

Managing the Small School

Being Your Own Administrator

Effective administration is necessary for the successful operation of every school, regardless of size. Most larger schools in the United States have a full-time principal who is responsible for administration. Public schools also have superintendents and other personnel who share the administrative duties required to keep a school running smoothly. However, in the Seventh-day Adventist system, many elementary schools do not have a full-time administrator. A full-time classroom teacher (often referred to as a “head teacher”) is often the sole administrator. These are the people to whom this article is addressed.

Because there is little research on the administration of small schools, I have applied general principles of good administration from the perspective of my own experience as head teacher of a small school and also as superintendent of a conference with a large number of one- and two-teacher schools.

Management + Leadership = Administration

First, let’s look at some definitions. Administration includes two components, management and leadership. Management involves the day-to-day operation of the school—such things as planning and organizing. Leadership is more ethereal. It has to do with setting goals for the school and then rallying the support of constituents and employees to accomplish these goals. Most if not all administrative tasks include components of both management and leadership. And the principal (or head teacher) of a small school must keep in mind the importance of both areas if the school is to effectively carry out its mission.

Some things are the same for small schools as for larger ones, while some things are different. One



By Lyndon C. Furst

Administration includes two components, management and leadership.

of the major differences is that small schools have fewer paid personnel to carry out the complex tasks of operating a school. Usually, they can't afford to hire people to drive the bus, clean the classroom, do maintenance, type letters, send out bills, or do bookkeeping. In many small schools, the head teacher is held accountable for the accomplishment of these tasks. One person cannot possibly do a good job of teaching a multigrade classroom plus clean the room, maintain the physical plant, and do the school's clerical work. To get everything done requires a cadre of volunteers to assist the head teacher.

Managing Volunteers

Dealing with volunteers requires both leadership and management. First, the church community must be convinced that volunteers are needed; then the required skills must be identified. Next comes the work of organization. Assignments must fit the schedules of both the school and the volunteer. Some people will participate only in the yearly cleaning bee or will perform only specific tasks. For others, volunteering is a continuous commitment. Getting the maximum effort from both groups means ensuring that their as-

signments are carefully planned and organized. The head teacher must see that this is done.

The School Board

Every school has a committee or board that is responsible for its daily operations.

However, most educational policy-making is done by the conference or union K-12 boards. In some small schools, the church board doubles as the school board. In every case, the principal/head teacher serves as liaison between the school and the board. In larger schools, the board functions most effectively as a policy-making body, while the principal manages the school by carrying out the policies established by the board. This plan can work well in small schools, too, but only if the head teacher is willing and able to perform the management functions. If not, the board as a whole or an individual member must step in to manage the school. This can work, but it usually results in a lot of tension between the school and the board.

The head teacher will function most effectively if he or she provides both management of the school and leadership of the board. This means keeping in close contact with the board chair, helping to prepare the agenda for meetings, provid-





ing necessary information to enable board members to make informed decisions about each item on the agenda, and making supporting documents or information available to board members prior to the meeting. If members have had time to think about the issues prior to the meeting, the agenda will go more smoothly, and better informed decisions will result.

The board chair should be encouraged to keep meeting discussions focused on agenda items. Free-ranging discussions frequently accomplish little and result in ineffective management of the school. It's often helpful for the head teacher to discuss with the board chair recommended solutions or at least some options for dealing with every problem on the board's agenda. Providing this kind of leadership increases respect for the head teacher and makes the board both more efficient and more effective. The result is a smooth-running school and more positive relations between the head teacher and the board.

Financial Management

While most schools face financial challenges, small schools are particularly vulnerable to fiscal crises. Since most of our Adventist schools depend heavily on tuition, a family with three children that moves away can cause a major crisis in the school budget. Similarly, parents who become disgruntled with the school can wield considerable pressure by threatening to withdraw their children. Good financial management, therefore, is a vital element in administering the

While most schools face financial challenges, small schools are particularly vulnerable to fiscal crises.

small school.

Developing a realistic financial plan is essential for every school, including small schools. In reality, there is no magic in managing a school's money, and it isn't as complicated as many people think.

From my experience, three simple rules can keep any school financially stable. First, *spend less than the total income*. Second, *count the money on a regular basis*; and third, *develop policies and procedures to make sure the first two rules are followed*. In a small school, it doesn't take a lot of time to follow these rules, but it does take committed leadership and eternal vigilance.

The budget is simply a document that lays out a plan for the future by projecting anticipated income and expenses for the school year. The head teacher can exercise good leadership by projecting the expenses for the coming year and then calculating income based on expected enrollment. The school (or church) treasurer can assist in this task by providing information on the current year's income and expenditures. Many conferences have a budget form that lists the categories to be included.

In assuming responsibility for developing the budget, the head teacher can ensure that materials and equipment needed for an effective educational program are included. If the head teacher is excluded from budget planning, important curricular decisions are then made by board members who may have little understanding of the educational process.

Once a budget is adopted by the board, the head teacher

becomes the budget manager. This means that he or she must ensure that expenditures do not exceed income. Usually, the small school has very little discretionary money. The head teacher maintains credibility with the church community by doing a good job of managing available funds. Remember the first rule: *Don't spend more than you take in!*

The school treasurer should provide regular monthly reports on the financial status of the school. A wise head teacher will ask the treasurer to give him or her a copy of the report before the board meeting and be ready to explain how the money has been managed during the past month. When the head teacher is knowledgeable about the school finances, this gives the board confidence

Three simple rules can keep any school financially stable. First, spend less than the total income. Second, count the money on a regular basis; and third, develop policies and procedures to make sure the first two rules are followed.

list of skilled volunteers who are able and willing to help with routine maintenance. The board should be involved in decisions about items that require greater expertise or a major expenditure of funds.

Planning

Planning is a major and essential management function in the small school. Before the school year begins, the head teacher should identify the major events of the school calendar and plan for them. These dates must be coordinated with the church calendar to avoid conflicts and to keep the school running smoothly. For example, the school picnic should not be scheduled for the same day as a Pathfinder outing; nor would the teacher want to schedule a school program during an

evangelistic series.

Every school event, be it the opening day, a field trip, or a visit from the public-health nurse, should be carefully planned. This involves identifying needed materials and having them available in advance, analyzing the requirements of each event and placing them in the proper sequence, and assigning people to specific responsibilities. Frequent communication is needed to keep everyone informed and to make sure that no steps are forgotten. Careful planning gives everyone confidence in the administrative ability of the teacher.

Planning must be augmented by good record keeping. Plans for all school events are best recorded in writing and filed for future reference. Each year, the files can be updated and preserved for the next year's planning. The head teacher should also note any changes that would make the event run more smoothly in the future.

Marketing the School

To survive, every organization needs an effective marketing plan. Thinking of the Christian school as a business may almost seem irreverent, but if the school is to fulfill its mission, it must make known the services it offers in a way that makes it attractive to customers.

The head teacher is the key marketing agent of the school. He or she must ensure that the school not only provides a high-quality Adventist education, but also that its overall program is presented in the best light to potential recruits and constituents.

The school must not only be good, it must also *look* good. This means that the grounds and buildings must be well-maintained and that the school most provide evidence that it offers an orderly environment and optimum learning opportunities for students. High-quality instruction and extracurricular activities are essential. Furthermore, the school should



that the school operation is in good hands.

The physical plant is the biggest asset of any school, and the head teacher must take responsibility for protecting it from loss. As plant manager, the teacher should regularly inspect the facility to see that it is properly maintained. When something is broken, it should be fixed right away. Here is a good place to use volunteers. The teacher should maintain a



provide needed services to augment the formal curriculum. In business language, the school should have a good product to sell.

Before the school can provide what its “customers” want, someone needs to find out just what parents and students desire from the school. This means that the head teacher must do marketing research—at least on an informal basis. This requires that the teacher get acquainted with local church leaders, as well as with parents of current and potential students. It means discussing with them what products and services should be offered by the school. If the board is representative of the church community, it can be a valuable help in marketing and needs assessment. However, the head teacher should maintain the leadership in these areas.

Selling the school to potential customers is the next step in marketing. The head teacher should seize every opportunity to promote the school and its programs. Regularly inserting notices about the school in the church bulletin and having the students take a prominent part in church services are just two ways to do this. Scheduling church activities in the school building is another way to advertise the school’s programs. When people come to the school, they become aware of what a nice place it is for the

children, especially if the teachers and students have made a special effort to make it attractive.

Good marketing doesn’t just happen. It must be incorporated into the head teacher’s plans.

Some Concluding Thoughts

An important part of school administration is maintaining contact with other levels of the church, as well as other educational organizations. The head teacher represents the local school to the conference and, in turn, represents the conference to the school constituency. To effectively discharge this function, the head teacher must maintain good communication with the conference superintendent.

Another key person with whom the head teacher must maintain ongoing and positive contact is the local pastor. As the spiritual leader of the church community, the pastor has a keen interest in what goes on in the school.

However, the pastor has to balance the needs of the school with the other aspects of ministry in the local church. The teacher can be a real help to the pastor by being aware of the competing demands for the pastor’s attention and by supporting his or her ministry as much as possible. The head teacher should feel comfortable acting as a member of the pastor’s team and in helping to provide spiritual leadership to the church.

Adventist schools do not exist in isolation; they are part of a bigger system. The head teacher can augment his or her administrative skills by maintaining contact with principals in other Adventist schools, as well as in other private schools. These administrators are usually very receptive to contacts by Adventist educators. The head teacher will also find it helpful to maintain positive contact with the public schools, particularly in planning how to serve children with learning disabilities and physical handicaps.

This short treatise on administrative considerations in small schools is certainly not exhaustive. Rather, I have tried to identify basic principles and apply them to some critical needs at the small school. Head teachers may not think of themselves as administrators; classroom tasks consume most of their time. However, if head teachers keep in mind both their management and leadership roles, they can come to think administratively. As they do so, the school will benefit. ✍

At the time this article was written, Lyndon G. Furst, Ed.D., was Dean of Graduate Studies and a Professor of Educational Administration at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, as well as Editor of the Journal of Research on Christian Education. In his 40 years of service to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, he has been an elementary school teacher and principal, boarding academy principal, and conference superintendent of education. He also served for several years as Chair of the Andrews Academy board and is currently a trustee of the public schools in Berrien Springs, Michigan. Now “retired,” he continues to serve half-time as Dean of the Graduate School at Andrews University.

