

STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE WHEN CIRCUMSTANCES WORK AGAINST IT

Picture yourself as teaching at a Christian school in a country where civil unrest and hyperinflation have ravaged your school budget. Your salary has little buying power, and school supplies are scarce and expensive. The closest post office is a day away in the next country. The threat of war is always imminent. The basic questions in life bedevil even the youngest student. In such an environment, stress takes on an entirely new meaning. . . .

Ellen White calls education the “nicest, the most difficult, [work] ever committed to human beings” (*Education*, p. 292). It requires more interactive interchanges per day than any other occupation—with the possible exception of air-traffic control!

And yet, teaching is also an optimistic profession. Every educator wants to help students become better at something. As they strive for excellence, teachers seek to use everything at their disposal to improve instruction. The array of resources presently available to teachers in some parts of the world is mind-boggling.

But talk about excellence and school improvement takes on quite a different meaning in lands whose ailing economies negatively influence class size, resource availability, teacher training, and curriculum development. Is there any hope for classrooms where every day means

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a struggle for survival?

Let's look at some misconceptions about school improvement:

1. School Improvement Has to Cost a Lot of Money

While money (or the resources it can buy) often does facilitate innovation and change, it cannot buy student achievement. Far more critical are the attitudes and perceptions of the community of teachers, learners, and parents. When school administrators actively encourage teachers to collaborate and participate in decision making, startling improvements can occur.

In our small K-9 multigrade school in Lubumbashi, Congo, we used what we had. There was no education supply store, and every sheet of paper had to be used multiple times. Sharing ideas for lesson plans and problems in weekly staff meetings helped us multiply resources. A willingness to learn from colleagues, to try new methods and materials, is a priceless change agent available to any school.

2. Quality Schools Have More and Better Everything

Society tends to link opulence to quality. But a bigger budget may simply mean the random selection of trendy methods and materials with little or no research on their effectiveness. In the long run, the influence of a godly Christian teacher—one who treats each student as an individual with great potential—may defy all quantitative mea-

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asures. Noble men and women have been educated in the humblest of schools. Schools can raise student achievement levels if they develop a clear vision and have honest leaders who openly communicate, while encouraging teachers to participate in leadership.

3. Excellent Educators Must Serve Selflessly

While focusing on excellence, leaders sometimes forget that teachers are human beings whose bodies regularly need replenishment after vigorous expenditures of energy. Wise leaders will plan ways for teachers to interact socially and provide time out for personal reflection and renewal. They will respect each teacher's personal goals and perceptions of his or her limits. A teacher who works long hours at the expense of a balanced lifestyle may not be modeling a Christian school's vision and thereby minimize his or her effectiveness.

4. A Strong Leader Makes School Improvement Happen

When the leader's word and directives are law, school improvement schemes do not always produce the desired results. But if teachers are encouraged to share their ideas and experiences and admit their need for help, this fosters a team spirit and facilitates change. When the principal shares decision making, teachers are more willing to ask questions about what they do not understand, and to experiment with new ideas.

School leaders can encourage teachers to learn from one another by inviting them to form study groups. Such training can effectively and inexpensively address locally felt teacher needs and problems.

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“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other” (Ecclesiastes 4:9, 10, NRSV). A good leader will work with teachers, rather than simply giving them orders.

When Change Is No One's Choice

Environmental factors may change

dramatically with war, civil unrest, natural disaster, or major economic crises. How does a teacher strive for excellence when the world around is falling apart?

Civil unrest in 1991 and 1997, followed by war, triggered rapid change at our school in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). Reflections on our experience and that of similar schools

led to the following suggestions for teachers who have to cope with change:

1. *Keep your vision in mind.* Decision making without clear goals becomes complicated and ineffective, particularly in times of crises. In difficult circumstances, when “how we’ve always done it” no longer works, how can administrators protect their staff and students, and ensure excellence? “Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Proverbs 29:18, KJV). The solution may include objectives such as the following: finding a balance between competing goals, preparing students for Christian service, developing critical thinkers who know right from wrong, and equipping pupils with the skills to become life-long learners. This is not a time for lengthy debate or divided staff loyalties. Keeping things in perspective is essential to continuing the vision of improvement in the midst of crises.

2. *Rethink your priorities—concentrate on the possible.* In the Congo, to provide quality education under tenuous conditions, we had to re-establish school security and emergency lines. We re-evaluated the situation on a daily basis, seeking to continue the school routine for the stability of the community and the students, while regularly assessing the general state of security. This helped the school to stay focused on its goals while adapting to reality.

Not knowing how political change would affect our school from day to day, we had to plan for smaller units of study. We selected core themes/units and taught them first, documenting progress each week by using narrative comments that could be followed by someone else, if necessary. Every day, we consciously committed ourselves to do our best despite sudden shortages of resources and security constraints. This meant frequently taking time to communicate with and encourage one another. We asked the students to help select alternatives when plans became untenable. They learned how to cope with unwanted change through experience and teacher modeling.

3. *Build new bridges—fast.* Some

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teachers were paralyzed by grief over how things should be but were no longer. Our perceptive principal/school leader rallied the team of teachers regularly, helping us to adapt to the circumstances at hand. We held daily staff meetings and gave students extra breaks. The agenda for these bridge-building meetings always included some variation of these questions: “What have you heard in the past 24 hours that we should be planning for? What have you taught in your class that worked well? What did not work? How can the rest of us help you?” We learned from one another, doubled up classes, and creatively integrated lessons. We dealt with the rumors and the fears to keep ourselves alive and to dispel panic. Crises can draw teachers together if leaders encourage equal participation and make time for social interaction.

4. *Re-establish classroom climate often.* When change occurs rapidly, this increases students’ and teachers’ need for safety and security. Fear of life-threatening situations or of the unknown can be crippling. It inhibits creativity and exhausts physical and emotional energy. We found that it helped to have students form teams. This provided for extra security checks, as well as opportunities for sharing and taking responsibility for others’ needs.

To help students deal with their situa-

tions, we created group activities that integrated naturally into several subject areas. For example, each morning students shared with a partner what they were thinking a lot about. These concerns were then included in prayer requests and expressions of gratitude by the whole class. We did not try to create a “war-survival curriculum,” but in keeping with our vision, we creatively adapted learning situations to address as naturally as possible the real questions and emotions that our students expressed.

During daily show-and-tell times, younger students could draw anything they’d seen, heard, or experienced. This gave teachers a base from which to ask questions and helped them understand the thought processes, fears, and other hard-to-describe feelings of the new reader/writer. Older students did projects by role-playing as “news reporters” and spent science time discovering more about thinking and perception. We encouraged them to express their frustrations (for example, “My parents are always listening to the radio and won’t let us talk at the table when the BBC news is on”), and to ask questions about the things that adults were discussing. Helping each child feel comfortable about discussing his or her perceptions created a comfortable environment and facilitated the teaching and learning of curriculum objectives.

5. *Make pleasant memories.* Wars and disasters often interrupt the normal celebrations of life. Because fear, separation, and suffering still affected students, even when the school was as safe as possible, we sought ways to create pleasant memories. My strongest memories of four days in a camp awaiting evacuation are positive ones, created by our uninterrupted vision for Christian education. As convoys of people were flown out, their trash became unpleasant for those who remained. I suggested to the children, who were looking for something useful to do, that they form teams and clean up the grounds. This turned out to be a great afternoon adventure, after which they made a card to thank the guarding soldiers. When our road convoy left, the soldiers thanked us for our clean-up efforts. Holding a birthday party just as a rainstorm broke loose lightened the worries with laughter. These positive memories resulted

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from our vision of Christian service and celebration and from trusting a God who is in control.

6. *Make time for personal growth and renewal.* Each day, we processed news of the war front, seeking to reach each student's needs while maintaining as stable a routine as possible. School leadership had to be flexible, recognizing the importance of continuing the school program as long as we could, yet never forcing any teacher to stay when he or she needed time out for personal renewal and emotional rest.

In every teacher's environment, many things can contribute to burnout.¹ While we often cannot control events, we *can* control their effect on our thinking and emotions. We can seek solutions to the constraints on our personal and professional lives. We can share our personal solutions with co-workers, family, and friends, asking God to help us do this kindly, yet with resolve so that we can maintain our personal limits.

"Unless we replenish the well we dip into for others, we will have very little to offer them."² Striving for excellence requires reflection, self-evaluation, and proactive planning. When goals are realistically adjusted during trying circumstances, support networks are actively created, and teachers make time for personal growth, burnout can be prevented. Simple things like taking a five-minute nap (closing one's eyes and "dreaming" of a favorite/restful place, for example), breathing deeply for a minute, or contracting and expanding body muscles even when in a confined space can work wonders in relieving tension. We cannot "pass on the torch" if we've blown out the spark!

7. *Give God a chance.* Knowing God promises to care for us even in the shadow of death³ is comforting and empowering. Sharing this knowledge with others multiplies the strength. I found the Serenity Prayer particularly relevant when we needed to act on distressing and confusing information from three different radio networks. "Grant us, Lord, serenity

to accept the things we cannot change, courage to change those things we can change, and wisdom to know the difference."⁴ ✍

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REFERENCES

1. "Burnout is the state of physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual exhaustion, characterized by feelings of helplessness and hopelessness."—Gerald Corey and Marianne S. Corey, *I Never Knew I Had a Choice* (Pacific Grove, Calif.: Brookes/Cole Publishing Company, 1990), p. 161.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
3. Psalm 23:4.
4. Unknown.