

*William Corbett's principalship is unfancy, unflagging,
and committed to children's development.*

An Effective School Principal

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Two years ago I chanced to meet an especially effective school principal. My admiration for his leadership led to the following attempt to pin down the qualities that describe his work.

For much of that 1979-80 academic year I spent one day a week at Lowell Elementary School in Watertown, Massachusetts, as part of a research team. My research took me throughout the school building, required me to interview numerous students, and brought me in contact with most Lowell teachers. As I grew familiar with Lowell's workings and atmosphere I became convinced it was an effective school: it offered a quality education to a diverse student population, "teaching poor children at least as well as . . . middle class children" (Edmonds, 1979, p. 15). Lowell School's atmosphere was humane and orderly. Students were not treated adversely; they moved uninhibitedly but considerately through the corridors, displayed little fear of adults, and independently carried out responsibilities such as getting milk for their classrooms or locating information in the library. Humaneness and stability coexisted comfortably.

The staff of Lowell School also impressed me. In my experience a stranger entering a school generally meets suspicion and a subtle non-cooperation from classroom teachers. The teacher ethos (see Lortie, 1975)—with its privatism and insularity—does not welcome outsiders. Yet the majority of teachers at Lowell were quite open to "someone who'll give our students some special attention."

My inference, bolstered by teachers' comments and the impressions of researchers spending their second year at Lowell, was that Lowell's principal, William Corbett, was a major factor in the school's effectiveness. (Interestingly I originally formed this impression without having met Mr. Corbett, who was on sabbatical for the first semester of the school year. The residual effects of his 19-year presence at Lowell were plain in his absence.)

During the second semester of that year Mr. Corbett permitted me to "shadow" him for a day as he went about his duties, as well as to interview him at length on several occasions. In addition I continued my regular visits to Lowell, enjoying the opportunity to observe vignettes of school action from various vantage points: in a first grade classroom, while interviewing in the library, in the corridors, while sitting in the two teachers' lounges.

In reporting my observations about Mr. Corbett's principalship I have included a brief description of the school itself and a longer discussion of Corbett's *modus operandi*.

The School and Its Students

Lowell is a small school with 430 students. Physically it is a traditional New England school building, handsome with its red brick exterior and white trim, sited pleasantly atop a grassy hillside. It is a two-story structure with grades 1-3 on the main floor, 4-6 on the upper floor; the art and special needs rooms are in the basement. When William Corbett became principal 19 years ago, he had the rooms, including bathroom facilities, gradually remodeled at the rate funds would permit. The principal's office came last in this procedure.

The Lowell neighborhood includes single-family-owned dwellings, moderate to high priced rental units, and a low income housing project. It is indeed a neighborhood school, and most students walk in the mornings. Students are of Greek, Armenian, Irish, Italian, and Canadian ancestry.

On the second floor of Lowell School is a large library with an extensive, wide-ranging collection of books. This is a pleasant carpeted room with posters and plants. Children enter and leave in a steady stream—taking out or returning books, engaging in small-group story sessions with the librarian, seeing films. One of Corbett's priorities has been to establish an excellent library and see that it is used. This room for reading strikes the observer as a focal point of the school.

The other focal point is the school office on the main floor, consisting of a large outer office and an inner principal's office. The office walls sport an everchanging array of student drawings, arithmetic papers, and writings. Teachers know that a student who will benefit from special recognition may be sent with his or her work to Mr. Corbett, who will admire the piece and display it prominently.

Mr. Corbett's office is plain and unexceptional, just a desk and a few chairs, shelves and a master clock. He doesn't use it much, preferring to spend more of his time roaming the school and visiting classrooms. In my observations his office served as a place to receive phone calls or confer with visitors.

In many ways Mr. Corbett is meticulous about projecting standards of decorum, dignity, and courtesy to students and staff. Quietly he insists on student behaviors like using "please" and "thank you"; personally he sets an ex-

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ample of holding doors for people and speaking respectfully to people big and small. Without apology he stated his behavior might be "old-fashioned."

William Corbett's Principalship

The school's instructional program is the main emphasis of William Corbett's principalship. Most of his activities explicitly or implicitly aim at ensuring quality instructional time for students.

The instructional program, in Corbett's view, begins with recruiting a competent staff. Though his influence on teacher selection has varied over the years, Mr. Corbett has had some hand in hiring 14 of Lowell's 20 teachers. He attempts to choose teachers with his general goals for the school clearly in mind. To me it is not surprising that, despite his obviously extensive pedagogical expertise, Mr. Corbett first looks for evidence of "empathy and love for children" in a prospective teacher.

The second crucial teacher characteristic Mr. Corbett looks for is, of course, potential teaching skill. He assesses this in a variety of ways. Sometimes, through a network of professional contacts, he hears about fine student teachers and arranges to observe them in action. He interviews candidates carefully, but also asks them to write on a choice of three instructional problems in their own handwriting. This enables him to assess their pedagogical approach, their thinking and organizational skills, and the legibility of their cursive writing.

Corbett is not searching for a single "model" teacher. He has striven to include at least two teaching styles at each grade level; for example, "more open with appropriate limits" and "more traditional with empathy." Diversity among teachers, he believes, makes it more possible to place children with teachers who will maximize their learning. In addition it will foster a cross-fertilization of ideas among teachers, creating a potential for staff development.

Staff selection thus functions for Corbett as one component of the process of student placement. In a more immediate fashion he attends to this process throughout each school year as he gathers information relevant to each student's placement for the following year. Parents' requests and communications are welcomed and kept in folders along with pertinent records about each child. Each sending teacher makes recommendations in a nonpersonal fashion.



such as "needs teacher who individualizes," "should be separated from _____," "would benefit from a teacher with a science emphasis." The guidance counselor, reading specialist, and Title I teacher make similar recommendations.

In late May Mr. Corbett sits down with these folders and places children in classes for the next year. He strives for heterogeneity within classrooms, believing diversity of abilities and social backgrounds is beneficial for most students. Most important he attempts to match each student with the best teacher for him or her. When this time-consuming process is finished, the guidance counselor reviews and revises Corbett's recommendations. Final placements are then communicated to parents.

In this process of selecting teachers and placing students Mr. Corbett functions as a strong instructional leader. That is, given McPherson's (1979) three general stances a principal can adopt—executive professional leader, routine housekeeper, or boss—Corbett most fits the executive professional leader model. To use McPherson's words, Corbett behaves as "a senior colleague who works with and guides a group of 'professional' teachers toward improved classroom outcomes." It is characteristic of his behavior to rely upon the input of professionals (such as the guidance counselor) to achieve instructional goals, but to make and take responsibility for final decisions himself.

In confronting the problem of developing, implementing, and monitoring a school curriculum any principal must consider the legitimate interests of numerous key social actors. There is the central district administration with its need to document the normative gains of local pupils compared with those elsewhere. There are parents, some of whom also worry about national norms, others whose concern may encompass humanistic, artistic, or social development. There are the teachers, who must implement (and can often sabotage) curricular decisions. Finally there are the principal's own strongly held instructional goals.

Judging from my observations and Corbett's own descriptions, his method of dealing with these interested groups is to genuinely listen to them, to accommodate those concerns he considers legitimate and fair, but most of all to lead his staff to accomplish a clearly defined, reasonable-in-number set of major instructional goals. These tend to be goals

that none of the groups involved could seriously disagree with and that are compatible with Corbett's own philosophy.

Corbett defines two overall school goals: children will advance a minimum of one grade level by any measure, and children will demonstrate respect for the rights of others and for property. These two broad goals, of which the staff and parents and even (I think) the students are aware, establish a tenor for the school. Most of the day-to-day activities of Corbett and his staff explicitly relate to the accomplishment of these goals.

The "by any measure" portion of the first goal is important in Corbett's principalship. In his view cognitive development is a multi-faceted process. He is not enamored of standardized testing, being an administrator who knows the limitations of such testing and who suspects its emphasis has caused losses in crucial extended reasoning and writing areas. Yet Mr. Corbett knows that such tests have some uses—in particular that they are necessary for the district central office and important to some parents. He reasons that by providing instructional emphasis on significant reading and math skills (something he would do anyway) the school will produce students who fare well on standardized tests. He is correct; Lowell students score above norms on such measures of achievement.

But in saying "by any measure" Mr. Corbett signals his unwillingness to aim merely at standardized norms. At Lowell standardized tests are but one way to monitor certain basic elements of the school goals. Development of written expression and mathematical reasoning are major goals at Lowell. So are artistic and musical appreciation and an understanding of the natural world. I don't believe Mr. Corbett would accept the often heard excuse that schools have no time for such broader aims. He is not a limited person, and he quietly insists that staff and students won't be either.

Although many principals have laudable instructional goals, not all are able to implement them. Mr. Corbett's strategies for implementation are as complex as the goals themselves. Yet each of his strategies stems from his view of himself as the school's instructional leader. He sees himself as open and undogmatic, but he communicates to teachers that he means his suggestions related to instruction.

A remarkable component of his effort to implement goals is his communication of instructional emphasis to stu-

dents. Twice each year Mr. Corbett listens to each child in the primary grades read aloud. This is a personal process: Corbett and the child sit together in the hallway while the child reads passages from a story of his or her own choosing. Corbett asks questions and discusses the story with the pupil. He writes a note complimenting the child or suggesting an area for improvement and asking if the child will read the same story to his or her parents that very evening. The child reads the note back to him. Corbett's stated objectives for this time-consuming process are to show each student that he cares about his or her progress in reading and to involve parents with the child's reading development. Apparent as well is his positive delight in seeing firsthand a child's initial steps to literacy.

Mr. Corbett employs a similar procedure to communicate his concern for and to monitor children's progress in writing and mathematics. Again twice each year he obtains writing samples from each class. These he reads at home, returning each with comments on usage, spelling, creativity. Math papers receive the same treatment.

Another component of this student recognition strategy is the display of student work throughout the school building. In the office, in classrooms, in the corridors one sees student artwork, math papers, stories, fables, and reports. Corbett actively encourages this, giving clear reasons for doing so: students should know that he and the teachers value the work students do.

It is this detailed monitoring of the instructional process, his constant awareness of and interest in the progress of individual students and teachers to which I attribute most of William Corbett's success as an instructional leader. Far more than the formal evaluation procedures, this daily attention to instructional detail stimulates quality teaching and learning. The motivation and excellent human relations engendered by this approach are worth the great commitment of time and energy required. But beyond the surface technique is a human, intuitive quality, a personal authority that derives from the humane ways he exercises his skills and the values he holds. I can only describe this element of Corbett's style as an unfancy, unflagging commitment to children's development.

Within the context of school life, problems constantly crop up—disciplinary matters with stu-

dents, concerned or annoyed parents, questions of how to allocate funds, social and emotional crises. In some schools such matters are resolved by responding to each as a major or minor crisis. At Lowell an atmosphere of reasonableness and openness removes some of the anxiety from and instills a sense of manageability into such problems.

Maintaining a visible presence and availability is the initial step in establishing a reasonable atmosphere. On most days Mr. Corbett is at school at least one-half hour early, organizing his agenda and performing tasks that might later take him away from students and teachers. When most people arrive at Lowell, Corbett is there in the hallway awaiting them. At that time, throughout the day, and for awhile after school hours he is known to be available for advice and troubleshooting.

He gives parents an open line to his office and responds within one day to any parent inquiry. Settling problems promptly "at the lowest level" keeps them depoliticized and on a human-to-human basis.

When asked how he thinks teachers perceive him, Corbett responded, "I think they trust me. I always accord them great respect and have a history of being up front with them. They know I'm open to suggestions and discussion, and I don't think teachers feel they must form a committee to approach me. I think I have a good record of going out of my way to support teachers' efforts in working with children. I strive to pry them loose for special professional improvement activities and to procure all the material and budgetary support possible." My observations and particularly my reading of teachers' lounge conversation would confirm Mr. Corbett's interpretation of this relationship. Teachers respect him; they perceive him as a superior but do not consider him threatening or unapproachable.

Corbett describes himself as "the leader of the building." Lowell does not run on a consensus or participatory democracy model; rather the prevailing ethos reflects rational, humanistic, due process concepts of governance. As Corbett says, "We don't vote, but we listen a lot."

Staff members are assumed to be competent adult professionals having rights and responsibilities. The leader coordinates the efforts of these staff members using procedures that are not arbitrary, that have justifications related to the institution's function, that respect

the rights of participants. The leader's ability to perform in this fashion is contingent upon his adherence to his own defined responsibilities and his ability to communicate and enforce expectations.

This due process, rationalistic model seems value neutral—it could lead to an effective or ineffective school, a satisfied or dissatisfied staff. The model does not account for the other personal and philosophical ingredients discussed earlier. In concluding this article I would re-emphasize these latter qualities, foremost among them a genuine commitment to the quality of the instructional process. Illustrative of this commitment is Mr. Corbett's reply when I asked him what he considers the biggest difficulty he faces as a principal. He said that it is finding the time to do what he's really supposed to do: to visit classroom teachers and work with them. Paperwork and administrative demands frequently obstruct him in this task.

I hope I have not painted too rosy a picture of Mr. Corbett's principalship. Lowell, like any school, faces difficulties, many of which it is helpless to combat (economic strictures and social changes, for example). Yet Lowell is indeed a remarkable school for the effective education it delivers to all of its

students. The man who has headed that school for 19 years has been instrumental in promoting its excellence. ■

¹ McPherson adopted the general description of executive professional leadership from the "EPL" model of Gross and Herriott (1965).

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