

# 1 WHO NEEDS LESSON PLANS?

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Federal mandates imposed on elementary and secondary schools are often viewed negatively by local administrators and teachers for at least two reasons. First, the directives almost always are inadequately funded; second, they are considered contraventions of local control. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), an extension of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 that was signed into law in January 2002, is a quintessential example. Proponents argue, however, that the legislation actually emphasizes local control, provides flexibility for local officials, and promotes parental involvement.

The intent of NCLB is to raise the educational performance of all students by setting higher standards, requiring annual testing, using test data analysis to ensure progress, and imposing rewards and penalties for outcomes (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). Students in grades 3 through 8 must be tested each year in reading, mathematics, and science, and schools must demonstrate adequate yearly progress. All special student groups (e.g., by ethnicity, socioeconomic status) must report progress separately. At least 95% of each of these groups must be tested, and if one subgroup fails to make yearly progress, the school as a whole fails. In addition, NCLB requires administrators and teachers to (a) collect assessment data, (b) disaggregate those data by student groups, and (c) develop explicit plans for meeting the needs of students, especially those exhibiting low achievement (Protheroe, Shellard, & Turner, 2003).

This case is about a principal who assumed the leadership role in a troubled school. She quickly discovered that the teachers had little interest in pursuing change, and they were bitter because the previous principal was dismissed. As you read this case, pay particular attention to evidence that reveals the nature of the school's culture.

Culture constitutes the symbolic dimension of a school's climate. Climate is a characteristic that causes us to feel the way we do about an institution; in this vein, it is analogous to an individual's personality (Hanson, 2003). Culture consists of shared values and beliefs; it provides an invisible framework of guiding standards intended to influence employee behavior—especially in relation to solving common problems. The guiding standards are nested in assumptions about what people in the organization hold to be true, sensible, and possible (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). Although school cultures are not easily changed, scholars (e.g., Fullan, 2005; Sarason, 1996) have concluded that improvement in low-performing schools will not occur without such transitions.

One reason why culture is so difficult to change is that underlying beliefs creating internal conflict for educators are often suppressed mentally but expressed behaviorally. This is particularly true when assumptions are known to be incongruent with the profession's knowledge base or with a community's prevailing philosophy. Even when not suppressed,

educators are usually unwilling to admit that they abide by such assumptions (Kowalski, 2003). When all or most teachers share the same assumptions, the culture is said to be “strong.” When all or most of the assumptions shared are congruent with the profession’s knowledge base, the culture is said to be “positive” (Kowalski, 2006).

### Key Areas for Reflection

1. Federal involvement in public elementary and secondary education in general, and NCLB specifically
2. School culture
3. Lesson planning
4. Change in school leadership
5. Changing unproductive values and beliefs about students

### THE CASE

After she became principal of Buchanan Elementary School 2 years ago, Maureen Hulbert knew she had assumed a difficult assignment. The school is in an economically depressed school district, the Harper City Community Schools. As she sat in her silent office on a cold, rainy November day, she reflected on her brief tenure in the troubled school.

#### Harper City

The population in Harper City has declined by more than 20% over the last 25 years. The largest outmigration of residents occurred in the early 1980s after a steel company closed its plant there. At its peak level of operation in 1972, the plant had slightly over 1,800 employees. After it closed, many who lost their jobs left the community. Today, Harper City is a collage of ethnic neighborhoods. The only newer homes are near the hospital in a small neighborhood. In all other sections of the city, the homes are more than 45 years old. Most of the single-family dwellings are prefabricated low-cost structures that were built between 1952 and 1960. Four government housing projects are in the city limits. The unemployment rate in Harper City is 21% higher than the national average.

#### The School District

The Harper City School District serves 6,885 students. In addition to a high school, the district operates two middle schools and six elementary schools. Last year, the dropout rate for the high school was 28%, and only 18% of the graduating seniors enrolled in a 4-year or 2-year college.

Nearly 70% of the students in the school system are classified as “disadvantaged” by virtue of qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches. Among these disadvantaged students, 38% are African American and 22% are Hispanic.

Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), both the composition of the school board and the district’s administrative staff have changed substantially. The five-member school board continues to represent the community’s diversity; however, only one member who was in office when NCLB took effect is still on the board. The superintendent, Dr. Mark Simon, has been in his position for 5 years. He is an energetic leader committed to improving the school district’s academic performance and is supported by the school board and Harper City’s mayor.

Since Dr. Simon arrived in Harper City, over two-thirds of the administrative staff, including school principals, has changed. Turnover in these positions resulted from a combination of retirements, dismissals, and reassignments. Three years ago, Superintendent Simon transformed one of the district-level administrative vacancies into a new position: director of technology and research. The director was given the assignment of constructing an infrastructure to facilitate data-based decision making, and, a substantial investment was made in the new department. Most notably, computer networking was upgraded and staff development sessions were added to prepare principals and teachers to generate, access, and apply data.

### **Buchanan Elementary School**

Buchanan Elementary School is just one block from Main Street in the heart of the city's business district. The two-story brick structure, built originally as a junior high school in 1947, was renovated in 1983 when it was converted to an elementary school. Two of the government housing projects in the district are within a half mile of the school, and children living in them attend Buchanan.

Buchanan has an enrollment of 390; approximately 90% are students of color (58% are African American and 31% are Hispanic). The percentage of disadvantaged students is above the district's average (82% compared to 69%). The school also has the highest percentage of students in the district failing to score at or above the state proficiency level on achievement tests. In the aftermath of NCLB, the number of student retentions in first grade increased significantly. The principal and the first-grade teachers said publicly that they were "pushed" to retain more students as a result of higher standards.

The average age of Buchanan teachers is 53, and only 6 of 17 teachers had ever taught in a school other than Buchanan. The previous principal, Walter Sampson, was popular with the staff but was seen as a liability by Superintendent Simon. Two years ago, Principal Sampson was placed on probation and required to meet specific performance goals in order to retain his administrative position. After conducting an evaluation and determining that the conditions had not been met, the superintendent and assistant superintendent for instruction concurred that he should be dismissed. Their recommendation to that effect was approved by the school board. After being informed that he would be reassigned to a teaching position the following school year, Mr. Sampson opted to retire. Angered by his removal, all the Buchanan employees signed and sent a letter to the school board expressing displeasure with the way Mr. Sampson had been treated by Superintendent Simon.

### **Principal Hulbert Arrives**

Why did Maureen Hulbert accept the daunting challenge of being the principal at Buchanan Elementary School? When asked that question by a friend, her response was quick and direct: "Because the school district has a dynamic superintendent, Dr. Mark Simon, who is committed to turning this school system in a positive direction."

Before coming to Buchanan, Principal Hulbert had not met a single staff member in the school. Only the superintendent and two other district-level administrators were present at her employment interview. During that meeting, Superintendent Simon explicitly told her that Buchanan was an under-performing school staffed by teachers strongly opposed to new ideas. He also made it clear that the school had to improve and he would provide whatever support he could to achieve that goal.

After beginning her assignment at Buchanan, Principal Hulbert made a concerted effort to develop positive relationships with faculty and staff. She met with employees individually and made two pledges: She would not be biased by the past and she would work actively and closely

with teachers to improve student learning. Most employees were unimpressed with her promises; they viewed Principal Hulbert as naive and unrealistic. In their eyes, they could do relatively little to help students overcome the social, psychological, and economic problems they faced outside of school.

A fourth-grade teacher summarized the attitude shared by most school employees: “Over the past few years, we have been unfairly criticized. After NCLB, we were also threatened. We were told that the school might be closed if more students were unable to meet state standards. Morale, which wasn’t very good in the first place, got worse. The bureaucrats responsible for NCLB intend to destroy local public schools by setting unattainable goals. Neither Superintendent Simon nor a new principal can perform miracles.”

This and similar comments disappointed Principal Hulbert. Attitudes being expressed suggested the faculty and support staff were pessimistic about school improvement, generally, and her ability to be a change agent, specifically. She decided to look at records for the past 5 years to determine what, if any, changes had been made by her predecessor, Mr. Sampson. She identified three that related to instruction.

1. The previous principal had discouraged social promotions from first to second grade, believing that the lowest-performing students would benefit from being retained.
2. The quantity of staff development provided for teachers increased slightly, but only because of the sessions required for data-based decision making.
3. Responding to one of his probationary conditions, he issued a directive requiring teachers to develop unit lesson plans.

There was no evidence indicating that any of these efforts improved student learning. In fact, after the retention rate in first grade increased achievement tests declined. Despite the workshops, many teachers did not rely on data to make important decisions. And, after examining the teacher lesson plans, Principal Hulbert concluded that they were generic and written for grade levels, not individual teachers. Not one word in any of the lesson plans had changed since they were first written 3 years ago, and no mention of the lesson plans was found in any of the teacher performance evaluations completed during that same period.

After speaking with several teachers about the lesson plans, Principal Hulbert learned that the requirement for developing and using them was actually a mock rule—that is, the rule had not been followed by teachers nor enforced by the principal. In fact, Principal Sampson told teachers he thought the rule was an infringement on their professional status. He added that he would not have adopted it if the superintendent had not forced him to do so.

### **Lessons Learned from the Lesson Plans**

Instead of devising their own plans, as intended by the superintendent, the teachers at each grade level collectively produced one set of unit plans that they all would supposedly apply. The following lesson plan for a unit on teaching fractions to second-grade students was typical.

Principal Hulbert also noticed that the lesson plans were entirely teacher-centered; that is, they only addressed teacher objectives. Thus, the lesson plans were void of learning targets, continuous assessments, and the use of data to determine student progress. Perhaps most troubling, the lesson plans made no mention of instructional alignment with prevailing standards.

After examining the lesson plans, Principal Hulbert expressed her concerns about them at a faculty meeting. She emphasized that the documents focused largely, if not exclusively, on what the teachers were to do rather than on what the students were to learn. She said that the plans would have to be revised so that they were more explicit about learning expectations, evaluation,

and alignment with state standards. She also was emphatic that lesson plans had to include guidelines for recording information about student learning so that information would be available for future instructional decisions.

Some teachers were visibly upset. Several pointed out that the previous principal had never criticized the lesson plans. Bill Osborne, a fifth-grade teacher and often the spokesperson for the employees, was the most vocal.

“Ms. Hulbert,” he began, “we might as well put all the cards on the table even though we haven’t gotten to know each other very well. It’s no secret why they put you in this job—and it’s no secret that we opposed Mr. Sampson’s dismissal. Every teacher in this room has been here for at least 5 years. We know these kids, we know their problems, and we know how to teach. Federal mandates, administrative dictates, and lesson plans aren’t going to change reality. Many of our students aren’t going to meet the state proficiency standard, and there is nothing you or we can do about that. The government can set lofty expectations and require us to use statistics, but the fact is these kids are not going to do well in school. Here’s another fact. Motivated students learn and unmotivated students rarely learn. Poor teaching is not the reason why many Buchanan students fail to meet state standards. The real reasons are outside these four walls. They include things like poverty, abuse, and emotional instability—things we can’t control. You’re the boss and you can force us to revise the lesson plans. Just tell us what you want in the lesson plans, we’ll copy it, and we can go on to more important issues. After we go through all of your hoops, ask yourself how much difference these plans will make behind closed classroom doors.”

## Problem Framing

1. Assume you are Principal Hulbert. First determine the main issue (problem) in this case. Then describe the current state and the desired state of this issue. (The section on problem framing in the Introduction section of this book defines the problem framing process.)
2. Based on evidence provided in the case, describe the difficulty associated with eliminating the gap between the present state and desired state.

## Questions and Suggested Activities

1. Share and critique the problem statements prepared by students in your class.
2. Describe the nature of the school culture at Buchanan Elementary School.
3. Why do Mr. Osborne and presumably the other Buchanan teachers have such a negative attitude about NCLB?
4. Evaluate Principal Hulbert’s decision to have the teachers rewrite the lesson plans.
5. Mr. Osborne implies that experienced teachers do not need lesson plans. Do you agree? Why or why not?
6. Mr. Osborne believes that many of the Buchanan students will not succeed academically because of the negative social and economic conditions they face outside of school. Do you agree? Why or why not?
7. Buchanan employees indicate that they supported the previous principal, Mr. Sampson, and they criticized the decision to remove him from the school. Is this fact relevant to shaping a plan to improve student learning? Why or why not?
8. How have teachers and principals across all districts and schools responded to NCLB? What evidence do you have to support your response?
9. No Child Left Behind requires administrators and teachers to collect assessment data, disaggregate those data by student groups, and develop explicit plans for meeting the needs of students, especially those exhibiting low achievement. Is this a realistic expectation for an elementary school teacher who has 20 or more pupils in class? Is it a realistic expectation for secondary school teachers who have over 100 pupils in their classes?
10. What actions could Principal Hulbert take to improve employee morale at Buchanan?
11. To what extent does the school’s culture affect teacher behavior?

## Suggested Readings

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# 4 LOUNGE TALK

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Role conflict occurs when you face two or more incompatible expectations regarding your behavior as an administrator. This problem is common in organizations including districts and schools. In the case of principals, for example, teachers, students, and parents have dissimilar preferences regarding administrative behavior. Some want principals to be relationship oriented—that is, friendly and caring administrators who value and respond to individual needs, interests, and goals. Others want principals to be task oriented—that is, firm and decisive administrators who value and respond to institutional needs, interests, and goals.

Role conflict has always been a concern for administrators, because public schools operate at a point where individual rights and societal rights (Levin, 1999) and professionalism and democracy (Kowalski, 1995) intersect. On the one hand, superintendents and principals are expected to be competent, professional leaders making critical recommendations that determine what should be done to improve schools. On the other hand, they are expected to be efficient managers subservient to the will of the people (Wirt & Kirst, 2001). In fact, consequential policy is rarely established by one individual; rather, it is promulgated in political arenas in which individuals and groups seek to advance or protect their interests. In the realm of school reform, dissimilar philosophies and political dispositions virtually ensure that every proposed change to policy or programs will be opposed by one or more stakeholder groups (Kowalski, 2006).

Studies of role conflict and leadership styles have contributed to theory building in the areas of *transformational* and *charismatic* leadership. As Yukl noted (1989), these two terms:

... refer to the process of influencing major changes in the attitudes and assumptions of organization members and building commitment for the organization's mission and objectives. Transformational leadership is usually defined more broadly than charismatic leadership, but there is considerable overlap between the two conceptions. (p. 204)

The seminal work of Burns (1978) described two contrasting administrative styles: *transactional* and *transformational leadership*. Transactional leaders tend to believe that people are primarily motivated by self-interests, and accordingly, they attempt to control behavior in others by offering rewards or threatening punishments (Yukl, 2006). Transformational leaders, by comparison, make others more aware of their responsibilities, induce them to transcend self-interests by behaving professionally, and emphasize higher-order needs, such as self-esteem and self-actualization (Bass, 1985). Though these two styles are distinct, they are not mutually exclusive; that is, administrators have used both depending on problems, issues, and contextual variables. Even so, the transactional style has been more prevalent historically in all types of organizations (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

Over the past 3 decades, transformational leadership has been promoted as a normative standard for school administrators (Kowalski, 2010; Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007). Advocacy stems from the conviction that organizational change most often occurs in situations where administrators believe in and trust people around them (Bennis, 1984). In the case of schools, for example, transformational principals are more likely than transactional principals to facilitate the development of shared school visions and acceptable strategic plans. Other characteristics of a transformational principal are likely to include:

- Being concerned that teachers and other school employees grow professionally and achieve self-efficacy.
- Treating teachers as peer professionals and not subordinates.
- Treating schools as learning communities in which important decisions are made democratically, individuals care about each other, and every student is treated as if he or she were a family member.

In this case, four high school teachers discuss their perceptions of the school's new principal. Three of them disapprove of her leadership style. In subtle ways, they question whether gender, age, and administrative inexperience affect her behavior. As you read this case, determine the extent to which role conflict is evident and reflect on the concepts of transactional and transformational leadership as sources of conflict. Also, imagine that you are a teacher in the school so that you can develop a personal perspective as to whether you would support this principal.

### Key Areas for Reflection

1. Transformational and transactional leadership styles
2. Principal succession
3. Role conflict
4. Teacher expectations of principal behavior
5. Leadership style and change in schools

### THE CASE

After Peter Weller entered the teachers' lounge, the room fell silent. Three colleagues—Debra Lowler, Linda Mays, and Jake Brumwell—were seated at one of the four small, round tables scattered randomly across the room. No one else was present. Having a common preparation period, the four teachers often spent 10 to 15 minutes a day discussing various issues while enjoying a cup of coffee.

Peter nodded as he sat down in the remaining chair at the table, but the silence continued. After a few seconds he asked, "OK, why did everyone quit talking? You look like my students after I catch them doing something wrong."

"Peter," Linda answered, "We were just discussing your favorite principal. Maybe she has a hidden listening device in this room and, after hearing our comments, sent you here to defend her!" After a brief pause, she added, "Just a joke, Peter, so don't get hostile."

Peter said, "Don't you have more important topics to discuss? I know you have a penchant for critiquing administrators and your colleagues, but your obsession with Dr. Werner is unhealthy. Ease up."

Colleen Werner had been appointed principal of Drewerton South High School, one of two high schools in the district, less than a year before. She is only the second principal in the school's 14-year history. With an enrollment of just over 1,000 students, South High School serves the most affluent neighborhoods in an upscale suburban community.

George Calbo, South High School's first and only other principal, retired at the end of the previous year. He was well liked by most of the faculty and support staff. Prior to becoming principal, he had taught social studies, coached basketball, and served as an assistant principal at Drewerton High School, then the only high school in the district. As the founding principal at South High School, he was able to personally select the school's new employees. Many of them were his friends and long-time colleagues.

The announcement that Dr. Colleen Werner would succeed Principal Calbo surprised a great many stakeholders, including faculty and staff at South High School. The superintendent had received more than 50 applications for the position, including nine from current district employees. Among the final five candidates, Dr. Werner was the only one not currently employed in the Drewerton district and the only female. Most observers concluded that she was merely the "token female candidate," especially since she was considerably younger (32 years old at the time of her appointment), less experienced, and less politically connected than the others.

The fact that Dr. Werner and her predecessor were opposites was evident almost immediately—even to most students. Mr. Calbo had devoted much of his time to managing people and material resources; Dr. Werner relegated these responsibilities to her two assistants. She devoted much of her time to visiting classrooms, working on curriculum projects, and building relationships with parents and students. Mr. Calbo spent nearly 2 hours every day in the teachers' lounge, listening to concerns and complaints, discussing politics, and seeking the latest gossip. Dr. Werner, on the other hand, rarely went to the teachers' lounge, and when she did, she usually stayed only long enough to pour a cup of coffee.

Peter Weller was one of only five or six South High School teachers who thought that Dr. Werner was more effective than her predecessor. He stated this conviction openly, especially when his colleagues questioned Principal Werner's competence. His disposition toward the new principal baffled his colleagues because Peter had always spoken positively of Principal Calbo. When challenged on this point, Peter explained that he admired Mr. Calbo's good intentions, most notably, his concern for teachers and students and his willingness to help them when needed. He added, however, that he thought Mr. Calbo was more of a politician than an educator. He saw Dr. Werner in a different light. In his eyes, she, too, cared deeply about others but her behavior was professional rather than political.

After a minute of silence, Peter spoke again. "I think I know why you became silent when I entered. You were skewering Dr. Werner again, weren't you? What did she do now?"

Jake responded, "We have to talk about somebody, and it might as well be Colleen-the-Great."

"Lately, she's the only one you talk about. You seem to be obsessed with her," Peter noted.

Debra Lowler, usually the least expressive member of the group, spoke next. "I'll tell you what bothers me about Colleen. It's her repeated comments about how we should behave professionally. She uses 'professional' as a code word that means 'do extra work without additional compensation.' Instead of looking out for us, she promotes the idea that we should assume additional responsibilities without being compensated. George [Calbo], on the other hand, fought for us. He knows what it is like to be a teacher. If the superintendent or the school board wants us to do extra jobs, let them pay us accordingly."

"Agreed," Linda chimed in, "George defended us. He even advised us, privately of course, not to do more without additional compensation. He knew how to manipulate the superintendent and school board. He never let them walk all over us."

“You really believe that Colleen doesn’t care about teachers?” Peter asked. “She was and still is a teacher at heart. She knows what the public expects of us. Did you ever consider that she wants everyone, including students, to be treated fairly? Just because she doesn’t praise you every minute of the day and just because she isn’t dangling ‘carrots’ in front of you constantly doesn’t mean she’s indifferent or disrespectful.”

Jake Brumwell, a mathematics teacher and track coach, was Mr. Calbo’s closest friend and biggest defender in the group. He spoke next.

“Peter, Colleen is not ready for this job. She still has a lot to learn, especially about working with teachers. Just last week, for example, she asked if I would chaperone a weekend camping trip with a group of students in June. The trip is part of a dropout prevention program, so you know the type of kids who will be involved. Two other teachers already have agreed to be chaperones, but she wants me to go too because she thinks I can connect personally with several of the students. When I asked her how much I would get paid for playing nursemaid in the woods, she looked at me like I was an extortionist. That condescending look made me mad. I told her I was too busy to go camping. Now, I presume, she has labeled me as being unprofessional. If George was handling the camping trip, he would have secured necessary resources to pay the chaperones or he would have canceled the event.”

Peter then said, “Well, Jake, I’m one of the volunteer chaperones. Did you know that Colleen is the other? And I know for a fact that she asked you to participate because several students involved think highly of you.”

Debra came to Jake’s defense. “Sure, Colleen is going. But she has a 12-month contract. So technically she’s being paid for going on the trip.”

“Wrong again,” Peter shot back. “To my knowledge, she does not get additional compensation for going on a camping trip that starts on Friday afternoon and ends Saturday evening.”

Linda entered the conversation again. “Look, it’s more than just asking us to give up our time. Colleen’s whole approach toward being principal is different. She doesn’t do things George’s way. You say Colleen cares about us. I disagree. She only cares about students—and she cares too much about the wrong students. Maybe her empathy for at-risk students is self-serving. Maybe she thinks the school board will reward her for being kind and considerate. Since you’re her apologist, you should teach her an important lesson—teachers, not students, are going to determine if she succeeds at South High School.”

“I agree totally with Linda. Colleen needs to know that principals don’t do well in this district without teacher support,” Jake noted. “Personally, I think she would be better off paying more attention to our best students. Maybe the high achievers should be the ones who go on camping trips and receive other favors from the principal. If you ask me, Colleen is sending the wrong message to students—and she certainly has not sent any positive messages to us.”

Peter was frustrated. “Do you realize that I’m not the only one in the school who supports Colleen?” he asked rhetorically. “Why don’t you give her credit for things she’s accomplished in a short time? What about the way she helped Deloris Hutchins? Prior to Dr. Werner’s working with her, she was an ineffective teacher. Colleen helped her improve her planning skills and classroom management. All George ever did was conceal her deficiencies. Deloris has become a more competent teacher, and she openly admits that Colleen is primarily responsible. Based on this evidence, tell me who is the better principal—the one who made excuses for poor teaching or the one who did something about it? I’ll tell you how Deloris answers that question. She thinks Dr. Werner is the best administrator she has known. To casually charge that Colleen doesn’t care about teachers is irresponsible.”

Jake responded, “See, that’s what I was trying to say a minute ago. No matter if she is dealing with teachers or students, she cares a lot more about low performers than she does about high performers. Where is the recognition for teachers who always have done a good job? Instead of praise and rewards, I get invited to spend a weekend with at-risk students in the woods! And because I said no, she probably thinks I’m insensitive. Listen, Peter, I don’t like the way Werner operates. She’s never going to be effective unless she wises up and develops political savvy.”

Peter just shook his head in disbelief. He recognized that converting his colleagues to his way of thinking was probably impossible. There had been at least a dozen previous conversations similar to this one and each had ended with the four teachers refusing to yield their convictions. Yet the disagreements never affected their personal relationships. Peter and the others had conveniently decided to agree to disagree.

“Well, colleagues,” Peter said as he stood up, “time to get back to work. But before I leave, I tell you again that you are wrong about Colleen. I hope you’re teaching your students to be more objective than you are. Dr. Werner is a bright, energetic leader. She’s not perfect, but who is?”

“Wipe that smile off your face,” Linda said. “Don’t you recognize that you have lost another argument? Just to show you that I’m open-minded, I’ll concede that Colleen has good intentions—just as you conceded that George had good intentions. Regrettably, she is terribly misguided about everything else.”

Jake added sarcastically, “Yeah, I’ll give her a ‘B’ for effort and a ‘D’ for achievement!”

The group always had a way of ending their discussions with a little humor, perhaps to ease the tension. The four teachers scattered down different hallways to their next classes and their thoughts quickly shifted to other matters.

## Problem Framing

1. Assume you are Dr. Werner. First determine the main issue (problem) in this case. Then describe the current state and the desired state of this issue. (The section on problem framing in the Introduction section of this book defines the problem framing process.)
2. Based on evidence provided in the case, describe the difficulty associated with eliminating the gap between the present state and desired state.

## Questions and Suggested Activities

1. Share and critique the problem statements prepared by students in your class.
2. Do you agree with the teachers who are critical of Dr. Werner? Why or why not?
3. As principal, would you be concerned if teachers had vastly different expectations of your leadership style? Why or why not?
4. Do you think that Dr. Werner should spend more time in the teachers’ lounge? Why or why not?
5. Describe and then compare the leadership styles of the previous principal, Mr. Calbo, and the current principal, Dr. Werner. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each style.
6. What evidence would you use to determine if a principal was transactional or transformational?
7. What do you view as the strengths and weaknesses of a transformational principal?
8. Assume that Peter Weller has never informed Dr. Werner of the criticisms being voiced about her. Should he do so?
9. What, if anything, should Dr. Werner do to establish improved relations with the faculty and staff?
10. Do you believe that the four teachers in this case have behaved professionally by critiquing the principal? Why or why not?
11. One of the teachers, Jake Brumwell, suggests that Dr. Werner should pay more attention to good students. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

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# 8

## SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT THROUGH BETTER GRADING PRACTICES

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The relationship between student academic success and student behavior at school has been a subject of debate for some time. Many studies (e.g., Brigman & Campbell, 2003; Hattie, Biggs, & Purdie, 1996) have found that interventions, such as those provided through school counselors, can improve both student grades and student behavior. Logically, students who are consistently unsuccessful with their studies are more likely to find school an unpleasant experience and to behave in unacceptable ways.

Many scholars (e.g., Bandura, 1977, 1997; Guskey, 1994, 2006) posit that grading practices affect student motivation and ultimately academic success and personal behavior. As a primary example, students who receive a very low grade on an assignment or quiz in the first few weeks of a course may find it difficult or impossible to earn enough points to get a high course grade. Once students incur this problem, they may lose their motivation to study, and their excess energy gets expressed negatively—for example, they disrupt classes to gain attention. In an effort to counteract this situation, teachers and principals have been encouraged to adopt evaluation practices that enhance rather than curtail student motivation. One such idea is commonly known as *minimum grading policy* (Carifio & Carey, 2009). This concept's intent is to prevent students from receiving very low assessments early in a course, thus making it impossible for them to receive a higher final grade.

Especially in high schools, the extent to which principals control, supervise, or otherwise influence student grades is another matter that has received considerable discussion (O'Connor, 2001). In most cases, principals walk a fine line between ensuring that a fair and an effective grading system is in place and being used and respecting the professional status of teachers. Professionalism implies that teachers should have considerable discretion in making important decisions that affect their students (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008). At the same time, principals are held accountable for school improvement and ensuring that students are not treated unfairly or in other ways that deter their academic and social growth (Kowalski, 2010).

This case takes place in a high school that has experienced considerable demographic change in the past 25 years. Dissatisfaction with the school's performance has led to instability in the principalship. A relatively young and inexperienced administrator, the fourth principal in 10 years, is employed with hopes that he can accomplish what his predecessors have failed to do—reduce discipline problems and raise academic achievement. The new principal proposes the adoption of an alternative grading policy as one strategy for achieving this goal. Unlike his predecessors, he believes that attacking academic progress problems is the most effective way to reduce unsatisfactory student behavior. His proposal, however, is met with skepticism and overt opposition. Thus, he must decide to implement, delay, or abandon his preference.

### Key Areas for Reflection

1. Grading practices in high schools
2. A nexus between student academic success and student behavior
3. Student motivation to succeed academically
4. Principal-teacher relationships
5. Fair and objective ways to evaluate student academic progress

### THE CASE

Tucker developed as a suburb shortly after World War II. During the 1950s and 1960s, the community's public schools were recognized as being among the state's best. Beginning in the late 1970s, however, many of the middle-class and upper middle-class families left the community, opting to build houses in newer and more affluent areas. As a result, the community and school system experienced substantial change as evidenced by demographic data. As an example, in the 1960 Census, only 2% of Tuckers' residents were identified as racial-ethnic minorities. In 2010, the figure was 61%. As early as 1984, Tucker High School had a minority-majority student body. Currently across the district, approximately 50% of the school's students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches.

Today, Tucker High School is classified by the state department of education as a low-performing school. Nearly 40% of the students taking the state's mandated 10th-grade high school graduation test (an exam that failing students retake in subsequent years) scored below standard in mathematics, science, and reading. Equally troubling, only 18% of the school's graduates over the past 5 years enrolled in 4-year colleges.

Six months ago, Jordan Johnson, a 36-year-old assistant principal in an urban high school, became Tucker's fourth principal in 10 years. His immediate predecessor, who had resigned before completing 2 years in the position, had been directed by the superintendent, Michelle Watson, to restore discipline at the school. In response, he developed new rules and regulations for student conduct that not only failed to improve student behavior, they resulted in a substantial increase in out-of-school suspensions. Moreover, many school employees disliked him because of his autocratic leadership style and inflexibility.

Prior to becoming an administrator, Jordan Johnson taught biology for 9 years. After interviewing him, Superintendent Watson realized that he was quite different than the high school's three previous principals. Johnson was considerably younger, much less experienced as an administrator, and focused on academics more than student discipline. At first, the superintendent could not decide whether these characteristics were advantageous. She remained convinced that discipline at the school remained a priority, but failed previous attempts to improve student conduct made her more willing to employ a principal with a different philosophy.

In a second employment interview she asked Johnson to clarify his conviction about the nexus between academics and student behavior. He told her, "Students focused on their studies are more successful academically. Often, it is hard to tell whether greater focus results from success or vice-versa. Regardless, students who experience success academically are less likely to exhibit

behavior problems. Therefore, my goal is to create more opportunities for students to experience academic success.”

Although the superintendent was skeptical of Johnson’s belief, her options for selecting a new principal were very limited. Only three applicants had been invited for a second interview and two of them appeared to share the same characteristics of the school’s three previous principals. Knowing that the school board was becoming impatient with the lack of progress at the high school, Superintendent Watson decided to gamble and selected Johnson.

Principal Johnson’s primary strategy for applying his philosophy was a concept known as “minimum grading.” The approach is intended to give low-performing students a second, third, or even fourth chance to do well. In presenting the idea to the faculty, Johnson shared data showing that students exhibiting unacceptable behavior usually did poorly in their studies. Moreover, their poor academic performance usually began early in a school term—for example, on the first quiz or test in a course. He argued that once students received low assessments, their motivation to study and improve diminished because they concluded that getting a good grade had become impossible. The minimum grading concept Johnson proposed had two facets.

1. *A minimum threshold component.* This provision set a floor for student scores on assessments used for grading. For example, on a 100 point quiz, the lowest score that could be given to a student was set at 50. Thus, even if a student actually scored 35, he or she would receive a score of 50. The purpose of this provision was to prevent students from getting into a situation in which earning a higher course grade was impossible.
2. *Adjusted scores.* This provision involved weighting assessments based on when they occurred during an academic term. For example, assessments made in the first half of a semester would carry less weight than those made in the last half of a semester. The intent here was to provide hope to students who got a poor start that they could rectify their performance by working harder in the second half of the course.

Most Tucker High School faculty members were unfamiliar with the grading paradigm. Josh McGill, the never bashful chairperson of the mathematics and science department, asked the first question.

“You showed us data indicating that students with behavior problems don’t do well academically. What data do you have showing that the program you are proposing reduces behavior problems?”

Johnson responded, “You raise an important question. Although I am unaware of compelling evidence regarding the effects of minimum grading on student conduct, I don’t see how it could make things any worse.”

McGill immediately said, “Doesn’t the minimum threshold simply give an unfair boost to poor students? If I study for my biology test and get a score of 85, my recorded score remains 85. But if I don’t study and get a 25, the teacher gives me an extra 25 points. Tell me, how is that fair?”

Before Johnson could answer, Sharon Beasley, an English teacher, spoke “Would the end effect of this concept be grade inflation? If we gave all our students A’s and B’s, fewer would likely drop out of school. But would doing so have any positive effect on the school’s pass rate on the state’s high school exit exam? Would it reduce discipline problems? I’m willing to learn more about your idea, but at this point, I’m skeptical.”

Johnson’s hope was to convince the faculty to adopt minimum grading at the beginning of the second semester. After hearing the faculty comments, he asked for five volunteers to serve

with him on an ad hoc committee to study the advantages and disadvantages of adopting the model at Tucker High School. He then said that the committee would present reports to the faculty at monthly meetings in October and November, and a decision to adopt the new grading program would be made no later than December 15.

The six-member committee began the assignment by examining existing policies and rules on student grading. Most were surprised to learn that beyond requiring students to receive grades and providing a grievance procedure for contesting grades, there were no substantive guidelines. In essence, teachers independently determined how they would grade students. This discovery led the committee members to examine how teachers graded students and the actual grades they assigned. This data showed disparate practices and outcomes. Some teachers based grades entirely or almost entirely on tests; others based grades primarily on homework and effort. Some routinely gave 85% or more of the students A's and B's; others routinely gave fewer than 40% of the students these grades.

At the October faculty meeting, Principal Johnson shared the committee's findings. He was optimistic that most teachers would view the status quo as being unorganized and unfair to students. Instead, several teachers voiced outrage that the committee was spending time examining and comparing teachers based on the grades they had given students. One social studies teacher said the data were misleading because the committee members failed to take into account the nature of the courses. He further contended that the data could be manipulated to the advantage of those who favored minimum grading. Several other teachers voiced similar sentiments but no teacher voiced a favorable opinion of the minimum grading concept at the October meeting.

Over the next month, the committee collected information from four high school principals who had implemented some iteration of minimum grading. Although all of them spoke favorably of the model, each said that it was too early to tell whether the approach would have a long-term, positive effect on reducing discipline problems, reducing drop-out rates, and improving school performance on the state's high school graduation examination. Moreover, three of the four principals reported that teachers, including some who had initially opposed the model, had adapted to the new grading system and were pleased with it. The other principal indicated that the faculty members at his school remained divided.

Prior to presenting an update at the November faculty meeting, Johnson met with Superintendent Watson. He had been keeping her apprised of the committee's progress, but now he wanted to know what her position would be if a majority of the faculty rejected his recommendation to implement the model at the start of the second semester. Previously, she had indicated that she was optimistic about minimum grading and thought the idea could produce positive results. However, she expressed this sentiment prior to learning that many teachers opposed the recommended change. The two administrators discussed three possibilities:

1. Implement the model regardless of teacher support
2. Implement the model only if and when a majority of teachers supported it
3. Not implement the model and seek other ways to improve school performance

Rather than stating a preference, Watson told Johnson she would support any decision he would make on the matter. She warned him, however, that mandating the approach in the presence of widespread teacher opposition would likely result in a political battle with the teachers' union—a group that had considerable influence with two school board members.

## Problem Framing

1. Assume you are Principal Johnson. First determine the main issue (problem) in this case. Then describe the current state and the desired state of this issue. (The section on problem framing in the Introduction section of this book defines the problem framing process.)
2. Based on evidence provided in the case, describe the difficulty associated with eliminating the gap between the present state and desired state.

## Questions and Suggested Activities

1. Share and critique the problem statements prepared by students in your class.
2. Do you believe that the teachers' fears of grade inflation are warranted? Why or why not?
3. Do you believe that the minimum grading policy proposed by the principal is fair? Why or why not?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of mandating the proposed concept regardless of teacher support?
5. Based on your knowledge of teaching and your experience as a teacher, do you agree that low scores in the early stages of a course reduce student motivation substantially? What evidence do you have to support your conclusion?
6. Evaluate the information the ad hoc committee received from the four principals using a minimum grading rule. If you were a teacher at Tucker High School, would you consider the information to help or hinder the principal's effort to implement the concept?
7. How do you evaluate the superintendent's position that she is relegating the decision to the principal?
8. The superintendent realizes that she gambled in hiring a young and relatively inexperienced principal for a very difficult assignment. Should she have allowed him to propose the controversial grading concept so early in his tenure? Why or why not?
9. If you were Principal Johnson, how would you interpret the superintendent's warning that political problems are likely to surface if the program is mandated?
10. What effect, if any, is the minimum-grading rule likely to have on student performance on the state-mandated high school graduation test?
11. Do you agree or disagree with the contention that there is a discernible nexus between academic success and student behavior? What evidence do you have to support your position?

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# 12 | BREAK THE RULES AND PAY THE PRICE

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Role theory addresses variables that shape work behavior. Theoretical models provide conceptual frameworks that assist analysts to study work behavior in the context of performance expectations (Gaynor, 1998). Such analysis often uncovers *role conflict*, disharmony between actual and ideal behavior. Commonly experienced by most school principals, this problem may be attributable to several factors. One is role ambiguity—a condition in which a formal role designated by the employer is either not clearly defined or not interpreted accurately (Hanson, 2003).

Even clearly written job descriptions do not ensure that prescribed roles will be interpreted correctly and uniformly. This is because school stakeholders hold dissimilar values, beliefs, and needs, and their dispositions shape informal role expectations (Kowalski, 2003). During a strike, for example, teachers may expect the principal to be sympathetic to their cause; the school board and superintendent may expect the principal to be a loyal member of the administrative team.

Role conflict also can be intrapersonal, as when a principal accepts two or more discordant roles as being appropriate (Owens, 2001). For example, she believes that she should closely and objectively supervise teachers to ensure school effectiveness; at the same time, she believes that she should treat teachers as colleagues and friends. The resulting internal conflict leads to inconsistent behavior, and teachers typically feel uncomfortable when a principal's behavior is unpredictable (Kowalski, Lasley, & Mahoney, 2008).

Principals can react in several ways to role conflict. Using the example in which a principal encounters competing expectations during a teachers' strike, the following are possible choices:

- *Picking one expectation over others.* The principal chooses either to meet the teachers' expectations or to meet the superintendent's/school board's expectations.
- *Withdrawing.* The principal retreats from the conflict; for example, he resigns or tries to hide in his office without expressing support for either side.
- *Seeking reconciliation.* The principal attempts to reconcile the differing expectations; for example, he tries to get both parties to accept his difficult positions in hopes that they will lessen their expectations.
- *Trying to satisfy everyone.* The principal attempts to be all things to all parties; for example, he wants the teachers to believe that he is completely on their side and he wants the superintendent and school board to believe that he is completely on their side.
- *Seeking protection for supervisors.* The principal attempts to gain relief by having the superintendent (or a designee) intervene. As an example, the principal asks the superintendent

to explain to the teachers that principals are only following orders by trying to keep schools operational during a strike.

- *Ignoring the situation.* The principal avoids decisions or comments that would reveal whether he supports the school board's position or the teacher association's position. The anticipation is that the strike will end before the principal has to be decisive.

This case involves a principal prone to suspending middle school students for what he considers serious violations of the school's code of conduct. An out-of-school suspension is a disciplinary sanction that excludes a student for a specified period of time; historically, it has been used commonly in secondary schools to punish unacceptable student behavior. Research, however, indicates that a temporary exclusion from school rarely reduces the negative behavior being punished; it does, however, usually have an adverse effect on academic performance (Christle, Nelson, & Jolivet, 2004). Many stakeholders in this case believe otherwise as evidenced by their approval of the principal's leadership style. Supporters believe that his tough disciplinary actions have contributed to an effective learning environment and a positive school image. Detractors, including several teachers, contend that the principal's stance toward student discipline is injudicious and ineffective. Tensions resulting from the divergent opinions are heightened when a student leaves school without permission after the principal tells him that he will be suspended for speaking to a teacher inappropriately.

### Key Area for Reflection

1. Role expectations
2. Role conflict
3. School and community cultures
4. Student learning and discipline
5. Zero-tolerance policy

## THE CASE

### School Profile

Rogers Middle School, in a major city in a Southwestern state, was built less than 4 years ago to accommodate population growth. The attractive and well-maintained building is a source of pride for local families, some of whom live in public-housing projects and some of whom live in inexpensive prefabricated houses that were constructed about 20 years ago.

Many Rogers Middle School students are bilingual. A statistical report prepared for district administration provided the following racial-ethnic profile:

- Hispanic: 41%
- African American: 15%
- Caucasian: 24%
- Native American: 9%
- Asian American: 9%
- Other: 2%

The demographic profile of the school's professional staff, however, is quite different. Nearly 70% of the teachers, counselors, and administrators identify themselves as Caucasian.

Rogers Middle School contains Grades 6, 7, and 8 and serves approximately 1,150 students. Data for the last 3 years show that the school's students have made greater gains on the state proficiency test than students enrolled in the district's other six middle schools. At the same time, however, Rogers has the highest suspension rate among the district's middle schools. Both outcomes are commonly attributed to the school's principal, Hector Sanchez.

### Principal Profile

Ever since he was in the third grade, Hector Sanchez wanted to be a teacher. One of nine children reared in a lower-middle-class family, he pursued his dream by working in a local factory and driving 45 miles twice a week to take night classes at the nearest state university. After 6 years, he had completed three-fourths of the degree requirements and saved enough money to allow him to finish his senior year as a full-time student.

Subsequently, Mr. Sanchez was employed as a mathematics teacher in a small high school. He also served as an assistant football coach and head track coach. Two years later, he began studies to complete his master's degree as a part-time student. Once he completed the degree and obtained a principal's license 4 years later, he was employed as an assistant principal in a large high school. There his primary responsibilities were student discipline and extracurricular activities. The principal, Carl Brown, became his mentor. Mr. Brown was a traditional administrator—stern, forceful, and decisive. Sanchez embraced his leadership style without reservation.

Over the next 3 years, Principal Brown molded his protégé and told him he was ready to be a principal. Heeding the advice, Sanchez applied for the principalship in a newly built middle school in the same district. While interviewing Hector, the assistant superintendent for pupil services, familiar with Principal Brown's discipline philosophy, asked him whether he shared his mentor's values and beliefs. Hector answered immediately, "Absolutely." He then added, "A principal's primary responsibility is to maintain a safe school. When I discipline students, and especially when I exclude them from school, I'm thinking about the welfare of all students. Contrary to popular thought, the typical student does not want to be suspended or expelled. The behavior of most students improves after they return to school."

Student discipline and school safety were pervasive concerns in this 24,000-student school district. Although policy required principals to suspend or expel students for certain infractions (e.g., possession or use of an illegal drug or possession of a weapon), considerable discretion was allowed for punishing lesser offenses. Support for existing policy among the district's administrators, including the principals, was mixed. In light of this fact, the assistant superintendent asked Hector: "Do you favor current district policy toward excluding students from school? Or, do you believe the school board should revise policy by specifying all offenses that merit suspensions?"

"I support current policy. Principals should have discretion. A single incident of misbehavior may appear minor, but when considered in relation to a student's cumulative record, it may justify a suspension."

Only four of the six-member selection committee voted to recommend Mr. Sanchez for the job. However, neither of the other two interviewees received more than three favorable votes. Consequently, Mr. Sanchez was recommended for and received the position.

### Student Suspensions at Rogers Middle School

As Rogers Middle School commenced its second school year, Principal Sanchez decided to establish the Student Discipline Advisory Committee (SDAC), a group of seven parents and four teachers. The SDAC met periodically to review discipline practices in the school and to make recommendations for improvements. Approximately 6 months after it was formed, a member of the SDAC, a teacher, suggested that the group review student suspension records. The teacher made this suggestion knowing that among the district's five middle schools, Rogers had the highest percentage of suspensions.

The group first reviewed district policy for student suspensions. The policy statement included the following provisions:

- A school principal (hereafter including an assistant principal, acting principal, or a legitimate designee) may suspend a student when, in the principal's judgment, the action is required. In the exercise of this authority, the principal is subject to all provisions of law and school board policy.
- Students may be suspended from school for up to five (5) school days by the school principal without concurrence from the superintendent or his/her designee.
- Prior to imposing a suspension, the principal must inform the student of the intent to suspend and provide an explanation of charges. The student is required to sign a form indicating he or she has been informed of these matters.
- If the student denies the charges, a written explanation of facts is given to the student and to his or her parent or guardian. Students whose presence poses a continuing danger to persons or property or an ongoing threat of disruption may be removed from school immediately.
- After a decision is made to suspend a student for five (5) school days or less, the principal shall report the facts of the case in writing to the superintendent or his or her designee, the student's parent or guardian, and the student as soon as practicable.
- Appeals of out-of-school suspensions are governed by board policy concerning suspensions and expulsions.

Next, the group reviewed school records that listed the reasons why students had been suspended. They learned that the cause of approximately one-third of the suspensions was listed as "recurring misbehavior." Uncertain as to the precise meaning of this term, the SDAC invited Principal Sanchez to meet with them. He explained that the term described a pattern of misbehavior as evidenced by a student's cumulative record. When asked about the higher rate of suspensions at Rogers, he said, "I can't explain suspension rates at the other four middle schools. You should know, however, that our student achievement test scores improved this year and our overall safety record is excellent. I believe discipline, student achievement, and school safety are inter-related." After meeting with the principal, the SDAC members, though not unanimously, decided to discontinue their review of student suspensions.

By its third year of operation, Rogers Middle School was receiving public recognition. The city's major newspaper published several columns praising improvement in student scores on the state proficiency tests. Various media reports portrayed Principal Sanchez as a model administrator, and the superintendent publicly announced that he had nominated Mr. Sanchez for the state's "Middle School Principal of the Year" award.

Not everyone agreed with the portrayal of Mr. Sanchez as an effective principal. His most outspoken critic was a social studies teacher at Rogers, Aaron Carson. An experienced educator, he considered the principal to be a bully who used his authority recklessly. After learning about the SDAC's review of student suspensions, he challenged the principal's views in a faculty meeting. He

said, “Contrary to what Mr. Sanchez told the SDAC, excluding students from school, especially for minor infractions, is ineffective punishment. You are really penalizing students academically while ignoring positive interventions that could improve behavior.” Although several colleagues agreed with him, none did so openly at the faculty meeting.

After the meeting, Principal Sanchez invited Mr. Carson to meet with him to discuss their divergent beliefs. They met on two occasions; though their conversations were candid and civil, they ended up agreeing to disagree.

### **Conflict Intensifies**

Most everyone at Rogers Middle School either knew or knew about Jimmy Malenga. He was a good athlete with a knack for finding trouble. His father was deceased and he lived with his mother and two sisters. Unfortunately, Jimmy’s performance in the classroom did not mirror his performance on the athletic field. However, he did better in social studies than he did in other subjects, possibly because his favorite teacher was Mr. Carson.

Unlike many middle schools, Rogers did not organize instruction around teacher teams and block scheduling. Instead, the daily schedule was traditional—seven periods, each 43 minutes long. Jimmy’s first period class, language arts, was taught by his least favorite teacher, Mr. Draycroft. Jimmy found diagramming sentences, studying grammar, and reading poetry to be unexciting. But he disliked the teacher even more than he disliked these activities. One day, Mr. Draycroft was reprimanding Jimmy for not having completed his homework. When he asked him why he failed to do his assignment, Jimmy answered, “Because this stuff is boring. Why don’t we do something useful?”

Other students in the class laughed loudly, but Mr. Draycroft was not amused. Instead, he shook his finger at Jimmy. “Young man, I have had it with you. You and I are going to see the principal at the end of the period.” Then Jimmy shouted back, “And, I’ve had it with you.”

The class period ended a few minutes later and Mr. Draycroft escorted Jimmy to the principal’s office. Jimmy was told to wait in the reception area as Mr. Draycroft talked to the principal. After a few minutes, Mr. Draycroft exited the office and went to his second-period class without looking at or speaking to Jimmy. At that point, Principal Sanchez took Jimmy into his office.

Jimmy already had been suspended from Rogers twice: once the previous school term and once during the current school term, each time for 3 days. “Jimmy,” Mr. Sanchez began, “when are you going to learn? Mr. Draycroft told me what you said to him.” After repeating the statements, the principal asked, “Did you say these things to Mr. Draycroft?”

Jimmy answered, “Yes. I said them because they are true. He’s not a good teacher.”

“Jimmy, you are in no position to judge teachers. Your remarks were disrespectful, and there are consequences for being disrespectful. In addition to being suspended previously this term, you have had after-school detention twice. Your persistent misbehavior is unacceptable, and clearly you have learned little from your previous suspensions. So, I am going to suspend you again for 3 days. Hopefully, this time it will have a positive effect. Before you go back to class, you need to sign this form indicating that I’ve told you of my intent to suspend you and then I’ll inform your mother that you are entitled to have an informal hearing if you contest the suspension.”

Jimmy responded angrily, “I’m not signing the form.” He then ran out of the principal’s office. Principal Sanchez tried to catch him, but Jimmy was too quick. Within seconds, he was out of the building and still running. Mr. Sanchez telephoned Jimmy’s mother, who was at work at the time. He told her about the incident, reported that Jimmy had left school without permission, and informed her of the impending suspension.

Mrs. Malenga left work immediately in hopes of finding her son at home. She did not find him there nor did he return home that evening. At 11:30 P.M., she contacted the police and reported that he was missing.

Various accounts of the incident spread quickly through the school. Aaron Carson found out about Jimmy bolting from the principal's office as he was leaving school that day. The next morning, he learned that Jimmy's mother had filed a missing person report. Angry about the way the matter had been handled, he confronted Principal Sanchez in the hallway before first period. Unlike their previous discussions, this one was not civil. Harsh words were exchanged and Mr. Carson promised to express his feelings to Dr. Penelope Mackee, the assistant superintendent for secondary education and Mr. Sanchez's immediate supervisor. He telephoned Dr. Mackee during his preparation period. After listening to his concerns, she said she would look into the situation.

Disappointed with the response he received from Dr. Mackee, Carson wrote the following letter to the city's major newspaper and hand delivered it that same day. It appeared on the editorial page the next day.

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*The public needs to know the story of Jimmy Malenga, a young Native American student at Rogers Middle School who apparently is now a runaway. Jimmy is one of my students and over the past few months, he has been making progress in my class. He was going to be suspended from school for expressing a viewpoint about another teacher. Though his behavior was undeniably improper, so was the disciplinary action imposed by the principal. Jimmy is now somewhere on the streets because his principal believes it is more important to punish him than it is to help him. What happened to Jimmy unfortunately is not unusual at our school. The principal routinely suspends students, at times for petty issues. Yet, he ignores possible interventions such as counseling or constructive behavior modification. I urge the superintendent and school board to revise policy so that principals will be unable to indiscriminately exclude students from schools. Hopefully, parents and other teachers will do the same.*

*Sincerely,  
Aaron Carson  
Social studies teacher,  
Rogers Middle School*

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After the letter was published, the superintendent, Dr. Fred Lopson, and school board members received numerous e-mails supporting Mr. Carson's views. They also were contacted by reporters. Late that afternoon, the superintendent issued a statement saying that he would investigate the matter and issue his finding at the next board meeting to be held in 4 days.

Two days after he ran from the principal's office, Jimmy Malenga returned home. His mother, relieved to have him back, informed the police and the media. Mrs. Malenga also called Principal Sanchez and told him she would not request a hearing. She said Jimmy would accept the punishment, apologize to Mr. Draycroft, and return to school after serving his suspension.

Controversy over suspensions at Rogers, however, did not wane. Now Mr. Sanchez's supporters were politically active. The following petition, signed by more than 200 Rogers Middle School parents and teachers, was given to the superintendent before the school board meeting at which he was to issue his report:

We the undersigned fully support the leadership of Principal Hector Sanchez. He has made Rogers Middle School the most successful and safest middle school in this district. We are relieved that Jimmy Malenga is safe and pleased that he will continue as a Rogers student, and we believe that Mr. Sanchez acted responsibly. We urge the school board to join us in supporting a great principal of an outstanding school.

Many of the people who signed the petition were at the board meeting.

During the meeting, Superintendent Lopson reported the outcome of his investigation. He concluded that Principal Sanchez had acted within the parameters of existing policy. He also pointed out that after the school's SDAC had investigated concerns about suspensions the previous school term, it concluded that current practices were acceptable. In closing, the superintendent said he would not recommend a change to existing policy. He explained that principals were professionals and should have discretion when disciplining students.

After he concluded his comments, George Manulita, a board member, was recognized.

"We are all aware that Mr. Sanchez is popular. In my opinion, he deserves some credit for operating a successful middle school. But the real issue is suspending students, not his popularity or influence. I believe the reasons why students get suspended should be specified in policy and policy should be enforced consistently across our schools. Therefore, I favor a policy change."

A few attendees applauded, but their reaction was quickly eclipsed by shouts of "no" from Sanchez supporters.

Darren Marshall, another board member, spoke next. "I disagree that a policy change is needed. As for Mr. Sanchez, he is doing a great job."

The principal's supporters stood, applauded, and then chanted, "Mr. Sanchez, Mr. Sanchez."

## Problem Framing

1. Assume you are Superintendent Lopson. First determine the main issue (problem) in this case. Then describe the current state and the desired state of this issue. (The section on problem framing in the Introduction section of this book defines the problem framing process.)
2. Based on evidence provided in the case, describe the difficulty associated with eliminating the gap between the present state and desired state.

## Questions and Suggested Activities

1. Discuss the intended purposes and merits of student suspensions. What does research on this topic reveal?
2. Do you agree with Principal Sanchez's contention that the effectiveness of discipline needs to be considered in relation to student learning? Why or why not?
3. What is the policy for suspensions in your school district? How does your district's policy differ from the one described in this case?
4. What alternatives could have been used by Principal Sanchez to discipline Jimmy given the incident and his previous record of misbehavior?
5. To what extent are student learning and discipline connected? What evidence do you have for your response?
6. What purposes should be served by policies and rules for student discipline?

7. The superintendent contends that specifying conditions for suspensions restricts principal discretion. Do you agree? What are the advantages and disadvantages of restricting employee discretion?
8. Did Mr. Carson, the teacher who wrote the letter to the editor of the local newspaper, behave professionally in criticizing Principal Sanchez publicly? Why or why not?
9. If you were a principal in this school district, would you prefer the current policy on student suspensions or a policy that would prohibit suspensions except for specified offenses? Defend your response.
10. Is Principal Sanchez an effective administrator? Why or why not?

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# 17 | THE PASSIVE PRINCIPAL

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

After-school reform again became a national issue in the early 1980s, policymakers attempted to improve schools by first making students do more of what they were already doing and, second, by raising standards for preparing and licensing administrators. Although these actions had some positive effects, they failed to improve underperforming schools sufficiently for at least three reasons.

1. Intensification mandates ignored the importance of school culture. Hence, requiring students and educators to do more of what they were already doing had little or no effect on educator shared values and beliefs (Sarason, 1996).
2. Intensification mandates had little or no effect on the way that schools were structured (Patterson, 2000). Therefore, the failure rate in them remained essentially unchanged (Schlechty, 1990).
3. Generic intensification mandates ignored the fact that districts and schools had different types and levels of needs (Kowalski, 2003).

Circa 1990, the locus of reform activity shifted to individual schools, as evidenced by the popularity of concepts such as site-based *management* (SBM). Revised strategies were intended to allow educators to make important changes based on the real needs of the schools in which they worked (Hoy & Miskel, 2005). To enable them to do this, teachers were to be treated as true professionals (Marzano, 2003), schools were to be given greater latitude to shape school-improvement initiatives (Kowalski, 2006), and local stakeholders were to be involved in strategic planning (Kowalski, Petersen, & Fusarelli, 2007).

In order to individualize reforms, schools had to become more flexible and adaptable. These attributes, however, heightened tensions between state authority and local district authority. Many state policymakers struggled to find ways to give districts and schools greater liberty without relinquishing accountability. One pervasive outcome was the adoption of *directed autonomy*—a strategy in which state policymakers set broad achievement benchmarks and then held local officials accountable for determining how they would be met (Weiler, 1990).

Principals arguably were affected more by the revised efforts to achieve school reform than were other educators (Brown, 1990). Specifically, their revised role included three school-improvement responsibilities:

1. They were to engage others in creating achievable and acceptable visions that detailed what needed to be done to improve their schools.
2. They were to engage others in building strategic plans for achieving the vision.
3. They were to garner political and economic support for change by communicating with a broad base of local stakeholders.

Concurrently, however, they were not relieved of extensive managerial responsibilities (Kowalski, 2010).

Although the strategy of tailoring reforms for individual schools has obvious merit, research has found that decentralizing authority, especially in schools that previously were highly centralized, often spawned unanticipated problems. Engaging in shared decision making, for instance, increased political behavior, divided faculty into factions, and stretched already inadequate budgets (Brown, 2001).

This case is about an experienced principal who volunteers to participate in a first phase of implementing SBM. In creating a school council, the principal determines that teachers, parents, and staff representatives should be elected. Although an ex officio member, the principal is passive during council meetings. After the council becomes mired in conflict, his laissez-faire attitude angers the council chair who has become frustrated with bickering between two factions of teachers.

### Key Areas for Reflection

1. Problems associated with decentralized governance of schools
2. Social conflict among individuals and groups in schools
3. Dynamics of group decision making
4. Leadership style and participatory decision making
5. Leadership role in conflict resolution

## THE CASE

### Community and School District

The LaSalle County School District has three high schools, six middle schools, and 19 elementary schools. From 1980 to 2005, the population increased by nearly 25% resulting in the construction of six new schools. One of them, Elm Street Elementary, is in the city of Sunland, the seat of government for the county and location of the school district's administrative offices.

### Superintendent and SBM

Three years ago, the school board employed Dr. Ursula Jones as superintendent. The 42-year-old administrator had been associate superintendent for instruction in a large-city school system in an adjoining state. Prior to coming to LaSalle County, Dr. Jones had established a reputation as a change agent. When the newspaper announced her employment, her former superintendent was quoted as saying, "LaSalle County is getting a top-notch superintendent. Dr. Jones is a creative and bold administrator and we will miss her leadership."

During her first year as superintendent, Dr. Jones developed a district decentralization plan calling for the incremental adoption of SBM. The initial phase included establishing pilot projects in one elementary and one secondary school. Six principals volunteered to have their schools become pilot projects, and after interviewing the principals, the superintendent selected the two schools.

The two participating schools received supplemental funding, including a \$25,000 allocation for staff development. The additional resources had to be used for SBM-related activities. In addition, the two principals were allowed to control budgetary allocations for supplies, equipment, and staff travel—allocations that normally were controlled by the assistant superintendent for business.

### **Elm Street Elementary School**

Elm Street Elementary is one of the district's newest buildings, having been made operational just 4 years ago. The school has three sections at each grade level, kindergarten to fifth grade. Albert Batz, previously a teacher and principal in the district, was selected to be the school's first administrator. An outgoing, friendly individual, he had been successful in his previous assignments.

Principal Batz's first major task at Elm Street Elementary was to select staff. He was inundated with applications, most from teachers already employed at other schools in the district. When the school opened, 75% of the teachers were people who had transferred from other district schools.

Mr. Batz describes his leadership style as "managing by walking around." He spends a great deal of time walking around the building, stopping to converse with employees and students when possible. It is not uncommon for him to walk into a classroom and join whatever activities are taking place. He usually makes two or three trips a day to the teachers' lounge, and one of his favorite midmorning hideaways is the kitchen. Teachers speculate as to whether his interaction with the cafeteria employees is motivated by his intense interest in the latest gossip or his intense interest in sampling the day's dessert. Most have concluded that the two motivators have equal influence on his behavior.

Teachers view Batz as an atypical principal. He appears to have a high need for social acceptance; for example, he often tells teachers that he is their peer and not their boss. Mrs. Lumans, his secretary, worked with him in his previous assignment; she was the first employee he selected after being named principal. The two complement each other; he does not like mundane management tasks and she has no problem when they are delegated to her.

### **Implementing SBM**

In seeking to be part of the pilot project, Batz claimed that he had always embraced democratic decision making; his interest, however, was not restricted to administrative philosophy. Pragmatically, he hoped that a school council could resolve intense conflict that had emerged between two teacher factions. One group consisted of four teachers who previously worked together at Harrison Elementary School; their leader was Jenny Bales. The other group consisted of three teachers who previously worked together at Weakland Township Elementary School; their leader was Leonard Teel. While neither faction was large, each was cohesive. After just a few months in the new school, they were continuously vying for broader political support.

Principal Batz concluded that Mrs. Bales and Mr. Teel were political enemies with similar traits and needs. In their previous schools, each had been the "alpha" teacher—the faculty member with the greatest power over other teachers. Each was attempting to recapture that status at Elm Street Elementary School. Bales and Teel viewed Batz as a weak administrator and basically ignored him. Instead, they attempted to garner support from the 15 teachers not aligned with either faction.

The superintendent's SBM plan required the pilot school principals to (a) establish school councils, (b) serve as ex officio council members, (c) determine the size of the council, and (d) determine how other council members would be selected. Batz opted for an 11-member committee consisting of six teachers, three parents, one support staff employee, and himself. He decided that members should be elected by the faculty, the school staff, and the PTA (each group selecting its respective representatives). Nine teachers expressed interest in serving on the council; seven were members of either the Bales or Teel faction.

Amy Raddison and Tim Paxton, two novice teachers not aligned with either faction, received the most votes in the faculty election. The other four teachers elected were Jenny Bales, Arlene McFadden (aligned with Bales), Leonard Teel, and Lucille Isacson (aligned with Teel).

Mr. Batz initially was pleased with the election outcome. He hoped that Bales and Teel would reconcile their differences by working together on the council. After 4 months, however, he realized his optimism was unfounded. Rather than diminishing tensions, the council became a conduit for intense confrontations, some of which were malevolent. A dispute over an agenda item at the December council meeting was an example. A request to send five teachers, including Teel and a member of his faction, to a mid-January conference on SBM was submitted for approval. Bales and her collaborator immediately opposed the request.

"Just because we have a budget for staff development doesn't mean that we should send people to California to conferences," she said.

Teel shot back, "This conference focuses on effective SBM practices. Teachers from all over the United States will be there. We can learn a great deal. It's not my decision to have the conference in California. Why do you care where it is held?"

Bales answered, "There are plenty of good programs you could attend closer to home that would be less expensive. Stop thinking about what you want to do and think about what is best for the school. I will vote against this request and urge others to do likewise." The vote was delayed until the next council meeting.

Barbara Whitlow, president of the Parent and Teachers Association, a parent representative, and council chair, was surprised by Batz's indifference to the petty bickering. After the meeting, she expressed her feelings to him and suggested that he could have ended the conflict by expressing a professional opinion.

He answered, "You know that I don't like to take sides. As principal, I need to be neutral. I have to work closely with everyone. This is probably a good conference but there are also good conferences and workshops closer to home. So, there are merits to both arguments. I want to hear how other council members feel before I decide how I will vote."

Since becoming council chair, Mrs. Whitlow had questioned Batz regarding his responsibility to exercise authority on the council. However, his responses always were vague. Now in the midst of another argument between Bales and Teel, she again asked him to explain his role. He answered that his role was identical to other members'; he had one vote just as they did.

At the next council meeting, Whitlow told the others that she had asked Batz to take a position on the travel request because of his role as principal. She added that he refused to do so. Expectedly, Bales and Teel were comfortable with Batz's position and openly agreed that his authority was no greater or less than any other council member.

In light of Batz's unwillingness to state his position on the matter in question, Bales made a motion to deny the travel request. The motion was seconded by McFadden, her political ally. Teel requested that the vote be taken by secret ballot, a process that was becoming common and one

that Whitlow saw as divisive. Nevertheless, other council members agreed to the secret ballot, perhaps because it provided a quick resolution and anonymity.

The motion to deny the travel request was defeated by a one-vote margin. A parent on the council then made another motion to approve the travel request, and it passed by one vote.

The next day, Whitlow again met with Batz privately to discuss his refusal to manage the destructive conflict between Bales and Teel.

“I just don’t understand how you can sit back and allow Mrs. Bales and Mr. Teel to constantly take jabs at each other. Their behavior is destructive to the council and probably to the entire school. Don’t you see that?” she asked.

“Barbara, I still hope they will reconcile their differences and begin to collaborate. If I intervene, I have to take sides. There will be a winner and loser. I don’t want to do that.”

Whitlow again was irritated with his lack of leadership and she told him how she felt. She added that if he remained passive, she would resign from the council. “You know, Albert, I have plenty to do besides spending 10 to 12 hours a week at the school. I will stop volunteering my time unless the council becomes a productive force, as intended by Dr. Jones. We spend much of our time in meetings listening to petty arguments that are more about power struggles than about school improvement. I’m not an expert, but I believe you have a responsibility to deal with this negative behavior.”

Batz pleaded with Whitlow to be patient. He told her that her continued leadership on the council was essential.

Two days after their private meeting, Whitlow wrote a letter to Batz resigning from the council. Copies were sent to Dr. Jones and each member of the LaSalle County school board. In her letter, she indicated that the SBM pilot project at Elm Street Elementary School was being undermined. She wrote:

. . . If schools are given leeway and added resources, principals must be made accountable for these assets. Simply sharing power and authority does not ensure that our children receive a better education. I resign from the Elm Street Elementary School Council. My decision is based on two related issues. First, the council has been infected by conflict contaminants emanating from a power struggle between two teacher factions. I have become frustrated because of my inability to improve the situation. Second, I have repeatedly requested the principal to address the contaminants and he has been unwilling to do so. To this point, experimentation with SBM has not been successful at Elm Street Elementary School.

After reading the letter, Batz put it in his top desk drawer and worried about how the superintendent, school board, and Elm Street faculty would react to it. Shortly thereafter, he left his office and started toward the school cafeteria. A smile came over his face as he got close enough to smell freshly baked cookies. Two hours later, however, Mr. Batz received a telephone call from the superintendent notifying him he was being reassigned to a vacant position (assistant curriculum director) in the district’s administrative office.

## Problem Framing

1. Assume you are Mr. Batz. First determine the main issue (problem) in this case. Then describe the current state and the desired state of this issue. (The section on problem framing in the Introduction section of this book defines the problem framing process.)
2. Based on evidence provided in the case, describe the difficulty associated with eliminating the gap between the present state and desired state.

## Questions and Suggested Activities

1. Did the superintendent's approach to selecting pilot schools to implement SBM contribute to the conflict at Elm Street Elementary School? Why or why not?
2. Do you agree with the principal's decision to permit council members to be elected? If you agree, what is your rationale? If you disagree, what would you have done differently?
3. As the new principal, you could remove the four teachers from the competing factions from the council. What are the advantages and disadvantages of taking this action?
4. Were members of the school council adequately prepared to assume their responsibility? What evidence do you have to defend your response?
5. As the new principal, what role would you play on a school council?
6. Was Mr. Batz's behavior indicative of a democratic leadership style? Why or why not?
7. To what extent is Barbara Whitlow (the PTA president and council chair) responsible for the conflict described in this case?
8. Based on your experiences in schools, how do non-administrators acquire power?
9. Based on the information in this case, did the superintendent act prudently by removing Mr. Batz as principal?

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# 18

## A DISILLUSIONED ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Administrative behavior is affected by a mix of personal, professional, and contextual variables. One of the most powerful variables is socialization, a process through which persons are pressured to learn and accept the behavioral norms of an organization or other social group. Workplace socialization begins when administrators are initially employed in schools, and the most critical values and beliefs typically pertain to problem solving and decision making (Kowalski, 2010). The process is especially intense in schools having strong cultures—that is, schools in which most organization members share the same values and beliefs about their work. Conversely, socialization is least intense in weak cultures where there is limited concurrence regarding values and assumptions.

Administrators almost always experience four levels of socialization:

1. *Socialization to teaching.* This process begins when a person enters college and more specifically a teacher education program. The intent is to provide normative standards for professional behavior. For example, students are usually taught to behave ethically, to serve their students, and to be caring and objective.
2. *Socialization to the workplace as a teacher.* This process begins when a person enters school as an employee and is most intense during the first year of employment. New-to-the-school teachers, including those who have previous experience in other schools, are directly and indirectly (symbolically) told which values and assumptions are most important and they are expected to embrace or at least tolerate them (Aiken, 2002). Frequently, a new teacher discovers that the core values of the teaching profession may not be the core values of a given school.
3. *Socialization to administration.* This process begins when teachers enter a school administration degree or licensure program. The knowledge, values, and assumptions they study are intended to influence their dispositions and behavior as administrators.
4. *Socialization to the workplace as an administrator.* This process begins when a person assumes an administrative position for the first time and recurs when the person moves to a different school or district. Again, the normative standards learned as a graduate student in administration classes may or may not be congruent with shared values and assumptions of a given school culture.

When the values and assumptions promoted at different levels are incongruent, administrators commonly experience conflict because they must choose between competing values and beliefs. These choices are pivotal because they determine how a principal or assistant principal will behave in a challenging situation (Hanson, 2003). An assistant principal, for example, may have been taught to treat teachers as peer professionals, but her immediate supervisor and the

superintendent may expect her to treat teachers as subordinates. Negative school cultures—that is, cultures in which members share values and beliefs incongruent with the professional knowledge base—generate the most conflict because educators are pressured to accept norms that contradict evidence of best practices (Kowalski, 2003).

Novice administrators do not respond uniformly to socialization. Although most conform and accept or pretend to accept dominant workplace values, others do not, even at the risk of incurring sanctions (Heck, 1995). When an administrator overtly rejects the prevailing culture, one of three outcomes occurs: she will resign; she will be dismissed; she will remain and incur sanctions (e.g., poor evaluations, being ostracized).

This case is about a female teacher who becomes an assistant principal. As a novice administrator, she quickly discerns that she and the principal have different values and beliefs—a condition that affects her self-confidence and her relationship with the principal. Moreover, she recognizes that the principal's philosophy is shared by most of, if not all, the teachers at the school. She begins to weigh four possible options: (a) learning to live with the conflict so she can remain in her current position, (b) accepting the principal's values and beliefs, (c) seeking an administrative position in another school, or (d) returning to teaching.

### Key Areas for Reflection

1. School culture
2. Socialization in organizations
3. Problems encountered by novice administrators
4. Professional knowledge, personal values, and ethical behavior
5. Determinants of administrative behavior

### THE CASE

Amber Jackson sat in her office at Polk Middle School trying to finish work assigned by the principal. At nearly 9:30 P.M., the three night custodians were the only other people still in the building. Amber was tired and frustrated, making it difficult for her to focus on the work she had to complete. As she stared at the clock, she concluded that she was not going to get much sleep that evening.

Amber had started teaching English and physical education at a middle school in Southern California at age 22. Two years later, she began coaching volleyball and enrolled as a part-time student in a master's degree program at a local state university. She selected educational administration as a major because she wanted to be a school principal. Dr. Tom Appleton, formerly a principal in a suburban school district near San Diego, was her adviser. During her master's program, Amber completed two of his classes: "School Public Relations" and "The School Principal." He considered her to be the best student he had encountered since becoming a professor 4 years earlier.

As Amber was about to complete her master's degree, Professor Appleton told her that she could be a highly successful administrator. "You are intelligent and your work ethic is great. I think you should start applying for assistant principal jobs. And once you find the right position, you should think about pursuing a doctoral degree. You are an exceptional student and your future is unlimited."

Professor Appleton's career advice was flattering and the idea of becoming an assistant principal and a doctoral student was inviting. Amber, however, was hesitant to follow the advice because she had only 5 years of teaching experience and she had recently gotten engaged.

Amber told Professor Appleton that she had decided to wait at least a year before applying for administrative positions. "I'm getting married in November, and my fiancé is an Air Force officer currently stationed in Texas. His tour of duty will be over in about 8 months, and then he plans to be a commercial pilot. Therefore, I'm not sure where I'll be living a year from now. Once we get settled and he has a job, I would be more comfortable seeking an administrative position and entering a doctoral program."

Over the course of the following year, Amber got married and her husband became a pilot for an airfreight company based in Chicago. They rented an apartment in a suburb about 20 minutes north of the city. Amber applied for teaching and administrative positions in the Chicago area. In less than a month, she had two job offers: one a teaching position in an affluent suburban district and the other a middle-school assistant principal position in a predominately lower-middle-class suburban district. She accepted the administrative position.

Polk Middle School, constructed in the early 1960s, enrolls approximately 800 students in Grades 7 and 8. Twenty-eight percent of the students are identified as racial or ethnic minorities, equally divided between African American and Hispanic students.

The other two administrators employed at the school are Emil Denko, the principal, and Ernest Tarver, the other assistant principal. The former is white and has been in his role for 14 years and the latter is African American and has been in his role for 12 years. Mr. Denko and Mr. Tarver plan to retire in 3 years.

Amber found Polk Middle School to be substantially different from the middle school where she had previously been employed as a teacher. Given the differences in the communities served, she correctly assumed that there would be more academic and discipline problems at Polk. She did not anticipate, however, that relationships among teachers and administrators at the two schools would be substantially different. At her previous place of employment, the administrators had a collegial relationship with the teachers, and teachers were routinely involved in important decisions, especially those relating to curriculum and instruction. At Polk, relationships between teachers and administrators were primarily adversarial and virtually all important decisions were made by administrators and contested by teachers.

Conflict between administrators and the faculty was pervasive at Polk Middle School and it was almost always resolved in one of two ways. Either the principal brokered a negotiated settlement, or the dispute was adjudicated in accordance with the grievance procedures contained in the teachers' union master contract. Yet, Mr. Denko and Mr. Tarver were rarely criticized personally; on a day-to-day basis, their relationships with teachers were friendly. Essentially, the administrators and teachers behaved as members of opposing political parties; they could engage in bitter disputes at school but then have cocktails together after work.

Amber also discovered that many Polk teachers set low expectations for their students. For example, teachers often commented openly (e.g., at faculty meetings) that many of their students could never succeed academically. Even more disturbing, Principal Denko appeared to share this conviction. During a conversation between Denko and Amber about student homework, he essentially echoed the conviction that many Polk students would never do well as students, primarily because they were situated in families that cared little about education. To support his belief, he pointed out that only 24% of the district's high school graduates enrolled in post-secondary education and 19% of high school freshmen dropped out of school before they graduated.

After 3 months at Polk, Amber already was experiencing job dissatisfaction. Almost all of her assigned duties were related to discipline and routine management. Her preference was to be more involved in instructional issues. By the end of the first semester, she wrote a letter of resignation. But before submitting it, she telephoned her former professor and mentor, Dr. Appleton.

She shared her impressions of Polk Middle School and her doubts about continuing in her current position. After listening for nearly 10 minutes, he offered his advice.

“Before you make a decision, you need to have the conversation we are having with the principal. Share your impressions of the school; express your desire to be more involved with instructional programs. Find out how he will respond. If he is closed minded, maybe you should resign. If you decide to leave Polk, however, do so at the end of your current annual contract. Leaving in the middle of a school year may make it difficult for you to find another administrative position.”

Heeding Appleton’s advice, Amber met with Denko and shared her concerns. She told him, “I don’t understand why the teachers have such a low opinion of students. They appear to be giving up on students who most need their help. High expectations usually affect students positively. One of my former professors said that it was especially important for administrators to believe that all students could succeed.”

Denko stared at her with a cynical expression on his face. He was astonished by her comments, thinking to himself that she should be grateful for the opportunity he had given her. After a moment of silence, he responded verbally.

“How could you be dissatisfied? Here you are, not even 30 years old and you’re already an administrator. You’re making nearly twice as much as most teachers your age. Personally, I think you’re doing a good job. Maybe there is something else bothering you and you do not want to tell me about it. Is that the case?”

Amber replied. “No. I’m being totally candid. I just feel uncomfortable in this school. The negative attitude about students and the pervasive conflict between administration and the faculty are draining. Many of the teachers leave school at the end of the day as if it was on fire. Even worse, they talk about the school’s lack of effectiveness as if they were totally unaccountable for negative outcomes.”

“Polk students don’t come from wealthy families; many of them don’t come from healthy families. People who have not worked in this type of community should not prescribe solutions. You cannot ignore the social environment. Being here and working with these social problems day after day have given the teachers a sense of reality. The teachers are being straightforward. Don’t confuse their bluntness with indifference. They actually try to help students, but now and then they let off steam. They cannot ignore the fact that 20% of their students hate school and drop out when they turn 16 or shortly thereafter. I have lived in this type of community all my life. I, too, once dreamed that every one of my students would go to college and be successful. Unfortunately, dreams do not shape reality. Years ago, I also listened to idealistic professors. The problem then and now is that many of them are unaware of what it is like to be in the trenches, especially in a community like this one.”

Amber disagreed with his comments, but instead of rebutting, she moved to her second concern.

“Emil, I’m also bothered by the fact that I have had no opportunity to work directly with teachers on instructional matters. I don’t mind handling discipline problems, and I don’t mind doing things like supervising students getting on and off buses. I expected to have these responsibilities—I just didn’t expect them to be my entire job. I want to work closely with teachers. As a teacher, I benefited from the counsel of my principal; she always exhibited interest in my professional growth. She was a terrific role model. I am a good teacher and I can help other teachers.”

“I’m sure you can,” Mr. Denko answered. “And maybe next year, you can be assigned to evaluate several teachers, especially in language arts. Right now, I don’t think you should be doing

that. You're younger than most of the teachers, and some might resent being evaluated by a person with much less classroom experience. In addition, teachers in this district don't want administrators meddling in their classrooms."

"Why are they opposed to receiving instructional supervision?"

"I suppose because that has been the history in this district. This is a union-oriented community, and the teachers' union has clout. We have to live with the union whether we like it or not. The doubts you're having will fade with time. As I told you, I, too, once had grand ideas about saving poor teachers and helping troubled students. But reality takes hold. My primary concern as principal now is to keep this school operating efficiently and safely. I started teaching in this district 34 years ago. This once was a much more affluent area and our school statistics looked much better. We can't control the social deterioration around us. Play your cards right, and you could be the next principal 3 years from now."

Hours later, Amber was sitting at her desk finishing the monthly student discipline report. Her thoughts, however, kept drifting back to Denko's comments; the more she thought about his advice, the more she felt dissatisfied with her job. The thought that she might become Polk's principal and Denko's protégé actually frightened her.

At 10:15 that evening, Amber finally finished the report and drove home. While in her car, she called Professor Appleton on her cell phone. She told him about the conversation she had with Principal Denko.

"Clearly, these were not the answers you wanted," he told her. "Even so, I think you need to finish the school year at Polk before moving to another position."

## Problem Framing

1. Assume you are Amber. First determine the main issue (problem) in this case. Then describe the current state and the desired state of this issue. (The section on problem framing in the Introduction section of this book defines the problem framing process.)
2. Based on evidence provided in the case, describe the difficulty associated with eliminating the gap between the present state and desired state.

## Questions and Suggested Activities

1. Do you believe that Amber has a realistic perspective about her role as assistant principal? Why or why not?
2. If you were Amber, would you remain at Polk until the end of the school year? Why or why not?
3. When you began teaching, to what extent did you experience workplace socialization? How did you respond to socialization?
4. In what ways is workplace socialization for teachers different than workplace socialization for administrators?
5. Evaluate Principal Denko's statements about the differences between dreams and realities in schooling disadvantaged students. Do you agree with him? Why or why not?
6. Amber is surprised that the administrators and faculty have learned to live with pervasive conflict. Specifically, they are on opposite sides in most day-to-day matters but yet have managed to be friends outside of school. Based on your studies and experiences in schools, is such behavior common?
7. Is the principal responsible for the attitudes teachers have about low-performing students? Why or why not?
8. Why is socialization a critical process in schools?
9. Based on what you read in this case, is the culture of Polk Middle School strong or weak?
10. Based on what you have studied and experienced in schools, what must be done to make Polk Middle School more effective?

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