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**TITLE: To Honor and Cherish: A Call for Encouraging Principals**

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Principals hold positions of enormous power and influence in the lives of their teachers. Their attitudes, their words, and their behavior can make the difference in a teacher's decision to stay in a particular school--or in the teaching profession. Positive, caring, encouraging principals who are concerned about the personal welfare and happiness of their teachers have a greater impact on their school's climate and their teachers' performance than they may know.

Somehow, we assume teachers are a given. I have known administrators to view them almost as interchangeable parts. A music teacher in my elementary school related how devalued she felt when her principal remarked, "Let me tell you how much any teacher is missed after she has left. Dip your finger in a cup of water, and then remove it. You can't tell the water was touched at all." Unhappily, job stress is making many teachers feel demoralized and unappreciated. Many stay only because they feel trapped financially; they would choose another career and leave teaching altogether if they had the chance. Teachers seldom receive the honor and respect many of them deserve, and as a result, their confidence and enthusiasm are eroding.

Yet schools filled with happy principals and teachers who want to stay do exist, enviable schools with little turnover and with teachers standing in line to apply for positions. Why is that? What do these rare and valuable principals do or say that sets them apart? Nancy Ichinaga, who has run an elementary school in Inglewood, California, for more than twenty-six years, is one such principal. A March 2000 article that appeared in the Los Angeles Times described her school's students as mostly Latino and African American, with three-fourths of the students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches. Yet the average teacher's stay had been sixteen years! What's Ms. Ichinaga's secret? The article quoted her as saying, "I'll give you the secret. I'm very supportive of the teachers.... I can't yell at teachers and treat them badly and then expect them to be nice to kids...."

My personal experience supports the findings of the Times article. I spent ten years at a middle school in Downey, California, with a great principal who encouraged and honored his teachers. He put a "Family" newsletter in our boxes at least once a week. It praised, by name, teachers who exhibited creativity or implemented interesting projects or assignments. Our principal might show up the day a class performed a play, praise the students for their cleverness and talent, and remind them how lucky they were to have a hard-working, dedicated teacher. Often, he would reward such students with a pizza party. The message was clear: In our school, teachers as well as students are important and valued. One spring, this principal announced that he knew teachers were growing weary and the kids were "getting to them." So he made an offer: "If you just have to go to the lounge for a twenty-minute sanity break, let me know and I'll cover your class." He followed through on that promise too. Like Nancy Ichinaga, he made both his actions and his words demonstrate that he cared about his teachers.

Educational journals comment frequently on the critical shortage of qualified teachers. Although sufficient numbers of education students seem to graduate each year, many teach less than five years--or never. What causes this attrition? Great principals like Nancy Ichinaga and

my old middle school principal have discovered the answer: they put teacher happiness high on their priority list. Their teachers, feeling respected and valued, stay. Principals can exert tremendous influence in teachers' lives, and I believe this influence has been overlooked.

#### **WHAT TEACHERS SAY ABOUT THEIR PRINCIPALS**

I pursued this subject further by asking my master's-level students for their opinions about what makes a good principal. These students have taught for two to fifteen years, range in age from twenty-five to fifty, and work in both elementary and high schools. I asked them to describe their experiences and insights regarding principals who encouraged them--and those who prompted them to fill out transfer forms. The comments, which verified my own observations from twenty years of teaching, seemed to fall into three focus areas: (1) the degree of honor and respect received from principals, (2) the principals' regard for teachers' personal lives, and (3) the principals' effectiveness and values.

Teaching can be tough, draining, and sometimes thankless work, but principals who show they value and cherish their teachers act as energizers. In describing one principal's approach, an elementary teacher emphasized: "Respect! A great principal shows respect and acknowledges success, and praises all teachers for their efforts (especially first-year teachers). She accepts teaching differences and encourages teamwork."

Another described his principal as happy and positive, one who gives pats on the back: "He does things just for the teachers. He is understanding and willing to talk with the teachers and is always visible on campus. He is helpful and will do what he has promised."

A high school teacher described his principal this way:

She is wonderful. We don't get compliments very often. However, her actions speak louder than words. For example, if a parent calls to complain about something going on in your room or with one of your students, she insists that the parent talk to the teacher first. She supports the teachers, and the parents know this. She always tells the staff what a good job we are doing. She has also talked one-on-one with me after observations and said how happy she is that I work there and that I'm doing a good job.

Another teacher summed up the impact of this respect on his own life:

No one left our school. I was there nine years with him. The day I found out that he'd been moved, I transferred out.... I had the best nine years of my life.... Gary brings out the best in you! I will model myself after him. He definitely touched my teaching career.

Discouraging, disrespectful principals were another story. One of the high school teachers said:

The principal I have plays favorites. He is unfair. He is not involved in classrooms, rarely making visitations a priority. I have even heard him talking negatively about other teachers in the staff lunchroom. Men are supreme in our school. He doesn't hold them to the same standards. It's like a boys' club.

Another described his principal as one who "talks down to teachers, in front of teachers. There is a lack of communication and a failure to stop rumors." One of the elementary teachers described her principal as a grouch: "He was unfair. Not professional! He'd say hello to some and

not to others! He assumed that being in command meant treating some people as 'inferiors.'... Only when it came to having to answer to the district or state needs (in terms of committees, agendas, etc.) would he be cordial, friendly. I hated him."

Sadly touching was the incident reported by a new elementary teacher:

My principal has a knack at being very mean when she corrects something that you do. And after one of her attacks, you completely lose motivation to contribute or help out with anything for the school. During my first year, her comments made me cry, which was devastating for me because I was so happy and proud to have my job. I guess I have toughened over the years. Now her cracks just give me a very apathetic attitude towards anything that happens schoolwide. For example, I would never organize an assembly or any program because I just want to go home. I don't want to hang out at school any longer than I have to. I will not volunteer to do anything, nothing! ... One thing that is very important--I never ever let her bitchiness interfere with my relationship with my students. [They] are the number one priority ... and I am never apathetic with them. I even teach them to respect the principal, even when it's hard to hold back my laughter.

One high school teacher told of being humiliated in front of his class by a principal whose highest priority had become his "Distinguished School" image:

During a time when custodians were still cleaning chalkboards, a day had been missed ... and I went ahead and cleaned the erasers on a pillar outside the building which left a mark of chalk dust. The following day, [the principal] came into my class very upset, called me out, and showed me the area that had chalk dust on it. He told me in a father-to-son tone to clean it immediately after school. I acted upon his request but never forgot that incident, as it belittled me in front of my students. The school at that time was receiving quite a bit of recognition, since it was fairly new and was just [cited] as a "California Distinguished School." He had never demonstrated this type of behavior to me [before], but after this incident, I left--as did over 30 percent of the teachers.

#### **CARING ABOUT TEACHERS' PERSONAL LIVES**

Many of my master's-level students balance multiple responsibilities. Their time is stretched to the maximum: they teach all day, coach after school, fix dinner, supervise baths and homework, grade papers late at night, and try to find time for a spouse--all while working to better themselves professionally. Their stress level is profound. A principal who cares about their personal lives is often critical for them. The stories and examples that these teachers gave of principals they loved were often poignant. These are just a few:

He was always there to provide advice and help. He did extra things just for the teachers, like a BBQ just to say thanks!

My principal shows interest in your personal life. She is kind and understanding, supportive and fun. Her door is always open. If you make a mistake, she lets you learn from it. There is a sense of consistent support.

My principal not only treats me as an employee but as an individual with feelings and concerns. I went into the hospital with early labor at six months. They hospitalized me for a week and then put me on bed rest. I was told, "That's it. You're off work." I called my principal, so worried

because nothing was prepped for a long-term substitute. The next week was Open House and our fourth-grade play. When she told me, "Don't worry, it's handled," I knew it really was. The first incident was when ... I went back to work a couple of days after my cousin's death... [W]hen another teacher asked how my cousin was doing, I broke down in tears and couldn't go to class. The principal took me into his office and gave me a big hug, divided up my class so I wouldn't have to teach that day, and sat and talked with me for almost an hour. He felt like a father looking out for his daughter.

Discouraging principals, on the other hand, prompted the following response:

This principal made me feel very bad about myself. Since he never once said anything about my teaching (except at the end of the year during evaluations), I was not as motivated to do much with my kids. I couldn't approach him with any ideas about supplies, field trips, conferences, etc. I was angry a lot.

An elementary teacher described her principal as "negative, demanding, insensitive, unavailable, unresponsive, and unaware." Another talked of a disappointingly similar lack of sensitivity: "My school is very low [ranked] with a high minority population. Our SAT 9 scores almost doubled. Our principal had said, 'We are going to party if we just meet our goal.' We met and doubled our goal--no word from our principal."

#### **EFFECTIVE LEADERS WITH HIGH VALUES**

Although the majority of teacher comments centered on the need for an encouraging relationship, cherishing teachers and showing interest in their personal lives are not enough. The school family lives in a relationship for six hours a day, and a competent, caring principal's values and professionalism affect teachers and flow outward to affect the attitudes and performance of the children they serve. Such principals were described as follows:

My principal is organized. Never has to hunt for papers or information. So organized that she types on her sticky notes. Strong willed. Although someone could be friendly [with her], she is able to put up a fight to get the job done or get her agenda accomplished. At my last school I used a reading program.... He did research on the program and then found the money to purchase it. This showed me he was here for the teachers and the students.

Others had principals whose lack of organizational skills make teachers feel uneasy:

Can't prioritize ... never meets deadlines ... procrastinates. [He is] ineffective and inconsistent. The principal who runs my school has his heart in the right place, but lacks the leadership to effectively run a school.

Teachers requested textbooks adopted by the district, and she didn't get them for us until we went to the district and union with our concerns. Even then, it took us almost four months into the school year to obtain the materials.

One of my high school teachers described his principal this way:

He is a man of firm beliefs and standards. You always knew where you stood with him. If he felt something smacked against his principles, he was unflinching in their defense. He was also very attentive. If you disagreed with him, you could approach him and even if he didn't agree with you, you left his office feeling good about the encounter. He had no problem showing that he was human. He was also a very hard worker. He had a vision for a school, and he shared it with us.... We were his first priority. He tried to make us feel like family--teachers and students. He was empathetic--he suffered with us.

Principals who did not exhibit strong values caused teachers much concern. On the thorny issue of student discipline, one middle school teacher said: "We have deep schoolwide issues of race wars and discipline problems. The principal is nonexistent in the classroom and on campus. Students consistently receive slaps on the wrist for altercations. The schoolwide disrespect for staff goes unpunished regularly. The principal continuously downplays incidents.... This is my last year in this school." An elementary teacher said, "Due to my principal's lack of strength, I am not willing to participate in any extra duties." One high school teacher said, "I feel for the students because they have no boundaries at home or school; however, I am leaving the district and only hope the appropriate changes are made. [The principal] makes me nervous because students are running the show."

### **CREATING MOTIVATION**

There is great pressure on principals to perform. They, like teachers, feel that more requirements and responsibilities are continually added, while little is taken away. They are pressured and often frantic and weary in this race to improve their schools. But the business-as-usual approach continues to produce unsettling, unsatisfactory results.

The business community studies ways of motivating employees. Managers know that employees who feel valued and respected are more productive, more loyal to the company, and likely to stay with that company longer. They know that constant employee turnover and retraining indicate poor business practices. Principles of motivational theory are valuable in many settings.

Teachers are encouraged to use good motivational techniques in the classroom as well. Although many views of motivation exist, most experts agree that to achieve, children need specific and immediate feedback on their work, and they need to feel that

1. they are emotionally safe in a friendly and positive environment;
2. their effort is appreciated and rewarded; and
3. success is possible. Children need a sense of "efficacy"--a sense that they are capable of success; otherwise, they may cease trying.

Teachers also need environments that are emotionally safe and friendly; enhanced feelings of efficacy; feedback that is immediate; and the reassurance that their efforts are appreciated and rewarded. In *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (1996), Albert Bandura found that a teacher's sense of efficacy is the best predictor of commitment to teaching. When teachers feel appreciated and empowered, they work harder and are satisfied in that work.

This may seem like no more than common sense. Teachers need to hear the same positive messages that motivate students or business employees. "Your room looks great," "Your students seem excited to learn," and "I appreciate your efforts" are all ways in which a principal can motivate and encourage teachers. When improvement is needed, one area can be mentioned with specific suggestions for improvement. When teachers hear positive comments on their strengths, they are more willing to do something about their areas of weakness. But teachers who year after

year receive little feedback begin to feel invisible and unnecessary.

This kind of neglect was expressed by a former student requesting a letter of reference so he could change school districts: "I'm currently in an almost 'invisible' situation as far as our administrators are concerned.... I never hear from any of them. I assume that means that they 'trust' me and everything I am doing, but it would be nice to occasionally have someone make contact. I am very pleased with what I have accomplished [and] I'd love for someone to notice this growth/progress, but nary a word."

I am reminded of a marriage that endures ongoing neglect. When one of the partners finally walks away, the other looks on in surprise and wonders what happened. Teachers who feel devalued often walk away too.

Principals can have great and positive influence in the lives of their teachers. Those who honor and cherish their teachers will reap great rewards, not only in the climate of the classrooms, but in the feeling, tone, and health of their schools. My plea to principals can be best summed up in the words of Goethe:

Treat people as if they were what they ought to be, and you help them to become what they are capable of being.

#### **ADDED MATERIAL**

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#### **REFERENCE**

Bandura, A. 1996. *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*. New York: Freeman.