

# WHAT TO DO WITH A FAILING TEACHER OR PRINCIPAL

## A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON AN AGE-OLD PROBLEM

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**Principals and superintendents need to take very seriously their responsibility to hire good teachers and discharge bad ones.**

**BY ROBERT RICE AND MARVIN OPIYO**

**T**he problem of failing teachers is as old and universal as formal education. Sixty years ago, Frances Donovan published a book entitled *The Schoolma'am*, in which she examined teacher motivation, training, selection, and turnover.<sup>1</sup> Donovan defined teacher failure as a lack of desired results in student learning and success.

Teacher failure may result in resignations and teacher turnover. However, retaining or transferring a failing teacher without taking corrective action may have a negative impact on students and eventually, on the whole community. Bad teachers can scar children and adolescents for life, while good teachers can inspire them to achieve lofty goals. Principals and superintendents need to take very seriously their responsibility to hire good teachers and discharge bad ones.

To deal with failing teachers, it is helpful to explore reasons why teachers are unsuccessful: (1) inadequate training; (2) wrong assignment; (3) lack of peer and administrative support; (4) mismatch between profession and personality, and (4) burnout.

### **Born or Made?**

An old philosophical question asks whether a teacher is born or made. We believe that while good teachers *may* be born, they *can* also be made. Accordingly, good quality teacher-training programs are the first step in ensuring teacher success. Even those who may be naturally suited for the teaching profession still need both intensive and extensive training to learn the skills to conquer the various challenges of today's classroom.<sup>2</sup>

Consequently, when hiring teachers, the principal should critically examine their background and training to ensure that they are well prepared for their responsibilities.

This selection process has been termed "the initial evaluation" and is quite possibly the most important teacher evaluation. "Errors made in the selection process have direct impact on the school and have far reaching consequences for students, administrators, other teachers, and the school as a

whole.”<sup>3</sup> If teachers need additional training, night classes or summer school can help them get up to speed.

### **Wrong Assignment**

At times, a competent teacher may be assigned inappropriate teaching duties. For example, some teachers are assigned to teach subjects outside their areas of specialization or in which they have no interest. This may lead to frustration, poor performance, and subsequent failure. Boe and others did a national survey of almost 5,000 K-12 U.S. public school teachers to determine what factors predicted teacher retention, transfer, and attrition. They found that teachers who were fully certified in their main teaching assignment were more likely to stay in the same school than teachers who were only partially certified.<sup>4</sup> Common sense and research suggest that qualified teachers will experience greater success and job satisfaction.

**M**any school districts assign subjects on the basis of seniority, giving veteran teachers preferential treatment in track or class assignments, as well as room and subject allocations. As a result, new teachers often end up with the most difficult students, both in terms of behavior and learning. Halford observes that “schools can often avoid setting beginning teachers up for failure by more carefully considering their teaching schedules.”<sup>5</sup> Principals should play an active role in such scheduling.

### **A Practical Example**

Harriet Williams, now director of middle schools in a northern California school district, formerly was principal of Pincate Middle School in southern California.<sup>6</sup> At one point, she needed four new English teachers. The recent graduates she hired all had the typical problems of first-year teachers, but two had a particularly difficult time with classroom control. Mrs. Williams assigned each of them a mentor teacher, who in turn enrolled them in a support program for beginning teachers sponsored by a local university. Since one teacher did not have a regular classroom and had to “rove” every month, the principal assigned him a permanent room.

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She also suggested a change of tracks for this teacher, and at the beginning of his second year, switched him from teaching eighth grade to seventh grade. This enabled him to start a new school year with a new set of students. It worked like a miracle! After writing a record-breaking 150-plus discipline referrals the first year, he again broke the record by writing none the second year! His classroom control improved to near-perfect. In her annual evaluation report, Mrs. Williams wrote of him: "This is the teacher I hoped I had hired." This shows how a principal can take the initiative in supporting a struggling teacher.

### **Lack of Peer and Administrative Support**

Teachers, especially novices, often need a lot of support and encouragement. Mayo states that teacher supervision and evaluation have gone through a major shift in the past decade. In the past, they were mainly used to measure teacher competence, but now they are also expected to foster teacher development and growth.<sup>7</sup> However, even the best teacher-training programs cannot provide their trainees with everything they need. Teaching is full of evolving challenges. Therefore, supervision and evaluation must provide opportunities for growth and development.

Mayo sees teaching "as a non-routine

activity that draws on a reliable body of technical knowledge and is conducted in collaboration with other professional colleagues."<sup>8</sup> Principals need to emphasize the collaborative aspect of teaching and explore ways of providing support for new and struggling teachers.

**E**xperienced educators can help new teachers by acting as formal or informal mentors. This can include classroom visits by the mentor, demonstration of teaching skills, help with classroom control ideas, and being available for professional consultation as needed. In order to encourage experienced teachers to act as mentors, Morgon asks, "Can you remember how your first year felt? Did you ever come home crying, or worse, already in tears long before you reached your door? Were there days you woke up and wished you didn't have to go back to school—ever?"<sup>9</sup>

A number of studies and observations have shown that the demands on new teachers are often overwhelming. Help from a caring, experienced teacher is usually welcome, even if it involves only information on little things.

Once teachers are established, they are less likely to quit. Boe found that for teachers with four or more years of experience, only 6.8 percent moved to a differ-

ent school and 5.6 percent left teaching; in contrast, for teachers with less than four years of experience, 14.5 percent moved to a different school and 9.2 percent left teaching.<sup>10</sup> Halford found that nearly 30 percent of teachers left the profession during their first five years,<sup>11</sup> and that the most talented ones were the most likely to quit. Support by peers and mentors, initiated and upheld by the principal, would be invaluable to retain these capable but inexperienced teachers. Principals may act as mentors, too, as a teacher at Mrs. Williams' school observed: "I wouldn't have survived my first year if it were not for the thoughtful and caring support of my principal."

### **Mismatch Between Profession and Personality**

Sometimes, people take up teaching as a last resort or because they failed to get into another career. Others are attracted to the convenient vacation schedule or the prospect of a short workday. Some people are genuinely interested in teaching, but lack the necessary qualities to do the job effectively.

An important component of teaching is dealing with people. Teachers who are aggressive and highly critical, or conversely, very timid, will have a difficult time in the classroom. People skills and discipline techniques can be taught, but many persons lacking such skills will not acquire them, even with assistance. A change of assignment may help, but if the problems continue, the person should be

advised to go into a different line of work.

### **Burnout**

Friesen stated that unrelenting work stresses may cause physiological, psychological, and behavioral consequences resulting in the symptoms commonly known as burnout.<sup>12</sup> According to Friesen, teachers and others in helping professions are more prone to burnout than the general population. The wise administrator will check carefully for signs of burnout in the teaching staff. The goal should be to save as many teachers as possible through support, careful counseling, and lots of tender loving care.

With appropriate attention, it should be necessary to dismiss only the very small percentage of teachers who can't or won't grow professionally. Firing a teacher is probably the hardest decision a principal has to make, considering its effect on the teacher, his or her family's livelihood, and future employment possibilities. Yet when all else fails, student and community welfare must not be sacrificed. According to Peretz in *The New Republic*, "one teacher may make the difference on a micro level. A good principal recruits many of these good teachers—and drives out the bad ones."<sup>13</sup>

### **Falling Principals**

Teachers are not the only ones who struggle or fail. Research studies show that the nature of the education system makes it hard for both principals and teachers to succeed. Davis states that "even the most skilled and experienced principals run the risk of failing in their jobs as a result of actions, events, or outcomes over which they may not always have direct control."<sup>14</sup> The principal has to deal with ubiquitous paperwork; parents with unrealistic expectations; teachers with diverse interests, abilities, and opinions; students with a variety of needs; and politics involving the school board and the local community. "Schools, for the most part, are turbulent environments in which multiple and simultaneous problems, solutions, and participants compete for decision-making opportunities."<sup>15</sup>

The superintendent needs to help the principal develop ways to deal with pressures from these competing forces, and even to use them to advantage. For exam-

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ple, instead of seeing teachers as competing for decision-making opportunities, the principal should learn to empower them to make certain decisions as a team or at department levels. By involving them in decisions that affect their professional lives, the principal also helps ease his or her burdens.

Lack of higher-level support may cause principal failure. A principal may be very lonely and socially isolated at his or her school site as the person "in charge." The superintendent can organize a support group that allows principals to share experiences, concerns, and frustrations, and to encourage one another.

According to Cohn, lack of a socialization process to help them succeed in a male-dominated profession was one of the major factors in the involuntary departure of female principals.<sup>16</sup> A support group and/or mentor program for principals can enhance the socialization process. New principals may benefit from such programs in several ways: they may (1) beat the "lonely at the top" syndrome, (2) discover what to do and how to do it, and (3) learn what *not* to do, since "principals more often lose their jobs for reasons of omission rather than commission."<sup>17</sup>

Personality and human relations problems are reportedly the number one cause of principal failure. According to Davis, the following are typical qualities of a principal with poor interpersonal skills:

1. Aggressive in speech and mannerisms; attempts to intimidate others.
2. Overly negative, accusatory, or sarcastic.
3. More interested in getting his or her point across than in listening and ac-

knowledging other people's points of view.

4. Inconsistent or manipulative.
5. Fails to provide accurate feedback to others.
6. Inaccessible and not visible on campus or at school functions.
7. Avoids conflict and fails to confront sensitive issues.<sup>18</sup>

Superintendents and school boards should watch for these negative traits in selecting administrators and in helping failing principals.

But, like the struggling teacher who is fired after all the efforts to help him or her have been futile, the principal who exhibits these deficiencies and does not improve must be replaced. As Peretz puts it, "Replace 50 useless principals with 50 good ones, and you've saved 50 schools."<sup>19</sup> He decries "the destructive powers of [principal] incompetence," giving examples of some tragic results: For example, a principal ignored a teacher's complaint that students were using an abandoned classroom to have sex. Later, a student was gang-raped in that room.<sup>20</sup>

Administrators need to make a balanced and objective evaluation of the whole situation before taking actions with far-reaching consequences. If the person has not committed a serious offense and is just not competent, firing may not be the best option. Teachers and principals who are fired have a hard time getting rehired. One of Mrs. Williams' teachers did not show significant improvement despite the principal's efforts to support her. Investigation revealed that she had previously enjoyed teaching the primary grades, but could not adjust to middle school students, who simply overwhelmed her. The principal therefore counseled her to resign rather than firing her, since she was apparently a good teacher with the wrong assignment. This humane approach enabled the teacher to find a more suitable position at an elementary school within a few weeks of her departure. She is currently doing well.

### **Some Legal Cautions**

The decision to let a teacher or principal go has to be reached fairly, compassionately, and carefully. There must be a clear distinction between the firing of a clearly incompetent teacher or principal,

and the traditional teacher/principal bashing that seems to appear whenever there is an educational problem.

Before dismissing a tenured teacher, the administrator should provide the person with (1) a written list of carefully defined behavioral deficiencies, avoiding generalizations like *ineffective* and *unimaginative*; (2) specific tasks that the person must accomplish to avoid termination, (3) a time line for their completion, and (4) ways that administration will help him or her to accomplish the requirements.

When it becomes clear that an educator must be fired, the administrator, after consulting the policy book and legal counsel, should begin termination procedures. Due process may not be required in the private sector, but it is the moral and Christlike way to deal with people and places the administrator in a much stronger position, should the case go to litigation.

Following are the necessary steps for due process: (1) notification of charges, (2) opportunity for a hearing, (3) adequate time for preparation, (4) access to evidence and names of witnesses, (5) hearing before an impartial tribunal, (6) representation by legal council, (7) opportunity to present evidence and witnesses, (8) opportunity to cross-examine witnesses, and (9) opportunity to appeal an adverse decision.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, applying the above suggestions and using the Golden Rule will help the administrator to deal decisively but humanely with failing teachers and principals. ☞

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