

**Dear principal: the district office, school staff and community members have a huge impact on the efficacy of their principals. Here are some questions they should ask about what they demand from their principals as they consider ways to help principals succeed.**

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Dear Principal:

This article is about time management, but it is not written for you. Which is not to say that you couldn't do a whole lot to improve the way you manage your own time--you could. But that's another article. This article is directed at two groups that have a tremendous impact

The principalship is still one of the best jobs in education, but it is losing some of its appeal. Principals love the fact that they can make a real difference for kids, but the personal price that principals pay to make that contribution is becoming increasingly unsustainable. As the average work week for principals approaches 60 hours, it seems remarkable that we continue to ask principals to do more with less. What follows are messages directed to two audiences who have a huge impact upon principals, the livability of their jobs and the quality of their work.

**To the Central Office Staff:**

You appreciate how hard your principals work, and you know how essential your principals are to your team effort to increase student achievement. You are asking your principals to focus their energies on instructional leadership while at the same time they maintain their managerial responsibilities. This is appropriate, and most of your principals are able to rise to your expectations. But you should be aware that some of your most capable principals are engaged in an ongoing struggle--and may leave the profession--because of the time demands that they face. Here are a few questions you might want to consider as you think about ways in which you can ensure that your principals succeed.

\* Is our central office organized to make the management part of the principalship easy? Many central offices have high expectations of sites for continuous improvement and accountability, but have not invested similar energy in continuous improvement and accountability at the district level. Many districts have plenty of room for improvement in their basic operational supports to school sites. Principals should not have to worry about

getting the lawns mowed and the bathrooms painted. They should not have to spend a minute organizing budget print-outs or student data systems. Central offices do these things so principals can spend their time working on instruction.

\* Have we taken steps to ensure that principals have adequate support staff? In right times, it is difficult to budget for adequate clerical staff, student supervisors, assistant principals, counselors and the like. But we can't raise our expectations of principals at the same time that we eliminate these resources. School boards and central offices need to understand that cuts in these areas have instructional implications.

\* Are we coordinating things in the central office--in order to minimize demands made upon principals? Do various departments in the central office--personnel, categorical programs, professional development--talk to one another to eliminate duplicative reporting requirements and to streamline written communication? Does the central office provide principals with adequate notice and realistic deadlines? Does the central office filter written communication, including e-mails, to ensure that principals aren't overwhelmed by verbiage?

\* Are we sensitive to principals' time constraints? Are meetings kept to a reasonable level? Do they occur at normal work hours? (You can't claim to be sensitive to time demands made upon the principal and then schedule meetings and professional development at the wee hours and on weekends.) Do you ensure that your meetings are well facilitated and efficient, and are not used to disseminate information that could be shared through other means? Do you minimize the amount of time principals are asked to serve in "adjunct" functions?

\* Have you made it clear to your principals and their communities that you do not expect principals to be omnipresent? Your high school principal cannot be an instructional leader, a parent and mentally healthy if he or she is expected to make an appearance at every game, Rotary meeting, booster club, school lunch break and school board meeting. Districts that expect their principals to focus upon instruction must recognize that some expectations have to come off of the plate. Have you had honest, two-way discussions about expectations with principals? Central offices should initiate those discussions, and should take the lead in informing staff and the public about the changing principalship. These questions raise just a few of the issues that central office folks should consider as they think about time, effectiveness and the principalship. As you know, your district will not succeed without the engagement of its site leaders, and your site leaders will not succeed without your support.

### **To School Staffs and Communities:**

You certainly know how important a strong principal is to your school, If you have a good one, you don't want to lose him or her. But you might. Principals complain that the demands made upon their time are unreasonable, and that they have difficulty making time for their highest priority: instructional leadership. The average principal in California is working between 55 and 60 hours a week. You don't want to kill off your principal; you want your principal to help lead a healthy and successful community. Given that goal, here are a few questions to consider:

\* Do you support your principal and district in ensuring that there are adequate staff and resources to handle managerial and administrative tasks? In tight times, it is very tempting and often appropriate to make cuts "away from the classroom," but sometimes those cuts have unintended consequences that impact classrooms and teachers. Before assuming that administration and support staff are dispensable, consider the consequences. The elimination of a clerical position may make sense, until student absenteeism increases because others are too busy to make parent calls. That assistant principal position may seem superfluous until you realize your principal and others are going to have to take up the slack around supervision and student activities. If your principal is going to serve you as an instructional leader, he or she has to have clerical and other support.

\* Before you take a minor problem or need to your principal, do you ask yourself if someone else might be able to help? Do you look to your principal as an instructional leader, or as a scheduler, bookkeeper, custodian, yard supervisor, nurse and message courier? It may seem expedient to take things right "to the top," but when you do so, you disempower the very people who are responsible for resolving day-to-day problems, and you limit your principal's ability to tackle the big stuff.

\* Are you clear with yourself and your principal about what really needs attention right now, and what can wait? Do you do your best to keep conversations short and efficient? Most principals are problem solvers and "servant leaders," and are tempted to disregard longer term, less pressing priorities (such as coaching teachers or working with student achievement data) when an immediate request comes through the door. They strive to be good listeners, and are probably willing to spend a half an hour talking with you about an issue that could be resolved in 10 minutes. Occupying your principal in extended conversations and "putting out fires" diverts time and energy from the deeper priorities that will have the greatest positive impact upon students at your school.

\* Do you have realistic expectations of your principal? The principalship has changed over the past few years: the people once asked to manage "beans, buses and budgets" are now expected to lead professional communities focused upon teaching and learning. Your principal cannot have a firm understanding of the school's literacy program, ensure that teachers have useful student achievement data, and attend every game and booster

club meeting. As you work with your principal to define his priorities, you have to be willing to have some things come off of his plate.

\* Do you encourage your principal to take care of herself? They may not share it with their school communities, but most principals, those same committed educators who are working 60 hours a week, feel guilty when they leave campus for professional development, take personal time off, or say no to a request. Let your principal know that you value his professional development, and that it wouldn't hurt for him to eat a real lunch for a change. You have a vested interest in your principal's physical and mental health.

### **Partners for kids**

Your principal has to take the lead in managing her own time and in structuring her work, you and your colleagues are partners in the process. When principals, central offices, staff members and communities support one another, kids benefit.

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