

THE UNPRINCIPALED TEACHER

Being Your Own Administrator

By Arthur B. Devlin

How could the school run without a principal? The threat of being “sent to the principal’s office” helps keep students in line. This indispensable person spares teachers much paperwork and responsibility. The principal chairs the budget committee and prepares for school evaluations and graduation. The first-aid station is in the principal’s office, and most teachers are deeply grateful that so is the telephone.

Some people have a teacher’s job and the principal’s too, and get only one salary—the teacher’s. They are not some alien breed. They are small-schools teachers. They have the school’s telephone in their room. The first-aid station is a drawer in their desk. The most obstreperous students are no one else’s responsibility.

These amazing people willingly teach four, five, or even eight grades in one room without having anyone in the building to turn to for help. Some wonder how these teachers can continue. It is because, for the most part, they can do it. Most don’t mind it, and many frankly prefer it.

Who Must Solve the Problems?

The small school has many advantages. Doesn’t everyone secretly long to

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boss himself? No backbiting from colleagues in the teacher’s lounge. No last-minute summons to the principal’s office before going home.

However, small-schools teachers do face special challenges. In some situations “the buck stops” before it leaves the classroom. Other matters must be referred to the conference superintendent. Still others should be left with the school board chairperson. But which ones?

This article will suggest some strategies for improving the administrative skills of those who must teach and act as principal at the same time.

Small Schools and Administrative Skills

Administration is not part of every undergraduate teacher-education program. However, every teacher who has had to administer a small school will identify with the following quote:

This is a Handbook for Elementary [princi-

pals] who teach and administer elementary schools in the Seventh-day Adventist school system; [principals] who have been pushed into the position before they have had time for adequate preparation; [principals] who must teach full time and still be administrators; [principals] who must expand their program into the areas of administration, curriculum development, experimentation, community relations and supervision....¹

Try inserting “small-schools teachers” in the brackets. It reads well because it fits. Most teachers of small schools learn these skills early. In a way, they become a clique. This is not elitism but simply the cohesiveness of common experience.

The ‘Small School Survival Guide’

Administration of a small school has become easier than it used to be. Recently the North American Division produced the *Small School Survival Guide*. This manual has been well received. It fills an important gap in the teacher’s resources.

The Small School Survival Guide offers helpful suggestions about fulfilling some administrative duties. Just knowing what is expected can be a big help.

While I taught in a larger school, it was a relief to let the principal attend board meetings. However, as the only teacher in a small school, I have had to

sit through many board meetings, calculate budgets, plan building alterations, and discuss student dismissals.

In any school, innumerable decisions must be made, and the solitary teacher has no principal to guide the board in making them. To work with a board requires administrative skills. Small-schools teachers can develop these skills.

What Makes a Good Administrator?

Leadership Qualifications. With little agreement, researchers have written much about leadership. One workable definition for leadership is "causing others to want what we are doing to accomplish the work of the classroom and school."² This definition is just as applicable to the teacher's relationship with boards and pastors as with students. Combining management skills with leadership skills can help teachers in small schools to function successfully in their many roles.³

Small-schools teachers should see themselves as professionals with special expertise in a particular field. They compare well with teachers in larger schools when measured by what they accomplish. Thinking of themselves as administrators, however, may help them become even more effective.

The skills that make one a leader of students can also help smooth relations with the school-board chairperson. Both require a knowledge of the behavior of people in groups.⁴ Here are some suggestions for enhancing relations with the board or the pastor:

- Use classroom motivational skills.
- Keep a positive tone.
- Emphasize assets, not liabilities.
- Be patient.
- Make one suggestion at a time.

Administrative Concepts and Principles. Who knows the most about the day-to-day needs of the school? The teacher, of course. How does this information get communicated to the board? In larger schools the principal performs this task. What about in the one-room school?

Small-schools teachers *should* see themselves as leaders—as principals. However, the average small-school teacher, when uncertain about a particular situation, usually looks to the board or conference superintendent for guidance. But it is not feasible to call the conference about every little detail. Nor is it politic to call the board chairperson that often either.

Suggested Resources

Some excellent books on administration are listed in the references at the

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end of this paper. Obtain one or more of them, and study their concepts and principles. An especially valuable book is the *Handbook for Senior Academy Principals*.⁵ Try to obtain a copy for your personal library. It has valuable material on concepts and principles relating to administration.

The small-school teacher has only four resources: human energy, objects, money, and time.⁶ Unfortunately, it is no simple matter to allocate these scarce commodities. There is a wide diversity of opinion and authority about the best way to utilize these resources. One way to make things go more smoothly is to get people to agree. Read books and articles on the art of persuasion. This will improve your effectiveness with those who do not see eye to eye with you on some issues.

Getting Respect

The principal and the small-school teacher are both middle-management professionals. Their responsibilities lie between the superintendent of education, who makes high-level decisions, and the parents whose children will be affected by the policies.⁷

Small-schools teachers are often treated as less than professional simply because the school is small. "Bigger is better" is part of the American tradition. Boards of the smaller schools often listen less to the teacher than do those of larger schools.

How can you get the respect you deserve? Being meticulously professional helps.

- Be careful to dress professionally and appropriately, both in and out of the classroom;
- Speak deliberately, avoiding undue spontaneity; and
- Seek to be very calm in every situation.

Only when your influence is well established can you afford to be more casual or informal.

Decision Making

For every complex problem there is solution that is quick, simple, and... wrong! (H.L. Mencken)⁸

Decision-making processes have been

extensively researched.⁹ The results of this investigation can be helpful to the small-school teacher. A multitude of decisions must be made in the one-room school.

For example, if the teacher needs advice from the conference, should he or she call or write? The school treasurer wants to limit calls to the conference; they are long distance, and letters are cheaper. Board members do not know how long it takes to compose a letter and are not always in the position to evaluate the urgency of a problem.

This is the time to use the following steps in decision-making: (1) define the problem carefully; (2) examine alternative solutions; (3) select a course of action; (4) implement it. Don't forget to (5) follow up, and (6) evaluate the decision.

Communication. The *Small School Survival Guide* has some good suggestions for keeping in contact with parents. It also recommends frequent communication with the school board. Keeping board members informed can be one of your most useful strategies. Compile a loose-leaf notebook for each board member and keep it at the school. Get the minutes, financial statements, and other important papers photocopied and inserted in the notebooks before each board meeting. Board members really appreciate this.

Supervision. Small schools are often located far from the conference office. This means that teachers may see the supervisor only infrequently. To cope with this problem, several conferences have instituted mentor systems. The program developed by the Georgia-Cumberland Conference works quite well. Each new small-school teacher is assigned to an experienced teacher. The two teachers are encouraged to keep in close contact throughout the school year. This mentoring greatly enhances the effectiveness of the small-schools supervisor, and of the teachers as well.

If you do not have a mentor, find one. Ask your conference for the name of another teacher whom you can call for advice. You can't beat the "buddy system" for easing stress.

Planning. Small schools are frequently in flux. They are either growing or declining. Both progressions require special planning. My first school was on its way down. I managed to hold its enrollment stable, but it closed after the next teacher.

When I went for an interview at my last school, the board chairman said, "We think we'll have 10 students this year—maybe." By the second year we had enrolled double that number. We became a two-teacher school. The next four years brought increasing growth.

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student with necessary feedback.

Evaluation

After the project deadlines, the teacher scheduled a review session. Finally, the pupils had to successfully pass a paper-and-pencil test to obtain a minimum grade. A different test was given for each grade level. To receive an "A," the students were required to do three more projects—one from each category.

Upon completion of each unit, the students took their portfolios home. To keep parents informed, Ms. Carlton sent letters home with each unit of instruction.

Results

After implementing the new curriculum, Ms. Carlton found science teaching invigorating and enjoyable. Although the initial preparation did take some time, implementing the program required very little daily preparation.

The students' response to Ms. Carlton's new curriculum was most encouraging. They began to pressure her to let them see the next outline of projects so they could begin working on them. They asked to have science periods extended, and begged her to schedule science class more often.

With this kind of response, Ms. Carlton doesn't even mind being stopped in the supermarket anymore! □

For more information, contact the authors at the following address: School of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Loma Linda University Riverside, Riverside, CA 92515, U.S.A.

Melvin Campbell is Director of Student Teaching at Loma Linda University Riverside, Riverside, California. VirLynn Burton, a recent Zapara Award winner, has taught grades 1-8 in both single grade and multi-grade elementary classrooms. At present she teaches the fifth grade at Loma Linda Elementary School in Loma Linda, California. Together Campbell and Burton have presented science workshops for elementary teachers, and have developed an all-day out-of-doors science/social studies unit using maps and compasses.

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When I left, it was a solid two-teacher school, and financially stable.

Yet this growth was hard on the board, the church, and the teachers. For several years everyone assumed that the growth was temporary. They fretted, "Will we have to cut back, or can we continue as a two-teacher school?" Looking back, I recognize that "committee skills" were needed to deal with this uncertainty.

Consult your local libraries for books on administration and decision making to help solve problems like these.

Getting Along With Boards and Committees

Classroom management is included in every teacher-education curriculum. Educational psychology classes teach about the requirements of children's psyches. But few teachers have studied about the care and feeding of board members' self-esteem.

Combining management skills with leadership skills can help small-schools teachers to function successfully in their many roles.

Here again, the skills that have made you an effective teacher will be useful.¹⁰ Books on interpersonal skills are readily available. Read several, and try some of their suggestions. Better yet, why not ask the union education office if you can take some of your recertification courses in the area of educational administration?

Finance and Budgets

Who knows how many teacher's editions, workbooks, and paper towels it will take to run the school effectively next year? And which company's science supplies are the most teacher-

friendly? Certainly not the school board. But on every school board there seems to be at least one member who thinks "cheapest is best." There is often not a good way to deal with this member. These and similar problems are not easily solved. Use your patience skills when faced with seemingly unsolvable problems.

Recognizing the Skills of Small-Schools Teachers

Small-schools teachers' competence has been demonstrated in the superior achievement-test scores of their students. Further, experience has shown that the small-school-trained teacher can readily transfer to a larger school, but rarely is the opposite true. Perhaps the unions or the North American Division could acknowledge these special skills of the small-school teacher with an endorsement added to the regular certification.

Technical Competencies

Leadership requires at least 10 technical competencies: (1) living with unfinished business, (2) taking nothing for granted, (3) coping with unexceptional resources, (4) facing up to adverse circumstances, (5) bearing the anger and hostility of others, (6) taking criticism, (7) accepting the contribution of others, (8) working ahead of time, (9) renewing one's energy and application, and (10) taking risks.

This is a wonderful list of qualifications, the possession of which would make for terrific human beings as well as good teachers! Add to this list interpersonal and decisional leadership, and it provides a good description of the qualities needed by the small-school teacher. Many of these teachers already possess the bulk of these skills. If you feel deficient in some of these areas, some of the suggestions in this article should prove helpful.

Summary

The introduction of appropriate methods and curriculum guides have dramatically reduced the stress level of the small-school teacher. The most recent of these helps is perhaps the best of all—the *Small School Survival Guide*. Through this resource and other means the small-school teacher can obtain and develop the needed skills to deal with the challenge of administration.

The small school is alive, well, and academically sound. With a nod to Mark Twain we can say that "The reports of its death are grossly exaggerated." The

North American Division Office of Education is writing excellent materials for small schools. Thanks to this, and to advances in curriculum and instruction, our small-schools teachers can hold their own anywhere. □

Arthur B. Devlin is a graduate student in curriculum and instruction at the School of Education, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan. Before enrolling at the university, he taught for nine years in Georgia-Cumberland Conference church schools and served on the Adventist Reading Management System committee.

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- 9 Morphet, et al.
- 10 Schuster and Stewart.

BOOK REVIEWS

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Educators will find it useful to assign this book for students to discuss and to apply in personal experiences.

—Selma A. Chaj Mastrapa.

Selma A. Chaj Mastrapa is a psychologist who works at Takoma Academy in Takoma Park, Maryland. Until the fall of 1990, she was Associate Professor of Counseling Psychology in the School of Education at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan.

Rock, Calvin B., *Church Leadership: A Call to Virtue*. Boise, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1990. Paper, 96 pages, \$7.95.

The author speaks to church leaders from a broad background as a pastor, college president, and general vice-president of the General Conference of Seventh-

day Adventists. Church and educational leaders at all levels of the organizational structure will find this book to have practical appeal. It provides both a professionally and a spiritually centered discussion of the leadership needs of the late 20th century.

The author points out that today's world challenges church leaders with attitudes and perceptions unknown in the past. This calls for a distinctive type of leadership for today's church.

Rock does not downplay the importance of leaders' being on the cutting edge of technology, or the need to keep pace with scientific management techniques. However, his basic premise is that the Christian church, led by Christian workers, suffers or succeeds in proportion to the virtue of its leaders, and that today the church faces a crisis of ethics that must be resolved if God's purposes are to be fulfilled.

The book then addresses these questions: (1) What specific conditions in society make leadership increasingly difficult today? (2) What leadership traits are especially challenged by these circumstances? and (3) What, if anything, can be done to make sure that leaders acquire the virtues required by the current situation?

The book consists of nine chapters, each based upon one of the indispensable leadership qualities so necessary today. Beginning with self-confidence, Rock moves on to courage, trust, self-control, versatility, honesty, decisiveness, loyalty, and disinterested love.

Rock addresses the real problems and challenges of modern leaders by using practical illustrations from everyday life. He also draws upon personal experiences to illustrate the various virtues.

Academy and college administrators will readily identify with the situations presented. A case in point is the chapter on "Courage." How do we decide between courage and mercy? Does courage mean steadfastly applying the rules, and administering justice? Or does it mean having the courage to make an exception? Can one give a coveted second (or third or fourth) chance and still administer justice?

Rock's book is replete with situations that leaders can identify with. Illustrations, quotes, and examples buttress the original premise and lead the reader to a better understanding and a deeper commitment to more adequately fulfill his or her role in God's church.

Rock warns that virtuous leadership may or may not result in "thank you" plaques, certificates, or accolades.

But the greatest reward of all will be that of knowing that one is perpetuating in a doomed society the noble principles of our Lord. That, in the final analysis, is all we have a right to

desire to expect in this world. The promise of heaven and the earth made new will often buoy our spirits and fire our imaginations, but even these are not our ultimate stimuli. That which gives fuel to our witness and life to our souls must ever be the unfathomable, unsearchable love of Christ.

This book is highly recommended reading for all those holding leadership positions in the church or school.—Gil Plubell.

Dr. Gil Plubell is Director of the Office of Education, K-12, North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, in Silver Spring, Maryland.

OUTREACH PROGRAMS FOR SMALL SCHOOLS

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program was first piloted and then incorporated into the regular weekly schedule by Washington Conference schools. It has been further developed in the Michigan Conference. Several other conferences are also actively participating in Bible Labs. For further information about the program and materials write to Dr. Edward Norton, Associate Superintendent of Education, P.O. Box 19009, Lansing, MI 48901, U.S.A.

The Bible Labs coordinator is a church member selected by the church nominating committee. He or she gives leadership to the school's community service program. *The Bible Labs Manual*, a "How to" booklet, contains among other information the job description for this position.

Robert C. Serow, "The High School Extracurriculum: Cui Bono?" *National Association of Secondary School Principals*, 63 (April 1979), pp. 91, 92.

William M. Alexander, Galen J. Saylor, and Emmett L. Williams, *The High School* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), pp. 214, 215.

For further information on the philosophy of service see the author's dissertation: Edward M. Norton, *The Philosophy of Christian Service and Its Practice in the Seventh-day Adventist Senior Academies of the United States During the 1979-80 School Year*. Ed.D dissertation, Andrews University, 1985.

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Dr. Edward M. Norton is currently Associate Superintendent of Education for the Michigan Conference of SDA, Lansing, Michigan. His responsibilities include Bible labs, secondary staff supervision, and curriculum development. He has been an elementary and secondary teacher and principal, and has taught religion at the college level in the United States and Argentina. He served on the Washington Conference Bible Labs manual committee and on the General Conference Bible Textbook Steering Committee, and has taught several seminars and in-services on Bible labs and school service activities.