Viewpoint

The Principal as Chief Negotiator: Some Concerns for the Supervision of Teachers

Ronald F. Stone

The backlash currently being felt as a result of collective bargaining in the public sector has a tendency to visibly display itself in the working relationships between teachers and their principals. Most widely-held concepts of instructional teams of teachers and administrators working cooperatively for the good of students are rapidly being supplanted by the adversarial relationships of labor and management inherent in the bargaining process.

As if the very nature of collective bargaining was not enough to dissolve sound teaching partnerships, many smaller districts throughout the nation are forced to use principals as members, or even spokespersons, for the management bargaining team. Such selection, though often a necessity, places the building administrator in a highly precarious position with respect to his or her status as "master teacher" or "instructional leader" in his or her building. Those teachers who once looked to the principal as a source of instructional support, now view him or her as a potential threat to their job security, professional status, and economic advancement. Dismal as this picture may seem, there are ways that administrators can salvage most, if not all, of their credibility among teachers as an "instructional leader."

The role of negotiator in public employee bargaining is totally dependent upon the person who occupies that role. In a sense, if an administrator chooses to play the hard-line manager who uses the contract to beat teachers into submission, the association representing the teachers of that system will create an image depicting the administrator as inflexible, vindictive, and unreasonable. On the other hand, should the association realize that the behavior of the principal at the table is consistent with his or her beliefs as a building administrator and is, in fact, reflecting his or her concern for improvement of the total educational process, then, to a degree, his or her reputation as an instructional leader will remain bruised, but intact.

Unfortunately, the process of bargaining will not allow management negotiators to abandon one role for another. Though the principal may serve as chief spokesperson for the board at a Tuesday bargaining session, he or she must still return to school Wednesday morning as principal of his or her school. The continuous shifting of roles complicates the issue of maintaining a supervisory stance among subordinates inasmuch as all decisions made by the administrator will be scrutinized by teachers as being made for educational purposes or for bargaining reasons.

Traditionally, the role of the principal has been defined as a facilitator of curriculum development. Recently, however, that role has been precluded by various middle management responsibilities that make it difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill traditional role expectations. The administration of a negotiated agreement has become one of those management responsibilities. All too frequently, the development of curriculum and the innovation of teaching processes have been limited to those activities that do not violate specific clauses of the contract or conditions of employment. Consequently, principals will hesitate to stimulate innovation knowing that the long hours and dedication required may not be readily available or may become financially prohibitive as a result of contract language.

Contract Provisions Must Be Honored

Problems and disagreements arise when principals, seeking to exercise their responsibility for curriculum development, assign additional duties

to teachers that result in grievances and tedious hearings to clarify contract provisos. It therefore becomes incumbent upon the building administrator to remain acutely aware of all provisions in an existing teacher contract with particular emphasis on those that may have impact on the development of curriculum or the supervision of teachers.

Having occupied the concurrent roles of principal of a secondary school and chief negotiator for the school board, I believe that, in spite of stringent contract language, changes in programs and procedures are still quite possible and often vital to the growth of the overall school program. The key to the issue lies in credibility. In order to succeed in bringing about curriculum change while under the constraints of a collective bargaining agreement, teachers must believe that the change is advantageous not just for students, but for their own personal and collective benefit.

One of the most effective paths to follow in planning for change under these circumstances has proven to be through the establishment of a close working relationship with the building representative of the teacher association. Unless the militant, adversarial posture created by collective bargaining is overcome by teachers and administrators, most attempts at meaningful changes will be fruitless. The era of paternalism in educational administration is past. The determination of what is good for public schools no longer rests solely with the principal but instead has become, and is destined to remain, a collective process couched in language of formal and informal negotiations with teachers. This is not to decry this as a change for the worse but merely to describe a pattern of behavior that may require a major alteration of behavior for more traditional school administrators. The once optional concept of democratic leadership for many school systems has now become legislatively mandated with significant consequences for those who resist.

Despite the impact collective bargaining has had on education in general, I remain firm in my belief that true professional educators, both teachers and principals, shall remain professional so long as educational change presents itself as essential and beneficial. Evidence of this belief is reflected in the consistency with which teacher associations negotiate for equitable and relevant forms of teacher evaluation by building administrators. Teacher evaluation has always been viewed as a positive self-renewal process to help instructional personnel become more effective in the classroom. However, with the advent of collective bargaining came a new perspective of teacher evaluation: that of the "gotcha process." In the "gotcha process" teachers live in constant fear of being caught in the act of doing something in the classroom that may violate a provision in the contract for which the principal may, during the course of the evaluation, say "Aha, I got you for . . . ."

The potential for totally undermining the process of teacher evaluation is straggering. Once again, it is the principal who must cast himself or herself in the image of "instructional leader" by using the negotiated agreement constructively to groom better teachers and to cooperatively effect change. The adversarial relationship created by collective bargaining must be overcome at all costs in the classroom. The foundation for creative,



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dynamic educational change lies in the classroom teacher and must be carefully nurtured despite the complexity of contract provisos.

It cannot be denied that we are engaged in an era of compromise with respect to collective bargaining. However, we cannot afford to compromise our standards or beliefs with respect to the worth and dignity of the individual, be it teacher or principal. The demand for a high quality of education in America has never before been paralleled. We as educators are obligated to meet that demand but must be cognizant of the need to maintain both personal and professional ties among the various educational circles. Despite the restrictions imposed by collective bargaining agreements, the processes of sound human relations and supportive cooperation will be critical to the development of curriculum change and teacher supervision in the years to come. EL

Letters

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It was of utmost interest to me to learn how other school systems are handling the same situation.

Both Gordon Cawelti and James Beane have underscored the need for less fractionalization of learning and the need for revamping the high school curriculum in a manner that will eliminate the need for competency tests, malpractice suits, and criticism by former students who feel they were not equipped to function in the post-high school environment.

The publications have been quite good this year, but this issue is superb!

Dorothy T. Bryant
Executive Council Member
Chicago, Illinois
EL



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