



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that help administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's focus is on the importance of visibility of school leaders.

See and Be Seen: The Importance of High Visibility



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

As I reflect back on my years as a principal, I am grateful for the influence others have had on my thinking and my decision making. One lesson I learned from listening to and observing my fellow educators is the importance of being highly visible among students, staff, and parents. To create a culture for learning, the leader must fully understand the existing culture – not by innuendo, past history, snap judgments, or who had the last word. The leader must become immersed in the life of the school by being “out and about.”

This month in *Just for the ASKing!* I relate some of the stories and events that have taught me important lessons, left lasting impressions, and impacted my practice.

Stranger in Our Midst: As a young teacher and student government sponsor, I had the responsibility of coordinating the end-of-the-year awards assembly. When the principal entered the gym to come to the podium to get the program underway, I heard students in the bleachers ask who he was. The comments surprised me even though I knew that the principal was rarely seen outside the main office. This same principal had earlier approached a teacher in the hallway and asked for her hall pass. She sheepishly informed him that she was a new teacher on the staff.

Lesson Learned: The leader of the school should not be office bound and “invisible” to the students and staff.

Hide and Seek: On my first day as an administrator, a teacher whom I had not yet met appeared in my doorway. She looked at me and said, “So where is your hiding place going to be?” I was a little confused by her question and asked her to explain what she meant. She told me that past administrators at the school had found out-of-the-way hiding places such as the library or in the classrooms of selected teachers where they could hang out and hide. Although I was a little taken aback by the question, in retrospect I was grateful.

Lesson Learned: It is important to be proactive in introducing oneself to teachers and students and be seen in the hallways and classrooms throughout the building. Every aspect of the leader’s behavior is noted

and sends a message to everyone in the building.

Beyond the Classroom: Early in my career as a principal, I took the advice of a veteran principal who was approaching retirement. He explained that one of the most important decisions he made as a new principal was to attend as many extracurricular events and evening meetings as possible during his first year. Although it was personally taxing, I heeded his advice and attended concerts, plays, PTA meetings, athletic events, orientations and events at other schools in the community. Parents and students repeatedly thanked me for my interest in the full life of the school.

Lesson Learned: There is no substitute for face-to-face interactions with teachers, students, and parents at school events. Everyone appreciates knowing that the principal supports the complete development of students, not simply in an academic context, but beyond the classroom as well.

Orientations: Several years into my principalship, I heard several colleagues talk about orientations for upcoming students and parents. The practice at our school had been to have counselors meet with upcoming students to orient them to the school. A fellow principal spoke of how he met with students in small groups to make sure they felt comfortable coming to their new school. Another principal shared her practice of having an open house for parents on the Friday afternoon prior to the students' first day of school. I added both events to my practice for over a decade with great success and satisfaction.

Lesson Learned: Looking into the eyes of students, dispelling rumors about their future school, showing them that their principal is friendly and approachable, and insuring them that they will have a positive experience reduces their anxiety and excites them about their upcoming transition. In addition, meeting families during the open house, shaking their hands and convincing them that you will "take care of their children" sets the stage for the school year to come. This lasting first impression promotes a positive image of the school in the community in immeasurable ways.

Listening In: In a recent workshop session, I overheard two groups of new teachers talking as they worked in small groups. All the teachers in each of the small groups worked at the same school. The group from one school spoke of their excitement when their principal appeared in their classroom since she was highly visible throughout the building on a regular basis. In the words of one teacher, "I couldn't wait to show her what my students were learning." Teachers in the second group spoke of their trepidation and fear when the principal came into their rooms. They rarely saw their principal and her appearance sent the message that "something was wrong." They shared that they became unnerved and overly self-conscious when she visited their classes.

Lesson Learned: It is important for a principal to be frequently visible throughout the building, especially in classrooms, to let the teachers know that what they are doing is the truly important work of the school. When a principal is visible on a regular basis, his or her appearance is not seen as a "negative" but as a supportive and positive event.

Classroom Observations: When administrators supervise and evaluate teacher performance, they are frequently trained to observe and capture the teacher's behavior. I recently had the opportunity to participate in a series of walk-through visits to classrooms in ten different schools. In small groups, we went into classes for brief periods of time, spending approximately five minutes in each room. Instead of observing what the teacher was teaching we focused our attention on what students were learning. We moved throughout the room, looked over students' shoulders and asked them questions about their learning. We focused not simply on what students were learning but also on how they were learning.

Lesson Learned: As the school leaders with whom I was working concluded, observers can learn a great

deal about the quality of classroom teaching and learning in a short period of time through interactions with students.

Principal Priorities: In a recent visit to a middle school, the principal greeted me and then quickly put on her coat, gloves, and earmuffs. She said that it has been a priority for her throughout her decade as a principal to greet the students as they came into the building each morning and as they left each afternoon. It was also important for the staff to know that the principal was not “above” facing the elements in all kinds of weather.

Lesson Learned: The principal should be visible in all phases of the school day. By behaving in this way, the principal’s message is clear: No job or responsibility is too small or unimportant.

Walking Around: The most successful educators I know are the ones who make a concerted effort to be out and about in their buildings. They are in the hallways, in cafeterias, at after school events and help sessions, and in classrooms throughout the school day. They spend a great deal of their time **listening** instead of **talking**. They use their “walking around” as a primary tool to gather data on teacher professional growth and student learning.

Lesson Learned: If the principal is truly the instructional leader in the building, as well as the person who sets the tone for learning, he or she should be constantly assessing what is happening in the school. This cannot be done from the main office.

The Kids are Watching: A principal of a small K-8 school was recently called to an eighth grade classroom. It was near the end of the school year, and not knowing what to expect, he quickly went to the room. When he arrived, he was asked to sit in a seat in the front row. A group of students who would soon leave the school to begin 9th grade, surprised him by paying tribute for all he had done to support them during their time at the school. They profusely thanked him for “being there” for them. At the conclusion of their remarks, they presented him with a plaque with the inscription ***Because Nice Matters.***

Lesson Learned: It is not important to simply be visible but to treat people with respect, dignity and compassion.

The importance of the visibility of the principal, as well as other school leaders, cannot be underestimated. Research links the frequent visibility of the principal with higher student achievement. Although I respect research findings, I am also a proponent of common sense and first-hand learning. With great assuredness from personal experience, I know that a school can be a better place when the principal builds a culture where he or she is frequently seen, leads through example, and builds relationships that impact student learning.

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