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ABSTRACT

Strategies for principals in supervising marginal teachers are described. Procedures for handling three types of marginal teachers are addressed, which depend on the causes of teacher ineffectiveness. Causes include lack of training, personal problems, and poor attitude. Conclusions are that principal action is necessary to maintain school excellence and respect of the school staff. (LMI)

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# HERE'S HOW

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

## Supervising the Marginal Teacher

Don Fuhr

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# HERE'S HOW

NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

## Supervising the Marginal Teacher

Don Fuhr

**P**rin cip als don't like to talk about the marginal or the incompetent teacher. We don't like to admit that they're on our staffs. It doesn't look good.

But the fact remains that in a public service activity as large as education (over 2.6 million teachers in public and private K-12 classrooms), we're bound to have a number of people who perform below any acceptable level of competence.

Many school administrators rank the task of supervising the marginal teacher as being one of the toughest challenges they face in their quest for educational excellence among their teaching staffs. The challenge exists for two reasons: (1) some school principals were simply never trained to deal with the problem of the marginal performer, and (2) some principals can't get the kind of cooperation and support they need from others on their staff or from their own bosses in the district office. Consequently, many marginal teachers drift in and out of school buildings each day

causing frustration among students, faculty, and administrators.

### What Do You Call "Marginal"?

Who is the "marginal teacher" anyway?

A marginal teacher is one whose performance borders on incompetency, but who is not incompetent. Many principals call this person a "fence rider," a teacher whose classroom performance vacillates between good and bad—but mostly it's bad.

To protect themselves from dismissal, marginal teachers usually do just enough to get by. And they can because they are essentially competent people. When they're up for review or evaluation, they can—and will—raise their performance enough to be judged "average." But in the days following the evaluation, they will slip back once again into their chronic pattern of poor teaching.

### The Ripple Effect

No school can afford poor teaching by anyone. We can excuse the conscientious teacher of average or better ability who, now and then, has a "bad

day." If it doesn't become a habit, we can make allowances for that.

But chronically poor teaching by marginal staff is especially damaging to a school in many ways. There is overwhelming evidence from research to indicate that poor teaching materially contributes to the student dropout rate. Inept and ill-prepared teachers also lose control of their classrooms. Their mounting discipline problems generate a ripple effect: students don't learn, colleagues are ashamed of them and angry, parents become upset, and the school loses the full confidence and support of the community.

If the community sees that a school—in particular, its principal—is doing nothing about a bad teacher, the community may gradually withdraw its support from that school. In fact, many principals will admit that the question parents raise over and over again is this. "How do you intend to get rid of bad teachers?"

Actually, at a time when so many schools face teacher shortages, that's not a good question. A much better question is this: "What can you do—as the principal and supervisor—to bring marginal teachers up to an acceptable daily level of competence and keep them on the job?"

In fact, that's the first of three key

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issues the principal must face, if he or she intends to properly supervise marginal teachers:

**Issue #1: The teachers you dismiss don't cause you problems. But the teachers you *should* dismiss—and don't—will cause you problems.**

**Issue #2: You can't manage effectively and motivate others to succeed, when you back away from correcting the human mistakes made by a few marginal teachers.**

**Issue #3: Being an effective school leader includes the supervision of marginal performers, and that will undoubtedly make you unpopular from time to time—but not as unpopular as if you did not supervise them at all.**

The next question is this: What do you do with marginal teachers? You can't ignore them. Ignoring them usually means their performance will get worse, if that's possible.

But before you decide to take action, you must first make sure that the individuals under scrutiny do indeed have the characteristics that distinguish the marginal teacher from most others.

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### Three General Types

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I find that marginal teachers usually have one or another of these three general characteristics:

*First*, there's the marginal teacher who doesn't grasp the basic techniques required for effective teaching. It may be because of poor training—or of good training that was never absorbed. In either case, this teacher is not lost forever to education; help is possible; the condition can be reversed.

*Second* is the marginal teacher who is competent and willing to do a good job; but, for some serious and deeply affecting personal reason, this person has begun to exhibit chronic inadequacies as a classroom leader and has slipped into the category of being marginal.

The personal reason may be very difficult to overcome; but here again the teacher's good qualities might be re-

claimed and she or he be returned to the status of a quality performer.

The *third* type is the most difficult. This is the marginal teacher who has developed what is called "an attitude." Such a teacher usually knows what is expected—but refuses to do it. No real reason. Just doesn't want to.

So what does a principal do? How do you address a *lack of training, personal problems, or a poor attitude* on the part of a marginal teacher?

The starting point here, as in most other management problems, is to put down on paper a plan that specifies what is to be done.

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### When the Problem Is Poor Training

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Unfortunately, a teacher may here and there receive state certification without anyone checking to see if the individual can actually teach. Merely passing courses is not good enough. Although we'd like to believe otherwise, the fact of the matter is that many student teaching programs in our colleges and universities are not by themselves valid criteria by which to judge a person's teaching potential.

If the problem stems from the fact that a marginal teacher had poor classroom training (despite a good academic record), then the principal should be prepared to provide constructive coaching and good direction for professional growth.

A folder full of reprimands won't do any good. But supportive supervision will.

Here's a simple plan for supervising the teacher who is marginal because of a lack of proper training.

1. Observe the teacher and then have a conference to talk about what you saw.

2. Together determine what the major problem area or areas seem to be: mastery of subject, lesson planning, student rapport, or whatever.

3. Together work out a strategy for helping the individual overcome his or her training deficit and become a good teacher.

4. Incorporate functional approaches, such as the following:

- a. Peer coaching from a mentor/colleague on staff

- b. Student perceptions or ratings if possible.
- c. Video taping or audio taping one or more classes
- d. Use of some quick and simple analysis instrument, such as Flander's Interaction Analysis
- e. Attendance at an outside training seminar or workshop.

5. Sit down together and jointly establish weekly expectations or goals. (For these and other kinds of meetings mentioned here, make sure you have a written record of what is discussed and decided. Both you and the teacher should sign that record. It should be filed but be accessible and consulted during evaluations.)

6. Visit the classroom at least once a week to see if the teacher is making progress.

7. Have a weekly session to review progress, according to the agreed-upon expectations and goals.

8. Be ready with praise whenever it's appropriate and genuine. But if things aren't going well, be just as prepared to re-direct the teacher into a potentially more fruitful avenue.

9. Keep your own boss informed. We should always hope for the best . . . but we must be prepared for the worst. If the marginal teacher makes no substantial improvement and remains a marginal member of the staff, you will need your boss's help for the next step, which could well be the first step in the process of dismissal.

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### When the Problem Is Personal

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In the second category is the teacher who is marginal because of a pressing personal problem. Something in the teacher's environment, usually outside the classroom, is affecting his or her performance.

Among the more common reasons are these: someone close has a serious illness (spouse, parent, child, or best friend), the teacher is in the midst of a separation or divorce, or the individual's financial status has taken an unexpected plunge. A teacher with any one of these problems—or another of similar consequence—can quickly slide from being a good or even an excellent

performer to being a disaster.

In most cases of this type, a teacher wants a sympathetic ear, not a sympathetic mouth. You can and should offer a few vital, genuine words of encouragement, support, respect, and affection. But keep it to that.

Encouragement is the key. I recall many conferences with such marginal teachers. After I'd listened to their problems and expressed my continued support, they would leave my office and the very next day get out of their marginal slump and demonstrate once again their ability to be excellent teachers. All they had needed was for someone, especially their principal, to listen and to offer a few words of encouragement.

Most teachers in this category are temporarily out of joint. Show them your genuine support and respect and they'll pull themselves together. But that doesn't mean their problems are solved nor their marginal status is forever behind them. As a safeguard for them as well as for you and your program, you should come up with at least a minimal plan of corrective action.

Here's an example of one:

1. Observe the teacher in the classroom, then have a sympathetic conference in which you do most of the attentive listening.
2. Be short on advice and long on encouragement.
3. Together talk about your joint expectations for improvement.
4. Continue your classroom visits, but keep them brief and informal. Don't send a wrong antagonistic signal to either the teacher or his or her students.
5. Carefully record your notes of these visits and meetings, then jointly sign them for the record. Make sure you and the teacher understand that this record is not a punitive weapon but rather a way for each of you to chart the progress you both want.
6. Be ready with praise and encouragement but, when appropriate, provide guidance for re-direction as well.
7. Personal problems are just that: personal. If you realize that a teacher is performing at a marginal level because of a personal problem, don't go any further unless you are prepared to maintain strict confidentiality: sealed

notes and sealed lips. Being worried sick about a personal problem is burden enough for any teacher, finding out that one's colleagues have heard all about it is an additional and often unbearable burden. Don't let that happen.

8. And that raises the question as to whether or not a principal should report any of this to the district office. I lean toward saying, no, don't do it. Maintain that promise of confidentiality. If, however, you suspect that your kindness is being abused or that the teacher is making no progress despite the expenditure of much time and effort, then—after informing the teacher beforehand—you ought to share your information with your boss. If things don't improve, you'll need to bring the district office into the picture on something other than a last-minute, panic basis.

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#### When the Problem Is Attitude

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The third general category, and the one with the greatest number of marginal teachers, has to do with a teacher's chronically negative attitude.

A teacher with an attitude problem must be confronted and dealt with at once, because a negative attitude on the part of any one staff member can spread like an infectious disease among the rest of the school staff.

As soon as possible, sit down in a private conference and get all your information—and your feelings—out on the table between you. (For guidance on "constructive confrontation," see the Vol. 8, No. 6, June 1990 issue of *Here's How*.—Editor) This conference is going to appear in the record as a reprimand; there's no way around it and the teacher has to know that. But it's also important to make clear that the reprimand is for specific actions or practices in the classroom, it is not a reprimand for being a "bad person."

The key to supervising the marginal teacher with an attitude problem is to tell the teacher *immediately and specifically* what he or she is doing wrong. You must also indicate the kind of improvements you want to see in attitude and in classroom performance, and you must clearly indicate that you expect these improvements to occur.

A principal is a supervisor, not a psychotherapist or a parole officer. It's not your job to advise the marginal teacher on ways to correct a chronically destructive attitude. The individual teacher has to be responsible for that. If the teacher cannot handle that responsibility, that in itself is the signal for you to start the process for dismissal.

In the interim, there are some things that should be in your plan of action for dealing with this type of marginal teacher.

1. Observe the teacher in class, verify the presence of a chronically poor attitude, then call a conference to indicate your unhappiness (the reprimand) and to spell out the particular areas in which you believe the teacher is demonstrating a negative attitude.

2. Write out what you believe are reasonable expectations for improvement and set realistic goals for incremental weekly improvement. (Here as elsewhere, you have to set time limits on how long a teacher's marginal performance can continue unchanged. Neither you nor anyone else on your staff has an infinity of patience.)

3. Require evidence of immediate improvement.

4. Set up a schedule of brief but frequent visits to the teacher's classroom. Allow for several random, unscheduled visits as well.

5. Again, get all this down in writing and make sure you both sign it for the record. This may be the toughest part of the whole process because teachers with a chronically poor attitude are almost by definition averse to committing themselves to anything. However, if you

#### PROFESSIONAL ADVISORY

This article is in support of the following *Standards for Quality Elementary and Middle Schools* (NAESP, 1990, Revised). LEADERSHIP (a principal does what's necessary for a school to reach its goals), INSTRUCTION (teachers plan and provide effective instruction), and EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT (teachers are evaluated according to a fair and systematic procedure). It is also in support of the SUPERVISORY PROFICIENCY (a principal assesses teaching methods, monitors instruction, and evaluates teacher performance) as given in *Proficiency for Principals* (NAESP, 1986).

and well known policy of marginal teachers to sign off on their professional improvement plans, you're not being discriminatory or vindictive when you ask for the signature of a teacher with a chronically bad attitude.

If the teacher won't sign, that, too, is a signal to start the wheels turning for dismissal.

6. But assuming the individual does sign, then proceed as in the previous cases: offer praise for improvement and, where appropriate, provide guidance for the re-direction of effort.

7. In these kinds of cases, it is essential to keep your boss informed. A marginal teacher with a chronically bad attitude can be a walking time-bomb in your school and in your district.

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### Why Bother?

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The motivation behind a principal's concern about a marginal teacher is the same motivation that keeps that principal coming to school every day: doing what's best for students.

But what happens if "the best" just doesn't seem possible with one of your marginal teachers? What happens if the carefully drawn plan for improvement

generates no improvement after all?

I suggest you call the marginal teacher into your office and deliver this message: "You have many fine qualities, but unfortunately they aren't related to teaching. Therefore, I cannot recommend that your contract be renewed next year. I advise you to do some new and serious career planning. I wish you the very best luck in finding a new position, and—wherever possible—I will assist you in moving on to a new career."

If the individual is close to—or actually eligible for—retirement, you might say, "I will be glad to explore various retirement options with you if you wish. The choice, of course, must be yours alone. But I do stand ready to help." Or words to that effect.

This is a sensitive area and you should seek the guidance of your district office on the precisely acceptable language you can use.

The American elementary or middle school is doing work that is just too important to be disrupted or compromised by the occasional marginal teacher. Marginal performers may be upset when you confront them and try to make them deal with their problems. But their upset will only be temporary. On the other hand, your top performers

will be upset permanently, if marginal teachers are simply ignored.

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### A Professional Priority

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The issue of marginal-teaching must become a top management priority for elementary and middle school principals, as they try to meet the demands of today's world of education. Unfortunately, there will always be a certain number of marginal teachers, no matter how effective the school leadership is. Our challenge is to keep that number as small as possible.

But we are not alone. Every profession—law, medicine, pharmacy, the clergy—they, too, have their share of marginal performers. And they, the same as we, are also struggling to improve accountability within their respective professions in order to reduce and, if possible, eliminate altogether their marginal performers.

We must keep our eyes on the high end of the teaching spectrum and strive for excellence from our teaching staffs. At the same time, we must also be aware of what's happening at the low end of the teaching spectrum and strive to reduce marginal teaching wherever it occurs in our schools. □

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