



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 supporting teachers as school opens.

Supporting Teachers as School Opens



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

I recently heard a speaker say that principals should treat their teachers like **precious jewels**. This message certainly made sense to me since I firmly believed in this philosophy during my many years as a principal. Listening to his words during a summer conference, I reflected on how important it is to make teachers feel important from the very first day of the new school year. I thought of my own experiences as a teacher returning to school and how I felt in the different places I had worked. Was I made to feel like I was fulfilling an important role? Did my administrators really care about my individual needs?

As I continued to listen to the speaker's message, I began jotting down all the ideas I could think of that would make teachers truly feel like **precious jewels** as a new school year began.

Typically, most schools have some sort of opening exercise when their teachers return which includes refreshments and socializing. It is important for the principal to be available among the staff during these occasions. Take the time to move around the room and interact with as many staff members as possible, welcoming them back for another school year. An optimistic and friendly approach can set the tone for the opening events. Making personal connections, asking about family, inquiring about summer travels, and really listening to what each teacher has to say can set the stage at the very beginning to make each person feel special. Particularly take note of any new staff members and introduce them to existing staff members so that they have someone to talk to. I know from past experiences that it can be very easy to be pulled away to deal with administrative duties during these opening social gatherings, but I learned how important it is to be visible and to focus your attention on each person with whom you interact.

During those opening sessions when the full faculty comes together to meet, it is important for the principal to set the right tone. The principal's opening agenda items should not be heavy or cumbersome. Most successful principals use this opportunity to tell stories and show their sense of humor. As they formulate their agenda, they make sure to include some light-hearted and fun full-group activity, and purposefully show their human side to their faculty members. The message to the staff is that educating children is important but, at the same time, we can laugh together and enjoy one another's company.

Another of the early agenda items is the introduction of new staff members to the entire faculty. A tried and true method for completing this portion of the meeting is to have the mentor for the new teacher carry out the introduction. These public introductions can help both new and veteran teachers make connections that can lead to more in-depth conversations as the week and year progresses.

As teachers prepare their classrooms for the first day of school, it is important for the principal, as well as other administrators, to move around the building, stop in each and every classroom and check on individual teacher needs. This sends the message that the administrators really care that the school year gets off to a good start. It is especially important to new staff members who may feel a bit isolated and overwhelmed. Most districts have a process to assign mentors to work with new teachers. It is essential for the principal to make the mentors feel that they are fulfilling a significant role by supporting new teachers. One of the primary reasons that teachers leave the profession is because they feel isolated. From the very beginning, a principal can alleviate this feeling of isolation by circulating around the building and checking on their needs as they prepare to open school.

Teachers often feel overwhelmed at the beginning of the school year because principals and central office personnel quickly fill their calendars with meetings and in-services. Some of these sessions are extremely important and necessary. As a young teacher, however, I remember sitting in meetings and in-services feeling nervous and uncomfortable because my focus was on all the things I needed to do to meet my students on the first day of school. As a young principal, I listened to my teachers who clearly told me that individual preparation time was so important to them. A principal can make teachers additionally feel like **precious jewels** by listening to their needs and adjusting the schedule to support those needs. As school leaders, we don't have to "unload" everything we learned during the summer hiatus at one time. This practice simply overwhelms the teachers. Teachers feel special when their genuine needs are addressed.

As the speaker wrapped up his presentation, I was still thinking about his **precious jewels** metaphor. One doesn't treat jewels carelessly, cast them aside without thought, or leave them lying around unattended. Jewels are protected, valued and treated in a special way. As the school year progresses, principals can enhance the value of their **precious jewels** with kind words, feedback on a job well done, personal notes, birthday cards and public recognition of achievements. By following these practices, the jewels won't lose their value over time. In fact, with proper care and attention, they can increase in value and worth, continue to radiate beauty, and make the school a happy place to be.

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