

From the Principal's Desk

Essential



Skills for a Principal

You've just been chosen to be a principal. You've begun to dream and set goals for the upcoming school year, but you really have no idea what to expect. You try to feel hopeful that all will be fine and that it is time for you to take on this new role. If you have just graduated with a Master's degree or have several years of experience as a classroom teacher or vice-principal, or have engaged in committees at both a conference and union level—you have a good idea what it takes to be successful as a principal.

If you have experience as a teacher, you'll recall that when you faced a difficult situation, the principal was available to handle any classroom matter beyond your control. You probably have an opinion about how the principal should deal with these kinds of issues. Now, as a principal yourself, you are not only responsible for these classroom matters, but also for the faculty, the staff, students, parents, and school board, hiring resource teachers, maintaining the property, purchasing insurance, choosing textbooks, creating a budget, planning the curriculum and technological advances, scheduling

music programs, recruiting prospective students, and being a spiritual leader.

However, many underlying issues also find their way to your office that can get in the way of your ultimate goal of “being an effective instructional leader [who develops and maintains] positive relationships with students, staff, and parents.”¹ Remember, as a principal you will be judged not based on your skill in organization and management, but rather by “who [you] are and how [you] interact with others.”²

After a few months as a principal, you realize that you are spending a lot

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of time mediating between teachers and parents, or teachers and students, or between teachers—issues that weren't addressed in your preparation for principalship. Although you have experience in dealing with classroom issues, lesson plans, and teaching, you realize you probably should have taken more courses in counseling. It comes as a shock to many new principals that much of their work day is spent interacting with people and their problems. Melgosa says that these encounters often involve "appointments made by employees or students to discuss problems, issues, worries, and personal requests," and that "[c]ounseling principles and skills were specifically designed for encounters where someone is seeking help, support, or understanding from another person."³ (At this point, you may also need to add problem-solving to your responsibilities.)

The good news (or maybe the bad news) is, "the ways you respond to these situations and the fluency and ease with which you switch the multiple hats you wear will profoundly affect the quality of the educational experiences found in your school, as well as your own job satisfaction."⁴ With these tasks in the forefront of your day-to-day routine, you may realize you need to know more about how to apply counseling principles within an educational setting than what you learned in one undergraduate course in educational psychology. Because the role of a principal begins with interactions with students and also embraces their families and the broader community, he or she needs skills beyond those gained from generic psychology courses or on-the-job training.

If you research the 2010 basic re-

quirements for a principal to obtain an administrator certificate from the North American Division Office of Education to determine whether counseling skills are integrated in the program, you will find only a requirement reading as follows: "Has a minimum of eighteen semester/twenty-seven quarter hours of graduate courses selected from the areas of curriculum, school administration, supervision, school law, school finance, school plant planning, personnel administration, school public relations, religious education, and field experience, or holds a doctor-

skills are for the success of a principal. In her research, she found little integration of administrative and counseling skills. "Principals and counselors are both identified for creating nurturing environments in schools.... The principal may even have to function in the role of counselor in the school, if the school does not have a counselor."⁶

This statement represents the reality in most Adventist K-12 schools around the world as well (except for the largest academies), which do not have employees on staff whose sole assignment is counseling. Usually, people assigned to do counseling must spend the majority of the school day teaching or fulfilling their other assignments. Thus, principals often find themselves called on to be counselors.

A Model for School Counseling

Principals need a specific model and training for school counseling because it differs in several ways from other forms of counseling. According

to educational psychologist Garry Hornby, "counseling in schools. . . has a broader focus than most situations in which counseling is used."⁷ Most other forms of counseling focus mainly on remediation. However, school counseling also has "preventative and developmental focuses."⁸ Second, school-based counseling occurs spontaneously when a student comes to the office, a parent drops by to visit, or when initiated by a parent or a teacher, rather than during scheduled appointments with clients. Third, the people doing most school counseling are not qualified counselors, but educators. Fourth, counseling in schools is not a specific, isolated helping strategy, but a continuum of helping strategies.

Kottler and McEwan, in their book



ate degree in school administration."⁵ Perhaps the closest requirement for gaining insight into the breadth of human interactions is in the endorsement requirements for a superintendent of schools is a course in human resources administration and school plant planning (course in public relations community partnership). The program does not require a course with an intentional focus on counseling skills to help principals develop their interpersonal skills as leaders in Adventist schools.

Sharon Weiss in her dissertation, "An Integration of Administrative and Counseling Skills: Benefits for Building Principals," describes how vital these

Counseling Tips for Elementary School Principals, describe the essential elements required to apply counseling and consulting skills to the school environment. The first step is “learning how to recognize problems.”⁹ Although this may seem like a daunting task, most experienced principals have developed a “sixth sense” that helps them identify when something is wrong with a student, teacher, or parent. However, beyond intuition, it’s also necessary to “have a rough idea of what is going on before you can take appropriate action . . . [but remember] your job is to figure out if indeed there is a serious problem, and if so, what to do about it.”¹⁰ The astute principal can learn to recognize a variety of clues that indicate when someone needs help.

Following assessment comes implementation—the process of helping. It is not your job as principal to be a full-time counselor. Yet you will find in your position “daily instances in which someone will reach out to you for understanding and some rudimentary background in several skills will allow you to help them.”¹¹ Nonetheless, it is important to recognize the limitations of your role because “regardless of positive intentions inherent in any helping relationship there is the potential for both benefit and harm.”¹² Therefore, when those moments arise, remember the following¹³:

1. Helping skills are learned from practice, not just by reading about them.
2. Functioning as a counselor will help you to put your own needs aside and be nonjudgmental.
3. Dealing with concerns, rather than “problems,” is your responsibility. “Problems imply there are solutions, even right ones, yet most often, personal issues have no single answers.”¹⁴
4. Avoid giving advice, as you may be blamed if the results are disastrous. Even if all goes well, you are teaching counselees to “consult someone else to tell them what to do” and reinforcing the idea that “they are incapable of

making decisions on their own.”¹⁵

5. Helping the person to feel understood, supported, and not alone is all you can do.

6. Slipping into a “helping mode” means freeing yourself from your own problems in order to be as nonjudgmental as possible.

7. Try not to feel overwhelmed as you practice your role as principal-counselor. Time will give you the opportunity to develop interpersonal effectiveness.

8. Recognize when people need help that you are not qualified to give, and refer them to a professional counselor.

Setting the Stage

Counseling meetings are different from regular conversation or discussions since the counselor must focus intently on the messages the other person is transmitting (through words, silence, body language, etc.). However, before you begin the meeting, it is important to take steps to clear your mind of all distractions, put aside your own worries, and be willing to be fully present for the counselee. Kottler and McEwans list basic counseling skills that help “to build an open, trusting, and accepting atmosphere.”¹⁶ First is attending to the counselee, which means “giving [him or her] your total complete undivided interest.”¹⁷ Second is listening, which means communicating “by the way you respond to the speaker, by your ability to prove that you really did hear what has been said.”¹⁸ Last is empathy, “where attending, listening, and interpersonal sensitivity come together in such a way that you are able to get outside yourself enough so that you can sense what the other person is feeling and thinking.”¹⁹

As Adventist educational leaders, we interact often with diverse persons, which enables us to minister as Christ did. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), an unfortunate man is beaten nearly to death by bandits. Two religious leaders pass him by

on their journey to Jericho, showing little empathy and offering no assistance. Did they feel they were too busy to attend to the wounded man? Were they too worried about their own safety to stop to find out what had happened to him?

Yet, the Samaritan who traveled on the same road took the time to attend and “listen” by showing compassion and empathy. In verse 34, we read that he bandaged the man’s wounds (the word is derived from the Greek *traumata*, which can be translated “trauma”) by pouring on oil and wine. In the Bible, the oil represents the Holy Spirit, who is also known as the Spirit of counsel or Counselor (Isaiah 11:2 and John 14:26), and the wine represents Christ’s sacrificial blood (Luke 22:20). It is important to note that the wounded man needed to receive both physical help as well as the oil (the Counselor) and the wine (Christ). Nonetheless, the helping process did not end there. It continued beyond the emergency aid. The Good Samaritan then carried the injured man to an inn, where he received the protection of the innkeeper. We can apply this parable to Adventist schools. As “inn-keeping principals,” we have the responsibility to extend the Good Samaritan’s helping process to aid wounded students, parents, and staff members.

An Environment of Trust

Before he left, the Good Samaritan gave the innkeeper money to be used to aid in the victim’s recovery, but he also told the innkeeper that if caring for the man cost more than what he had paid, he would reimburse the innkeeper when he returned. As a principal, you are prepared and equipped for leadership but need to aid in the recovery process of students, families, and staff who are wounded and in need of help. Therefore, if this requires going beyond the basic training you have received to acquire counseling skills, you should consider doing so. Through empathy and guided support, you will be able to

establish an environment of trust that treats students as more than mere vessels to be filled with facts. “Empathy, warmth, and support are essential skills in the counseling process for they represent compassion, concern, and caring in the counselor [principal]-student relationship.”²⁰

As an Adventist school leader, it is your responsibility to attend to the concerns of diverse individuals and the consequences resulting from your decisions. A Christian educational system must not only educate young people for this world and eternity, but also help them recover from their wounds and traumas. Adventist principals should have compassion for the people they lead, and actually *stop* and *pay attention*—even if this implies leaving behind their responsibilities to be present in the moment to attend to the individual, unlike the two religious leaders, who *rushed* by the wounded man on their way to “do God’s work.”

Moreover, when Jesus said, ““Love your neighbor as yourself”” (Mark 12:31, NIV),²¹ He also warned that in the final judgment, the criteria for being considered His follower was this: “as you did it to the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me. . . as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me” (Matthew 25:40, 45).

Ozorak believes there are two ways of interpreting Jesus’ imperative. One is that Christians must help those in need, and the other is that they are called to see Christ in the face of those in need.²² The latter is an intrinsic motive, one that arises from being led by the Holy Spirit to love as Christ loved. Principals, as educators and counselors, must acknowledge their own wounds (traumas) and recognize the needs and suffering of others by showing compassion (empathy), which will produce the ultimate fruit of the Spirit—love (for God and the neighbor).

Principals have enormous responsibilities in leading a successful, God-fearing school. If you integrate coun-

seling skills into your repertoire of leadership skills, you will “notice an improvement in your personal relationships. . . become more respected as a leader in your school. . . you will become more influential in every aspect of school life. . . [and] you will be able to grow emotionally and psychologically yourself.”²³ Although the principal is not called to conduct formal counseling, he or she can attend to students’ needs, listen to parents’ concerns, and show empathy for those in their care, and thereby enhance their effectiveness as they follow Jesus’ example. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Ibid, p. 1.
3. Julian Melgosa, “How Educational Leaders Can Use Counseling Principles and Skills,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 66:1 (October/November 2003):32.
4. Kottler and McEwan, *Counseling Tips for Elementary School Principals*, op. cit., p. 11.
5. North American Division Office of Education, *K-12 Educators’ Certification Manual* (2010), p. 16: http://www.nadeducation.org/client_data/files/1091_certificationmanual3262010.pdf. Retrieved July 26, 2012.
6. Sharon Weiss, *An Integration of Administrative and Counseling Skills: Benefits for Building Principals*. Ed. D. dissertation, Illinois State University (February 2007), p. 35. Retrieved January 15, 2012, from Dissertations & Theses: Full Text (Publication No. AAT 3233951).
7. Garry Hornby in *Counseling Pupils in Schools: Skills and Strategies for Teachers*. Garry Hornby, Cerol Hall, and Eric Hall, eds. (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), p. 12.
8. Ibid.
9. Kottler and McEwan, *Counseling Tips for Elementary School Principals*, op. cit., p. 14.
10. Ibid., p. 17.
11. Ibid., p. 30.
12. Hornby, *Counseling Pupils in Schools*, op. cit., p. 165.
13. Most of the recommendations in this list are adapted from Kottler and McEwan, *Counseling Tips for Elementary School Principals*, op. cit.
14. Ibid., p. 31.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., p. 46.
17. Ibid., p. 43.
18. Ibid., p. 44.
19. Ibid., p. 45.
20. Weiss, *An Integration of Administrative and Counseling Skills*, op. cit., p. 25.
21. All of the Scripture texts quoted in this article are quoted from the New International Version. Texts credited to NIV are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.
22. E. W. Ozorack, “Love of God and Neighbor: Religion and Volunteer Service Among College Students,” *Review of Religious Research* 44:3 (March 2003):285.
23. Kottler and McEwan, *Counseling Tips for Elementary School Principals*, op. cit., pp. 3, 4.