

## PROACTIVE VERSUS REACTIVE PRINCIPALS

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Much is written pertaining to the principal being proactive as compared to being reactive. An either/ or dichotomy is presented here. No doubt the principal should have foresight and be proactive, if at all possible. However, the principal must also react favorably in identifying and solving problems. This paper will examine both the proactive and reactive concepts of being a school principal.

### THE PROACTIVE PRINCIPAL

The proactive principal is expected to have foresight to avoid problems in the school setting. There is no crystal ball here for gazing purposes to foretell events in a school for the future. Thus, the principal should have much knowledge pertaining to education and be able to use what is known with skill. What is known about the latest in educational practices provides background information to predict what should be. The principal studies and evaluates the local school carefully in terms of what is being emphasized at present. Evaluation is ongoing and continuous. Useful categories are developed by the principal to assess in detail what is in evidence in the school setting. Useful categories include the following:

1. Curriculum including objectives, learning opportunities, and evaluation techniques.
2. Management of instruction including grouping practices, improving the quality of discipline, availability of technology to all pupils, and audiovisual equipment scheduled appropriately for all teachers to do a good job of teaching.
3. Materials of instruction such as textbooks, trade books, audiovisual aids, illustrations, and consumable items such as construction paper and art supplies.

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4. Human relations among school personnel.
5. Parental input into the school curriculum.
6. Research conducted in the school setting to improve the curriculum.
7. Staff development and in-service education.
8. A professional library for teachers and other professionals in school.
9. Leadership provided by the school principal in working toward an improved school curriculum.
10. Innovations made based on perceived needs in the curriculum.

After categories such as the above have been worked out cooperatively, teachers with the principal's assistance may study and evaluate that which needs improvement. Based on study results, the principal with his/her teachers predict what will or might be in the offing. A definite knowledge base is needed to predict. Proactive is then possible. The principal tries to avoid hindrances and negative results by moving forward to the new and the unique. The new and the unique is based on sound educational thinking and quality procedures.

For example, after studying the stated objectives of the school curriculum (item #1 above), the principal with his/ her teachers, stresses that modifications are necessary. Thus, for example, in moving from pupil problem-solving using abstract learning opportunities largely, more problem solving is necessary using real world situations in society. Parents and students might have indicated problem-solving in reality and the real world to be salient as compared to learners solving problems in simulated situations largely. This becomes a necessary ingredient of a new curriculum. Or there is a need to have technology and audiovisual materials available to more pupils (item #2 above in management of instruction), not the talented and gifted only, nor another select group of pupils. Careful planning is necessary to ward off problems before they occur. Another area of concern (#2 above) pertains to problems of discipline. Moving from a teacher/ principal - centered program of discipline, the study indicates that a pupil-centered procedure could reap more benefits. A planned series of meetings together with staff development programs are needed to remedy any identified area of weakness from becoming a reaction to a grave difficulty in the school setting.

### REACTION IN THE SCHOOL SETTING

One cannot predict, at all times by any means, what should be in the school setting. Sometimes, the principal reacts to problems, complexities, and difficulties. The problem area has burst at its seams and a definite reaction is needed. Item #3 above pertaining to the use of instructional materials has critical components. For example, if selected pupils are not learning to read well, considering diverse influencing variables including materials of teaching reading, parents complain and the involved pupils become very dissatisfied with life in school. Teachers, principals, the superintendent, and school board members hear complaints about this problem area. Perhaps, there are even letters to the editor in the local newspaper about the quality of teaching that permits selected pupils to fall through the cracks in reading instruction. Reaction is necessary. At the very beginning, before complaints arose over pupil progress in reading and with sophisticated diagnosis and remediation procedures, the principal and teachers could operate in terms of being proactive by changing to new strategies and materials of instruction. However, after the many complaints are heard, it is necessary to react to a lack of progress in reading on the part of selected pupils.

The reaction, after adequate deliberation, could involve diverse means of remediation. These might include using a different set of readers, using a different teaching procedure such as changing from basal readers to individualized reading, using different grouping strategy from homogeneous to heterogeneous grouping of pupils for instruction, emphasizing a different teaching strategy from "round robin reading" to personal conferences with the reading teacher to notice pupil progress, and/or using a different reward system to encourage increased skill in reading on the part of pupils.

The reaction is needed to move from what is to a more ideal situation in the curriculum for all pupils.

No doubt, a combination of procedures, both proactive and reactive, need to be used in improving the school curriculum. It is obvious that complete proaction is not possible since principals and teachers cannot foresee all problems in education. One must always try to do the best possible to have each pupil make continual, optimal progress. Even the best intentions can go awry.

Reactions are not always bad or negative. People are human beings and limited in what can be forecast. Then too, sometimes the reactions come early and

little damage has been done. Principals and teachers need to react as early as possible to a problematic situation. Very clearly, the problem needs identification and adequate delimitation. Vague problems are difficult or impossible to try to solve. The problem identified needs to be contextual, not unrelated to where these occurrences happen.

In item #4 above, if human relations are a problem in school, the principal and teachers in a school need to identify where specifically the weakness is and why it is occurring. For example, two teachers have recently refused to speak to each other in the hallway or teachers' lounge. To let a situation go on and on may only make for negative communications and undesirable working conditions. In these situations low morale may set in on the part of many teachers as well as for the principal.

Once the problem is clearly delineated, a hypothesis needs developing to determine a course of action. Brainstorming might be needed to get a better perspective on different courses of action. What may be the best course of action? Quality human relations are necessary to develop a vision as to what a school should be like and strive toward. A plan should follow in working out a solution. The hypothesis needs to be tested in a lifelike situation involving the two teachers. When people do not speak each other, a delicate situation exists. To try any identified hypothesis requires a skilled mediator. The disagreements between the two teachers could only become worse if a lack of mediation skills is in evidence. However, quality communication is necessary among school personnel in working toward the best curriculum possible for pupils.

Should the hypothesis not work satisfactorily, a new or different solution needs to be found. Problem solving skills are musts for teachers and principals. A reactive principal then needs to use quality problem-solving skills. The principal reacts to a problematic situation that does not go away unless intervention occurs.

### **OTHER AREAS OF INTERVENTION**

In following through with the ten areas of possible problems listed above, the first four have been referred to in identifying and solving problems. Let us analyze briefly how a proactive, as compared to a reactive, principal would function.

Thus in item #5, the proactive principal would determine with teacher involvement how to secure parental input in assisting the latter's offspring to achieve

more optimally. Epstein (1995) provides a framework of six types of parental involvement and sample practices which include the following:

- a. parents receiving information, in a variety of ways, from the school to improve parenting procedures.
- b. Quality methods of communication between parents and the school.
- c. Volunteer work by parents in schools.
- d. Parents helping pupils at home with homework.
- e. Involvement in parent-teacher organizations in decision-making roles.
- f. Parents securing assistance from community organizations to assist pupils to do better in school.

These areas provide a framework from which schools may involve parents more so than formerly in the education of their children. Parents need to assist their offspring so that each might achieve more optimally in school and society. A proactive principal has foresight to notice what is needed in educating the whole child. Thus parental involvement is needed to improve parenting skills, improve communication with the schools, do volunteer work in school, assist pupils with homework, increase involvement in decision-making such as parent/ teacher interaction, and secure help for specific pupils who experience deficiencies in sight and vision, among other items.

The reactive principal identifies weaknesses when parents should have been involved in assisting their child to achieve. Based on the diagnosis, remediation work is involved such as securing parental assistance in guiding more optimal learner achievement.

Item #6 above emphasizes conducting research in the school setting to improve the curriculum. The proactive principal possesses wisdom to predict which areas in the curriculum need to be researched. Possible answers from the research may assist pupils to make continuous progress in learning. An entirely new approach may be an end result based on research results. A reactive principal notices that dissatisfaction with pupil achievement is revealed by teachers and parents. Areas of weakness are noticed and research conducted. Research results

might pinpoint areas of weakness which need modification or change.

Flake, et. Al., (1995) wrote the following:

“Efforts to improve the quality of schooling in America require classroom teachers to assume new professional roles. The development of the role of teacher/researcher can improve instructional growth and fulfill the teacher’s responsibility to students and the profession. At the University of South Carolina we are striving to prepare interns for this new professional role by helping them become researchers and take care of their own learning. The research methodologies they learn to use to solve problems in the MAT program will pay dividends throughout their professional lives. Through the creation of knowledge, the interns discover the power they have to participate in professional dialogues and to direct their own professional development. By becoming researchers, teachers can take control of their classrooms and professional lives in ways that confound the traditional definition of teacher and offer proof that education can reform itself from within.”

Is the approach used by the University of South Carolina in the MAT program for teachers proactive or reactive? I do believe it truly would be proactive. This program of teacher education is looking forward in having teachers foresee what needs to be done in teaching to work toward improvement. These teachers when serving as practitioners might well react to weaknesses in teaching and learning with a plan to change and modify that which needs to emphasize something different. Reaction to the curriculum then sets in. Numerous schools of education at colleges/universities also stress an action research component for future school administrators. These school administrators might then use action research plans proactively as well as reactively to offer the best curriculum possible for each pupil.

### **STAFF DEVELOPMENT, ITEM #7**

Staff development is viewed as a necessity by the proactive principal because of changes occurring in the societal arenas which relate to education and schooling. The proactive principal has foresight to notice that an outdated curriculum might be an end result unless quality new ideas are pursued in staff development. A prime example here is the use of technology in the public schools. The school curriculum can become quite outdated unless principals and teachers take the lead to notice what should be in the curriculum. Peha (1995) wrote the following pertaining to the use of technology:

“Before looking at what we found in classrooms, let’s define a few key terms. For many years, three types of traffic have dominated the Internet:

\* With electronic mail, the most popular tool at all grade levels, a user can quickly send messages to any other user or specified group of users. E-mail can also reach mass audiences when used in conjunction with:

- - distribution lists, made up of e-mail addresses of people with shared interests (a list of educational distribution lists is available via anonymous FTP)
- - newsgroups, also called electronic bulletin boards, where any user interested in a topic may read about it much the same way one reads personal e-mail.
- - File transfers (FTP’s) allow a user to copy a file (which can contain text, software, pictures, and music) from, or to, another computer system. With a variation, anonymous FTP, a user can copy files without the need for password privileges.

\* Telnet allows a user to log onto a remote computer as if it were in the same room. For example, one might telnet onto a system because it has capabilities that the local system lacks...”

It will take quite a few years before public schools, in many cases, will come near to what is described above in the direct quote. In Missouri, school systems are in their very infancy in making computer use available to pupils, let alone having e-mail, internet, and world wide web. Principals here need to act proactively to obtain needed technology for teachers and pupils to use. Technology should be available to all pupils in all grade levels. If this does not occur, there will be individuals who will be left out of securing jobs and positions in the work place as adults. With foresight, the principal needs to work with the school board and lay public to obtain necessary technology for all learners. A principal might be reactive in remedying situations where the school needs to move from where they are in technological use to where the school should be. Pupils need to have ample opportunities to use technology in all its dimensions. Staff development is necessary with quality objectives, learning opportunities, and appraisal procedures incorporating the use of technology.

### **PROFESSIONAL LIBRARY, ITEM #7**

Principals need to have access to the latest in educational publications pertaining to their professional areas of work. In the field of school administration, I recommend publications from the following professional organizations for the principal's professional library: National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, American Association of School Administrators, The National Council for the Social Studies, National Science Teachers Association, International Reading Association, and the National Council Teachers of English, as a minimum. Each of these organizations has national, regional, and state association conventions for administrators and teachers. By reading literature and attending professional meetings, the principal can continue to grow, develop, and achieve. Leading publishing companies publish university level textbooks in the training of school administrators which the practitioner will find beneficial to read to increase professionalism as a school principal. A professional library is a must for the proactive as well as reactive principal.

### **LEADERSHIP TO IMPROVE THE CURRICULUM, ITEM #9**

The proactive as well as reactive principal must be a leader to develop the very best objectives, activities and experiences, and evaluation techniques for pupils in the school curriculum. To develop a quality curriculum, the principal must encourage, guide, and stimulate teachers to change in a positive direction. Teachers then inwardly feel a need to move from what is to what should be in the curriculum. The role of the principal is vital. Teachers tend to look to the principal to lead them from the actual to the ideal.

Leadership is needed to stress different approaches in curriculum improvement. The principal might then assist teachers to participate in workshops devoted to improving the curriculum. The following is a model to follow (Ediger, 1988):

1. The theme of the workshop should be decided upon cooperatively by participants.
2. The general session should be used to help participants identify relevant problems in teaching.



3. Committees should be formed to work on problems identified in the general session.
4. Individual study is necessary in providing for personal differences among participants in the workshop.
5. Consultant service must be available at the workshop.
6. An adequate library must be available for participants.
7. The number of sessions in the workshop as well as the duration of each session should be decided upon cooperatively by workshop participants.
8. The physical facilities necessary in having a good workshop and the arrangement of furniture conducive to generating ideas in the solving of problems should be such that they facilitate increased achievement on the part of individuals in the workshop.

Workshops are one way, among others, to improve curricular experiences for pupils. Teachers and principals need to perceive that workshops are purposeful, worthwhile, and utilitarian in finding means to solve problems in teaching and learning.

### **NEEDS IN THE CURRICULUM, ITEM #10**

The proactive and reactive principal constantly analyzes needs in the curriculum. The needs provide a basis for problem-solving on the part of school personnel. The following are ways of determining needs in the curriculum:

1. conduct a needs assessment survey in the local school area or district pertaining to what should be in the curriculum, according to participants in the survey.
2. talk to individuals and committees, such as the local parent-teacher organization, in the community as to what they deem needs to be changed in teaching and learning.
3. interact with civic and religious organizations to discern what is deemed necessary in the curriculum.

4. Participate actively in school events to ascertain from parents what the latter believes to be important in the curriculum.
5. discuss education and ways of improving the curriculum with lay people in the community.

### IN CONCLUSION

The proactive principal plans together with his/her teachers pertaining to that which should be in the curriculum. These plans are developed prior to experiencing conflict in the community over matters pertaining to teaching and learning. A normative approach is used here in that the principal and his/her teachers believe in selected trends in education that should be implemented. The reactive principal realizes that certain happenings occurred which need remediation in the school setting. When reacting, solutions are applied to the areas of deficiency.

Sometimes, the lines are thin indeed between being a proactive as compared to a reactive principal. This manuscript shows the roles of a proactive as well as of a reactive principal in the following areas of the curriculum: problem solving, school-university collaboration, cooperative learning, school research, a common vision, parental input, staff development, a professional library, leadership to improve the curriculum, and needs in the curriculum. Hopefully, these vital areas will receive adequate attention in the school setting and each pupil will be assisted to achieve as optimally as possible.

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