—a class from the low or middle track with randomly assigned students, not an honors or AP class.

Great principals observe as many teachers in their classrooms as often as the job allows.

A truly great principal is confident and secure enough to provide students and teachers with a voice in how the school is run, and appreciates and listens to dissent. The great principal I worked for collaborated with a Faculty Senate of elected representatives who had regular meetings with the administration to provide input into how the school was run. With that level of involvement, we felt that we had a great stake in the institution and wanted to be a part of it.

There you go: My off-the-shelf great administrator. Not easy, and not the norm. But someone that teachers want to work with.