

# *A Day in the Life of an Urban High School Principal*

By

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## *A Day in the Life...*

There are many responsibilities, demands, and expectations as principal of Miami Northwestern Senior High School. The school, located in Miami's Liberty City, lies in one of the most violent, impoverished, and HIV/AIDS stricken zip codes in these United States of America. For two consecutive years our ninth and tenth grade students failed to achieve the established performance levels by less than 3 points, resulting in the assignment of letter grades of "F." Despite the obvious disappointment felt by not only me, but the students, faculty, staff, and community, we continue to work collectively to move our students and school toward higher levels of student performance and achievement.

As principal, I meet the responsibilities, demands, and expectations as I begin my day with the arrival of 3,000 students whom I assist in leading their direction to class prior to the ringing of the tardy bell. After morning announcements, several parent conferences are held---one to address and serve as mediator a fight that occurred on New Year's Day at which time I was at home watching a College Football Bowl game. Another, was to assist a parent with her son who, in her own words "lacks a male figure in his life," in providing both direction and discipline so that he does not go astray. The last school day before the winter recess, he was involved in a fight with another student. During the first nine-week period he managed to earn four "F's," a "D" and a "C." As a repeat ninth grader, he has improved from last school year in which he earned all "F's" for the entire year after having missed 62 days out of school. Coincidentally, he sat for the FCAT. He did not do very well.

The real enjoyment comes while visiting classrooms. There, I am able to witness the tremendous instructional efforts being made by our teachers and learning opportunities being provided to our students. I visit all of the classrooms on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of our large, college-style campus. Students are actively engaged in learning and sharing in dynamic learning environments. Several classes are adhering to their scheduled computer lab time to provide students with technology-based instruction using various software programs to strengthen reading, writing, and mathematics skills. While entering some classrooms, walking through the corridors, or providing supervision during lunch, several students would request to speak with me about issues ranging from my needing to sign a scholarship application, override the number of adult school credits that they be allowed to take in order to graduate in June, or speak to a few students who had an argument during first period that may result in a fist fight. The scholarship application is for a student who has been accepted to Harvard. Yes, you read it correctly---Harvard University and it was not because of sports!

Some students try to hide. A female student who has been described as one of my “turnaround” students because of her past propensity for being quick –tempered and loudly profane has made a tremendous “turnaround” since arriving as a disruptive, excessively truant, and failing ninth grader nearly two years ago. Through the involvement of her mother, support of her teachers, and prayers of her church, she has earned her credits, maintained the required grade point average, and passed the mathematics portion of the FCAT her first time taking it. Over the past two years, she has affectionately referred to me not as “Dr.” Gallon, but “Daddy” Gallon. Her father was murdered when she was three years old and she professes that since her arrival to Miami Northwestern Senior High School I have been the father she has never had. During this time, I have provided both discipline and direction. Today, she strangely tries to avoid me to no avail. Over the holidays, her pregnancy has now become conspicuous. I am disappointed---yet determined. I know that as a young teenage parent things are going to become increasingly difficult, but not impossible. With hard work, faith, and an education, she can make it. As a former teenage parent myself I know what is possible. I make a mental note to speak with her later as she is embarrassed and “fearful” of what her “daddy” is going to say. I plan to not reprimand her for what has happened, but to encourage her to overcome what will now become inevitable adversities.

Our state-of-the-art, multi-million dollar facility has three floors, a college-sized gymnasium, performing arts theater, driver’s education range, track, two football practice fields, baseball and softball diamonds, computer and vocational teaching labs which offer dry cleaning, welding, and auto body and mechanics to name a few. Walking the facility and campus on a daily and consistent basis is a daunting, yet rewarding task. It serves, however, as a pleasant reminder of how greatly improved the educational opportunities and resources have become since I was a student here nearly two decades ago. I attended the “old school” which stood for nearly four decades but stands no more. As principal, it is crucial that I remain engaged in and fully aware of what is happening or not happening

in classrooms. It is good to be able to communicate to a parent or stakeholder, “Oh really, well I was just in the teacher’s classroom this morning” when and if an issue arises.

I continue to respond to the concerns and inquiries of faculty, staff, students, and parents as issues arise, so many in fact throughout a day that I find some difficulty reflecting on “every” decision I made throughout the day. I just learn that one of my new teachers will be resigning. She informed me that administration, faculty, and staff were very professional and supportive. The demands, however, of working in an Inner-City school which has been placed under immense scrutiny and pressure are too much for her to bear. A class full of seemingly unmotivated ninth graders sealed her decision to leave. Without hesitation, I contemplate a replacement. Until such time that I find one, a strong temporary instructor will have to suffice. The e-mails, faxes, and phone calls from various offices throughout the district often require quick and immediate attention, and prompt written responses. I was informed through one call that I would have to host an out-of-state visitor who is scheduled to arrive: tomorrow. Another call resulted in absolute frustration as I differed sharply with an administrator about a decision I strongly believe will clearly have an adverse impact on my school. I only had my convictions. I was compelled to concede as they had position and policy. As a principal, one has to know when to hold and when to fold. I am still learning!

Through it all, the students help to provide sanctity, stability, and some days even sanity---they are why I am here. They provide the purpose that keeps me focused and the “fuel” to keep me going. The world provides a paradoxical outlook for many of them who are from diverse backgrounds and experiences. This diversity provides for some a promise to realize the “American Dream” and for others the need to pray to be awakened from the American nightmare that they know as life. In between it all, Miami Northwestern Senior High School serves to level the playing field and indiscriminately provide a rare commodity for many of my students: *hope*.

The nightmare for many of our children continues as evidenced by ten-year old Jarobe Brooks who was shot and killed this past Saturday while sitting on a neighbor’s patio. Jarobe was not in the park. He was not in the street. He was not a part of a gang or group of troubled, delinquent youths. Jarobe was sitting on a neighbor’s patio in the complex where he lives. In short, he was *home*. Many of our students live in a nightmarish world where fear, anger, and uncertainty are their companions. As I actively engage in community outreach efforts, I leave to attend the press conference scheduled for two o’ clock in the afternoon. I have a mandatory meeting scheduled for three! The responsibilities, demands, and expectations compel me to attend both. I do. I sadly and angrily stood shoulder to shoulder with the clergymen, elected officials, concerned citizens, and law enforcement officials who plead for the public’s help and shout out “No more, no more.” A year and a half ago a 13-year old boy was shot and killed by a stray bullet on the Fourth of July. Bullets flying through the neighborhoods and homes of many of my students are described as “a common occurrence.” We work tirelessly at the school

to shield our students from the ills and vices that plague our community---especially the deadly violence that plagues the streets and continues to snuff out the life of our most young and innocent.

After stopping for gas, I make the *mandatory* meeting just in time. I arrive three minutes before it starts. I listen to the superintendent of schools, complete a principal's survey, and leave. I grab a *Pepsi* on the way out. Fortunately, I am going against traffic and my *return* to the school is smooth and prompt. I read and review my mail, take a stroll through the building, and return to the office as I have a few moments before the girl's basketball game begins. One of the documents is a certified letter from a "board certified civil attorney." A portion reads: Attention Dr. Steve Gallon III, Principal.

I then attend a brief EESSAC meeting between the scheduled Varsity and Junior Varsity games. The low-scoring games were exciting and included a great display of defense on the part of both teams. We won both. As I prepare to leave for home, I remind one of the players who had not been allowed to play the other night of the importance of coming to practice. "I learned my lesson," she smilingly remarks as she walks off toward the locker room with the team. It is now 8:52 p.m. I have not eaten since consuming a salad in the cafeteria earlier that day.

As our society, through its schools, continues to meet the challenges and demands of the twenty-first century, increased focus and attention must be placed upon the role, responsibilities, and demands of the principalship. Unlike any other educational position, the principalship has remained ripe with ambiguity and accountability, with little understanding for the fundamental responsibilities that the position today entails. As a senior high school principal in a large, urban school in the nation's fourth largest school district, I remain aware of how few people really understand the day-to-day activities, challenges, and nature of my work. The cynics and critics need not perceive this as a complaint. For most principals who labor in the trenches, this is rarely the case. This is not a complaint or an excuse---this is just our reality as we know and live it in our schools.

### ***The Need for an Improved Understanding of Today's Principalship***

Since the 1983 release of *A Nation at Risk* and its subsequent attack on our schools' unsatisfactory performance, educators have been struggling to find ways to improve schools. During this time, very few educators have argued that the principal of a school is the most important administrator in the American educational system and is pivotal to its improvement (Kimbrough & Burkett, 1990). When schools are functioning properly and realizing high levels of success, much credit belongs and is given to the principal. Conversely, when schools are not performing at satisfactory levels, more often than not, the principal is to blame. It has long been realized with little debate that the principal's leadership or lack thereof, is key to a school's success or reason for its failure. Yet,

despite this realization, not enough attention is given to an improved understanding of the school principal as a position that has changed from that which it was decades ago. An improved understanding of the role, responsibilities, and demands of today's principalship will enhance the educational, training, and professional development programs designed for school administrators.

Little is known about today's principals because very little is told by them. Principals report that there exists a disjunction between their actual work and what everyone perceives their work to be (Boris-Schacter & Langer, 2002). The principalship with its proud and distinguished tradition is seen as a very strong, influential position in which problems, issues, and concerns are directed towards for resolution, but from which very few problems, issues, and concerns are expected to emanate.

### ***An Eclectic Role?***

As principals, we have seen our roles defined and redefined several times over during the past decade. Varied, yet competing paradigms have shaped the position as it is perceived today. As a result, the role of the principal has become dramatically more complex, overloaded, and unclear (Fowler, 1991). In addition, the principal position has become increasingly and severely challenging because the society in which schools now operate is, in many ways, in a state of turmoil. Concerns about a general economic and child welfare crisis are reflected in our social fabric. As always, our society turns to schools to play a pivotal role in helping to find solutions to a vast array of problems of which are always traced backed to or blamed on a "fledgling" educational system.

As the head of schools, we are expected now more than ever to meet the fulfillment of a new set of societal expectations and demands. Though, understandable and readily expected and accepted, I believe that these expectations and demands must be advanced with an increased understanding, respect, and appreciation for the position in present times. A thorough reexamination of our role and responsibilities must precede societal expectations. It is crucial that people not only know who we are as school principals, but better understand what it is that we do in *today's* schools.

A panel convened by the Institute for Educational Leadership under its School Leadership for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Initiative called for a "fresh look" at the duties and responsibilities facing today's school principals. It advised that failing to bring broader public attention to the issue of school leadership in public education puts the success of public schools at risk (Alan, 2000). The task force called for the "reinventing of the principalship." It recognized that principals are faced with age-old managerial roles such as coordinating buses, attending events, and handling discipline. Though necessary, these duties mitigate a principal's capacity and ability to deal with areas that directly improve student performance and achievement. Such duties required in this expanded role include

monitoring instruction, assisting teachers, and facilitating professional development. Principals must now serve as “leaders of learning” in their schools. They are expected to be knowledgeable about instruction, understand the school’s role in the community, and have a vision for where the school is headed (Alan, 2000).

Today’s principals, as learning leaders, are expected to work alongside teachers; develop a broad knowledge base in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and seek ongoing professional development (Educational Research Service, 1999). Tirozzi (2000), in describing the principal’s role in school reform as the “missing imperative,” advises that “the burden falls on the principal to provide instructional acumen, curriculum support, professional development opportunities, data-driven decision-making, and visionary perspective to mold a faculty of teachers into a unified force to advance academic achievement for all students.” We are expected to assume the role of clinical practitioner bearing expert professional knowledge to teaching and learning. Above all, today’s principals are expected to engage on an equal basis with teachers on matters involving teaching and learning, and inspire everyone else toward the achievement of one goal: *student performance and achievement*.

Today’s principals, however, exist in a societal and educational environment that consistently impedes such efforts. As principals, many of us have lamented that “we would love to be more of an instructional leader, but that we simply don’t have the time.” Most of our time is spent on issues that have little or no direct impact on student performance and achievement. This reality of schools provides principals with an unenviable and challenging dilemma: To effectively manage the day-to-day operations of the school site at the expense of providing much needed leadership towards student performance and achievement. The assignment of a Vice-Principal and Business Manager through the Project 4-High initiative is a step in the right direction.

The daily school life for many school principals, which may not consist of isolation and seclusion in offices, does involve an extensive amount of time on management-related issues. As a result, at the end of almost every school day, most principals have to ask “Where did all of the time go?”

As a high school principal with over 300 faculty and staff and a student enrollment of over 3,000, my job has often been compared to that of a city manager. I am expected to manage fiscal account and budgets; identify, hire, and evaluate staff; ensure the safety of staff and students; monitor, prepare, and approve payroll; approve and manage purchases; supervise the distribution and use of equipment and supplies; provide for food service programs and oversee the maintenance of the school building. In addition, the role of principal forces me to be a bureaucrat, educational leader, parent, social worker, community pillar, accountant, banker, law enforcement officer, role model, community activist, moral agent, and, yes, a politician.

Another time-consuming responsibility of principals is taking care of the “squeaky wheels” in schools. This comprises complainants with issues that seem to be irresolvable. I have experienced that many of these issues, even with the utmost time, Herculean effort, and greatest intent, remain unresolved at any level simply because the complainant is seeking a resolution that is not possible and inconsistent with district and school policies and practices. This, however, is determined after an inordinate amount of time has been spent between the complainant, school, and district bureaucracy.

The workload of principals has been clearly deemed by many to be overwhelming. Principals themselves, despite their usual strength and composure have complained about the overwhelming nature of their job. In the Public Agenda Survey, more than half (57 percent) maintain that even good administrators in their districts are “so overwhelmed” by day-to-day activities that their ability to provide vision and leadership is stymied (Johnson, 2002).

In most school settings, though assistant principals and deans handle many disciplinary issues, as school principals, we are ultimately responsible for student discipline and safety (Seyfarth, 2002). It is common for staff to bring issues and parents to me for resolution. In some instances, it is the students and parents themselves that may request to meet with me and “only me” to address an issue or solve a problem. I prevent and break up fights; suspend and recommend the expulsion of students; resolve conflicts among students, staff, and sometimes parents in the community; investigate and report criminal activity in the school, as well as outside of the school that many endanger daily school life; conduct home visits; assist with domestic problems impacting students; handle bus and lunch duty; and counsel faculty, staff, and family members regarding problems or issues that may have an adverse impact on employee productivity or student learning. Many principals have resigned themselves to handling the management issues of the school at the expense of quality involvement in the school’s instructional program. They view proper management as a basic requirement of all schools if they are expected to function properly and maintain support from external constituents such as district leadership, school board members, parents, and the school community.

It has been clearly recognized and articulated that school boards and other segments of the public will not tolerate inefficient and poorly managed schools. As a school principal, I know that our school must be characterized by a degree of order and reliability that provides a sense of security for my teachers, students, and parents. In many schools, poor organization, not the lack of student performance and achievement, lead to negative feelings among faculty and staff.

There must be a continued effort to gain a better, broader, and more reliable understanding of the role, responsibilities, and demands of today’s school principal. This effort must bring with it the confronting of the “leadership vs. management” dilemma

facing today's school principals. The antiquated view of the principal's role must be replaced with a fresh, realistic one that encompasses a broader understanding of the dynamics and complexities of today's principalship. This view must recognize the ever changing societal demands of not only the educational process, but of the school principal who must both lead and manage this process as well.

The lack of understanding and ongoing debate regarding the "proper" role of the principal has compromised the training, development, and support for the position. Central to this debate is the idea that the required managerial role of the principal is antithetical to high quality instructional leadership. Thus, the argument for instructional leadership implicitly asks me as principal to give way to general management and focus on curriculum and instruction oriented functions. Ideally, this may seem timely, reasonable, and appropriate; however, in reality, this represents an egregious demand and has serious implications for my professional, managerial, statutory, and in some cases, legal responsibilities as the school principal. In the view of some, however, for a principal to effectively lead and manage today's schools, represents impossibility. This perceived impossibility, which must be noted, that is being made possible by thousands of high performing principals across the nation.

Sitting with a group of principals at a recent meeting, a discussion ensued about the new wave of educational accountability in our state and the impending challenges facing today's principals. Problematic issues ranging from a lack of qualified teachers and suitable classroom space to downed air conditioning units and budget cuts resonated with passion and anxiety among the group. These issues are not unique to Miami Northwestern Senior High School. They are prevalent in schools throughout the nation. They are, however, increasingly concentrated and exacerbated in urban schools located in communities with large amounts of poverty, violence, drug abuse, crime, illiteracy, and hopelessness; schools such as ours in Project 4-High. I am proud of and enjoy my work at Miami Northwestern Senior High School. I have a deep, unabated love for the school and the community. My daily rewards are great and my efforts more often than not are appreciated by the students, faculty, staff, and members of the community. Each day we work as principals in the "4-High Schools" to meet unimaginable challenges in hopes of improving student performance amid the stares, aspersions, rumors, and innuendos surrounding our competence, commitment, and even the future of our careers. As principals in such schools, *this is just another day in the life...*

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