

Priorities for the International School Principal

by Bambi Betts

What is the PRIMARY role of a principal in an international school? This question tops the current list the PTC receives from practitioners around the world.

Clearly there is no single answer. The question comes from dedicated professionals, sincerely interested in trying to do the right thing by their students. In this same spirit, I venture an answer.

Attempting to define a primary role pits key elements against each other. Assuming that one of these elements is more critical than others is dangerous. But I believe we can narrow it. Let me suggest that the primary role of an international principal is threefold:

- ? To ensure there is an excellent curriculum with high standards in place
- ? To ensure that there is the best possible teacher in every classroom.
- ? To monitor student achievement regularly and with the tenacity of a pit bull.

High standards breed high achievement

There is increasing evidence (see recent British report on exam results) that the rigor of the curriculum is an equal or greater factor in student achievement than socioeconomic background or parental attitudes toward education. Unfortunately, in our efforts to "meet the needs" of all students, many schools have substantially diluted the curriculum. If high standards are not set, high standards are not achieved. No rocket science here.

And in many international schools, the curriculum is still based on whatever the particular teachers in the school are most comfortable teaching. What is to be taught is not clearly described in writing to teachers, students or parents. The notion of high standards of achievement becomes a game of roulette.

The principal has the job of tirelessly keeping the school focused on what students should know and be able to do and to what extent. As Grant Wiggins has claimed, the purpose of the curriculum is to "cause learning." It is the starting point for successful learning.

The best teacher in every classroom

But a piece of paper cannot "cause learning" simply by its existence. At least in our current model of schooling, teachers are the primary movers of the curriculum. A favorite quote for principals goes like this: "Your greatest contribution to humankind is to be sure there is a teacher in every classroom who cares that every student every day learns and grows and feels like a real human being."

A good curriculum is worthless without a teacher who can implement it in an inspiring and motivational way. And whose job is it to ensure that every classroom of students has the best possible teacher? No mystery. In fact, while curriculum writing can be widely shared and delegated, this critical task of ensuring the best teacher is a much more singular role of the principal. And from the stories I hear from colleagues, it is perhaps the most difficult of the three roles described here.

In a future article, we will share some more specific strategies for effectively fulfilling this role. But, in summary: Be sure that you have some guiding principles in place. Is your school clear about where you stand on things such as contract renewal, beliefs and practices, or the role of professional development in the retention of teachers? Do you have clear standards for what it means to be an

effective teacher in your school? Is contract renewal based on "not doing anything wrong" or on standards of excellence? Is professional growth used primarily to help mediocre teachers reach standards or to assist good teachers to become excellent?

Sharing the achievement mandate

One of the dilemmas of our current educational model is that the teacher is at the center of everything. The teacher ultimately decides what's worth learning. The teacher decides what's worth assessing and how evidence of learning will be gathered. And then the teacher decides and reports on to what extent the student has achieved the learning. Although there are some exceptions (IB, AP, IGCSE, etc.), for many teachers in many grade levels, this is the model. This places an unusually heavy burden on the teacher to get all these things 'right'.

The effective principal shoulders some of this burden by tenaciously monitoring student achievement. It is a critical role of the principal to gather evidence of student achievement . For example, an effective principals knows such things as: reading is a weak area for many students in grade three; or argumentative writing is a concern for many TOK students; or students across the middle school compute well, but are less successful in applying mathematical thinking. The effective principal will systematically gather, evaluate and act on such evidence.

That these three are complexly linked is evident . They need to be carried out simultaneously. As we have written previously in this column, the principalship, by definition, is a complex, dynamic, web-like venture. These three are not a linear formula. Pursuing any one of them "first" and waiting until it is perfected is a recipe for failure.

Although not with life and death consequences, it would be similar to an airplane pilot pursuing, one at a time, the speed, the direction and the altitude. You need to get all three right simultaneously for the plane to fly effectively.