

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 123 808

EA 008 369

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 TITLE The Principal and the Community.  
 PUB DATE 25 Apr 76  
 NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (Atlantic City, New Jersey, April 24-28, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS Community; \*Community Education; \*Community Involvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Principals; \*School Community Relationship  
 IDENTIFIERS \*Corcoran School (Minneapolis).

ABSTRACT

The evolution of a run-down inner city elementary school into a flourishing community school is documented by its principal. By going out into the community and visiting in parents' homes, this principal built a base of support for innovations, such as individualized instruction and tutoring, as well as a lunch and breakfast program. Student academic performance improved, and discipline problems (including vandalism) declined. (DS)

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THE PRINCIPAL AND THE COMMUNITY

Kenneth A. Schumack

PRESENTATION AT THE BICENTENNIAL CONVENTION

OF THE

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Atlantic City, New Jersey

April 25, 1976

This morning I am very pleased to speak with you about the role of the principal in community relations. Involvement -- how to get people involved in a society where time is at a premium, where there is the rush-rush, hurry-hurry, I-could-care-less attitude that prevails in many American communities today. Throw in the factor of people involved in just making ends meet in today's inflationary economy, and we have a real problem.

Each of us come from separate and distinct communities that are unique unto themselves, so the suggestions I would present to you are some I hope you'll be able to adapt to your educational setting.

One of the guidelines suggested by educational institutions in the training of administrators is "go slow", "don't rock the boat", "don't make waves". Whoever developed this line of thinking either wasn't a sailor or he was content to go nowhere.

Think back to your first principalship and recall the waves you made.

The first year I came to Corcoran School in Minneapolis, Minnesota was without doubt one of the most moving experiences of my short career. When I say "moving" I must qualify that remark by saying that --

- a dozen of the twenty-two teachers decided to transfer that fall.
- the school secretary decided to move.
- the social worker left.
- the physical education teacher left.
- and, to top matters, even the school engineer decided to move to greener pastures.

I pass along these facts with the knowledge that you'll discover, as I did, that not all persons can or should come along with you and your educational philosophy. First of all, to be the educational leader in your community you must know where you're going. Sounds simple -- but in reality, not so. We are all in this profession to

help children. How we do this, however, and to what extent we facilitate the education of children, marks us as an administrator. Are we as administrators willing to innovate as we look at the needs of the school, of children, and of the community? There are administrators that operate on the principle that it is easier to ask for forgiveness than it is to seek and gain approval for an innovative program.

Walk, walk, walk in your community. Talk with the children and visit with their parents. It is from this simple, but basic idea, that many of the needs of your community can be discerned. We speak of islands of education and this is so true of our schools where personnel drive in each day and leave each day with no knowledge of what takes place in that community, but only what happens in their school building. Some might say, "Isn't it the school building where the learning takes place?" The truth of the fact is that only a small portion of the child's learning takes place inside of the school building, and most of that is contingent on what took place in that child's home before he came to school or what happened to him in his community in the evening.

I resolved as an administrator to spend a portion of my day -- morning, noon, after school, and on occasion evenings -- in my school community to see what made it tick. I needed the support of the staff because I knew I wouldn't be available in the office where it is customary for the school principal to be. I assured the staff we were expanding the perimeters of our building and we would cut discipline problems 50%. It didn't turn out that way. In the next few years discipline problems diminished closer to 85 - 90%.

Our school was an old building with 750 children located in the so-called inner city -- an extremely high crime rate area, low income, and high incidence of single parent families.

As I talked with parents that first year, it became evident that one of their greatest concerns was the fact that the school had no lunch program of any type for the children. A survey had been taken of parents a few years before and 98% of the parents had hoped for a bag-lunch program. A hot lunch program because of cost, was out of the question. I assured parents we would have a lunch program that year. So began the politics of fulfilling a community need. Politics? Yes, for unfortunately the needs of schools or children aren't easily perceived by those not on the school scene. Armed with statistics and parent support, a request was made -- not for a bag-lunch program -- but for a hot lunch program which is what our community really needed. I'm sure that those of you who come from low social economic areas realize the pitfalls of the brown bag lunch program. Bag lunches range in scope from attractive, nutritious lunches to the hard sandwich, or no sandwich at all. Wonder of wonders -- I received support from a ranking school official who would deliver the program we so desperately needed! If only I could obtain staff support for the new program:

Could I convince staff members to shift from a lunch period of one hour and fifteen minutes to a lunch period of 30 minutes? You'll recall that 12 of the 22 teachers were interviewed by me for positions that fall, and I was certain where their priorities lay for the welfare of the children. I went individually to the other staff members and presented the problems and the benefits as I saw them. When we voted as a staff it was unanimous that all would support the new

lunch program. A lot of leg-work to move a program? Of course, but success was vital!

As I talk with you this morning, I often use the pronoun "I" and for this I must apologize. You as an administrator would be wise to forget the "I" and concentrate on "we". The staff and community obtained a hot lunch program for our children -- that is the important fact. You need the commitment of all staff -- for they, as well as the community -- must share the pride of ownership in the program. We were on our way!

A short time later a state department official came in to view our most successful lunch program and asked "Could you find help to serve these children a free breakfast for those who qualify?" "Absolutely," I assured him. When the first cereal, milk and fruit was delivered, breakfast was served that morning to approximately 100 needy children -- older children helping the younger ones, for after all, isn't this the way things are done at home? The breakfast program rapidly grew to 250 children and I needed adult help. No longer was I able to be out in the community in the mornings. I needed help and requested it from mothers in the community. The program made sense, and that I emphasized, so volunteers came in to help serve and supervise. The school superintendent was invited to breakfast with our children. Politics again? Yes, but things were happening for our children!

The basement room where we served our food had not been painted in over twenty years so it was dark and dirty. The Board of Education was requested to paint it -- but, we were far down on the waiting list. I went to the parents and a meeting was held to see what we could do. The Parents Club held a huge rummage sale at the school and we raised almost \$100 to buy paint. Two designers

who had set up shop in the community came up with a painting plan complete with beautiful graphics. Somehow or other, the Board received word of our painting endeavors. Hadn't I heard of unions, liability, work codes, etc., etc.? To this I replied "The schools belong to the people". The Superintendent requested community involvement and this was it at the grass roots level. The Friday before the Saturday our parent work-force was to begin its' work, the superintendent in charge of business affairs proclaimed our lunchroom would be painted by the board painter with Board of Education paint. Even the graphics would be put on the walls!

Involvement and group pressure to get things done? Absolutely! Our philosophy of school and community was rapidly expanding as the tenet "Hungry children can't learn effectively" and group cohesion had become a part of that philosophy.

The food program brought an added dividend that was unique unto itself in the form of "Old Sam". "Old Sam" was a non-descript form of dog who was lured to our school by the left-over remains of school lunches. Somehow he found his way into the building and worked his way into the hearts of our children and staff. He lounged in the hallways and classrooms and now the school had a community mascot -- and woe be to any other dog who ventured close to Sam's domain. I recall one day when a visiting nurse was going to call the dog pound to pick up the dog in the school building. "Maam, you almost committed the most unpardonable of all sins and 700 plus souls would hate you forever if you do that." She spoke quickly of rules, laws and regulations; but, of course, never called.

At the same time as the expansion of our food program, we were examining the progress of our children and were becoming more aware of our failure to meet the

educational needs of many of our children. Attempting to individualize for the wide range of educational needs in our program required much needed help. We looked to the community to help us in this need.

Picture our elementary school located on 34th Street. On 32nd Street is a senior high school with approximately 1,500 pupils and on 36th Street is a junior high school with 1,200 pupils. Sandwiched between the drag strip is our elementary school. How to turn a liability into an asset? The senior high principal and the junior high principal readily permitted me to talk to their pupils. The response from youngsters who craved the need to help others, particularly young children, was overwhelming. We developed a cadre of tutors whose presence we enjoy to this day.

We opened the gym of our school to these high school students with only two stipulations -- no smoking, and leave when the engineer asks. Vandalism had become an item of the past as people were developing an awareness as to what our school was about. To some extent we were over-successful in our tutoring program. One of our high school pupils tutored for us for two years, but yet never attended a day of class in his own school.

Senior citizens came in and sat down beside the high school youths in tutoring our children. The University of Minnesota contributed 40 College of Education juniors who tutored our children as part of their course work. Augsburg College sent 15 pupils to help tutor. Parents, who were members of our parent group, made reading tutoring a part of their group meetings -- and still, we needed more help as we attempted to individualize for our children.

When the local drug rehabilitation program approached me with the offer of full-time volunteer persons to do anything we needed, I hesitated. You recall we

were close to the senior and junior high schools where drugs were a real problem and, in addition, we were adjacent to the counter-culture of our city. The people in our community not only hated, but feared drugs. I asked the director what other schools were using his volunteers. "None", he replied, "but these people need a chance to prove themselves". The following Monday he brought three young persons in their early twenties to my office. They would volunteer full-time, five days a week. They did a beautiful job, those first three, and we continue using the program to this day. A wise decision, you might say. I pray so, for the decision is that of the principal alone, and it is a decision that daily hangs in doubt.

A milepost of success was mirrored in the want ads of a daily paper when I read the advertisement for a home which stated "Close to Corcoran School". Our school engineer sold his home in a more affluent neighborhood so his children might attend our school. Our individualization was beginning to show dramatic results. Primary children were testing with the top five schools in the city. Our staff believed in themselves and the transfer of teachers, which marks inner-city schools, came to a screeching halt as no teachers transferred for the next five years.

Teachers had become totally involved in our community venture as evidenced by their involvement in after-school activities. Classrooms became meeting rooms for our parents engaged by educational and leisure-time pursuits. Parents utilized our facilities for volleyball, weight-watching, basketball, square dancing and so forth. The school day seemed to move with a continuity as day time activities flowed into evening. (Of course there was a full-time after school program for children -- wrestling, crafts, etc.)

Teachers brought community persons into their classrooms as resource to demonstrate interests, vocations, skills, business skills as well as expertise in certain areas. It became a two-way educational street for many of these adults for although they came to school to share their vocation with us, they usually left with a feeling of appreciation for the youth in their community.

Parents with exceptional children requested transfer of their children to our school because word-of-mouth had spread of staff concern for children. Children with special needs and handicaps were mainstreamed with a tremendous drain on building personnel and resources. One of the most dramatic cases I can recall is one of our mothers bringing her five-year old daughter to school and asking if we would take her in our program knowing she might die during the school day with cancer of her kidneys. The girl was doomed, but mother wanted her daughter to know the enjoyment of learning and of knowing other children. Her teachers were alerted as to what to be aware of when a hemorrhage came on, and a pre-arranged bell signal was devised so I might be on the scene and give first aid. Kathy didn't die that first year, nor the second. She came to school daily, despite the changes in skin color as her kidneys rebelled and struggled with the dreaded disease. Often she bloated up as the kidneys could not perform their function, but still she came. In her fourth summer with us, Kathy passed silently away. The small, brown-eyed child was gone, but her memory lingered on as an inspiration to peers of a child who truly loved school.

Not all community involvement was limited to the four walls of our school. Our children were menaced by a traffic hazard on a busy street two blocks from our school. The street proved to be a state highway on which to get a lighted semaphore, to quote a state official, would take an act of God plus \$16,000. Meetings were held and parents were mobilized into action. Parents called the local alderman 24 hours per day on the hour. He called me and said "Schumack, can't you get these people off my back?" "Sure", I replied, "get us our semaphore". A short time later it appeared magically on the corner blinking its bright testimonial colors to our local alderman who really cared about his people. He remains a strong supporter of the community school to this day.

The local park board gave us a skating rink for winter use and a wading pool for summer use because 400 of our parents needed it for their children. One of the natural wonders of local government is that they want to help their citizens, but sometimes they must be encouraged to do so. Four hundred seems like a good round number when making a request, and no public official wants to be in a position of denying services to boys and girls.

Providing reading materials for our school became a community challenge. There was not a library within walking distance of our school and many of our parents didn't drive. Our school library was opened to community use and junior high pupils became our after-hours librarians. By now we had developed the thought -- once you have been a pupil at our school it's part of your responsibility to come back and help. We emptied the shelves of our bookroom and lined the hallways with usable books for children to take home by way of the honor system. The Public Library responded to our needs with a Bookmobile on a weekly basis. The parent group held an auction and the proceeds were used to buy paperback books which

were stocked in our paperback book library. The paperback book library was a reconverted room, scrubbed immaculately by our head engineer, who, you recall was now one of our parents. The library was staffed by the principal and volunteer parents.

The kindergarten teachers and the principal started a pre-school orientation for prospective kindergarten children in which the adults came in and sat along side of their children in the library. A mini-course of kindergarten activities, plus the stimulation of books in conjunction with school was offered. Parents were exhorted to read to and with their children. Of course, all youngsters left the library with their very own book.

All of these so-called innovations with books might have raised the ire of a typical building librarian, but we were extremely fortunate to have as librarian a beautiful person by the name of Helen Gaye. Helen loved books, but more important she loved sharing this feeling with children. Helen was a rather difficult person to get to know those first couple of years. She did not eat with the staff, but she did work well with community people. In fact it was during one of my infrequent visits to the staff lunchroom when a few teachers remarked "It is getting difficult to locate books in the library by the Dewey Decimal System" and asked if I would speak to Helen. I went down to the library and was starting to go in the door when I noticed a small group of children seated around my librarian. Two little ones were craddled, one in each arm (she was a large woman), and she was telling a fairy tale. I motioned one of the older children to come into the hall and asked "what's happening?" I knew it was Helen's lunch hour. "Oh" he said, "Mrs. Happy tells us stories everyday". Mrs. Happy -- Mrs. Gaye. Needless to say I

forgot why I ever went down to the library. Helen became deathly ill at Christmas break and passed away a few short months later with lung cancer. I visited her during her last days as she was suffering terribly. Her eyes beckoned me to come closer and she whispered softly, "I reached children, didn't I?"

As Helen reached children, so the problem of reaching Native American or Indian children posed a problem for our school. The survival rate for these children is astonishingly low in comparison with any minority or socio-economic group. The children appeared to be turned off in school many years before it was legal for them to drop out. Adult participation was extremely difficult to obtain.

We launched an all-out program to reach these children and their parents. Title IV supplied us with funds to hire two Native American persons and they proved to be a key in our program. With their help we literally pushed out into the community and brought parents into the school. A pow-wow or party was held for the parents of our 150 Native American children. We established a parent club that met weekly. A tennis and overshoe fund was started. We began a culture group for children and an Ojibway language class. One of our primary children gave the invocation for our new school building in his Native American language when it opened last fall.

These facets of the program were important, but even more so was the high level of trust and human interaction that had developed between the school and our parents. My two aides who gave countless hugs, wiped away tears, gave children and parents rides, and interpreted programs to our parents. The parent trust I feel was best exemplified by a call I received from one of our Native American parents. "I have a personal problem" the call started. I knew the caller was a good friend

of our two aides -- so I asked if she would feel more comfortable speaking to them. "No, you are the leader and I have faith in you." She went on to relate a cultural problem and a request that I am not sure I truly understood, but I have learned how to listen. Learning to listen and to learn there are many avenues in cultural development that we must walk, in order to effectively reach all persons.

As hiring the right persons in our Native American program was so important, so, too, does the principal's prerogative or voice in hiring practices become an extremely effective tool in developing community relations. Who do you hire for aide positions in your school? Hopefully, high on your criteria for any position, are parents or children in your program and at the very least one would employ residents of the community in which your school resides.

Our reporting system took on a new meaning for children, parents and staff. We realized our report card system was outmoded. Parents often didn't understand it or it didn't tell what we wanted to say. We tried conferences for all of our reporting. When parents couldn't come to the school, the staff went to the parents. Teachers were encouraged to make home visits by excusing all teachers from after-school activities who accompanied a child home and talked to his parents. High points of satisfaction were to visit a home on a neighborhood walk and find one of my staff already there.

We stressed community pride, community involvement, a belief in our school, our educational process. Then came the District Judge's decision to close our neighborhood school and begin anew with a new educational complex built for integration purposes. Now would come the acid test. Could we transfer the feelings of our small neighborhood into an expanded community environment?

Four hundred persons were packed into our gymnasium for a meeting that was to announce the closing of our school and the busing of our pupils to implement a court-ordered desegregation mandate.

Feelings were running high, to put it mildly, and I had fears and apprehensions as I and a member of central administration struggled to present the outline of steps to close our community school. A woman came up to me before the presentation began and said, "You knew me when I carried my child in pregnancy and now you want to bus her! Why? Why?" The thought "how did I ever become so involved with this community that I have become a part of it" struck me. Oh, to be like the educational expert from the central office and deal with these people in an objective way! In the next 180 minutes I learned many things. When the visiting administrator attempted to explain procedure he was overwhelmed with hostility. No way could I help him get his points across. When I spoke utilizing his same points there was a deadly silence -- not acceptance or rejection, as far as I could tell -- but people listened. One of the fathers exclaimed "Schumack, you know we can't scream at you". Our desegregation effort did go smoothly, I am happy to report, and I credit much of its success to total community involvement.

It takes a high degree of community inter-action of person to person, an opportunity for people to be heard, something to believe in, and -- above all -- it takes the commitment of time -- time coupled with purpose. We haven't reached our goal as yet, but we are working at it. It is as simple as that!

A few short years ago, or so it seems, I happened to be at Jasper Park in Alberta, Canada. As I was walking down the street an extremely tall man, head encased in a turban, approached me and asked for directions. My small

son tugged at my hand and to my embarrassment kept asking "Daddy, daddy, who is he?" The tall man bent over and spoke to my son and I will never forget his words. "I am just a man, just a human being like your Daddy!"