

This article can also be viewed at the website:
<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=8672850>

Title: Getting Help: HEADING THE SMALL SCHOOL.
Authors: Votey, Scott
Source: Independent School; Fall2002, Vol. 62 Issue 1, p57, 6p, 4bw
Document Type: Article
Subject Terms: *SCHOOL principals
*SMALL schools
Abstract: Reports on duties and responsibilities of school principals of small schools in the U.S. Priority to students' interest; Keys to translating spirit into culture; Creation of a core administrative team; Need for shared learning opportunities.
Full Text Word Count: 2818
ISSN: 0145-9635
Accession Number: 8672850
Persistent link to this record: <http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=8672850>
Cut and Paste: Getting
Help: HEADING THE SMALL SCHOOL.
Database: Academic Search Premier

Getting Help: HEADING THE SMALL SCHOOL

Early in one's career, it pays to get a mentor

LIKE MOST SCHOOL HEADS, I AM AN EDUCATOR by training and experience. In the four brief years of my headship at Green Hedges School (Virginia), it has become abundantly, sometimes painfully, clear that even heads of small elementary schools must move more easily in the worlds of law, business, public relations, marketing, fund-raising, construction, finance, and local politics. Legal issues, building-permit headaches, architectural revisions, "the ask," neighborhood complaints, and community outreach do not bypass small school heads. In fact, they are often more invasive in the life of the head of a small school whose limited budget restricts the ability to hire additional administrators or contract with outside specialists.

Parents select small schools for a variety of reasons, but a common reason is that they believe their child will stand out at such schools. At small schools, parents sense a "mom and pop" feel that implies homey comfort and personal attention. Along with everything else, heads are expected to reflect this intimacy in numerous ways — by active involvement in admissions, for instance, and knowing all the children not only by name, but by their learning styles and issues, and knowing all the parents by name and by issue. We're expected to give the same careful attention to teachers, too, by visiting classrooms daily, being aware of individual teaching styles. In short, small school heads are expected to be ever-present and available, and cannot easily delegate these responsibilities to division heads, assistant heads, directors, or deans. Many small schools, in fact, do not even have such administrators.

How do the heads of successful small schools balance this small-school intimacy with the realities of leading an independent school in the 21st century? There are a number of ways of doing this, perhaps. In my case, I turned to the help, guidance, advice, and example of a seasoned mentor. With the support of the Green Hedges Board of Trustees and the help of Will Delamater, chair of the Head Evaluation Committee and an ex-independent school administrator, I spent the 2000–2001 school year mentoring with Tom Northrup, headmaster of The Hill School, a K-8 school in Middleburg, Virginia. Once a month, I visited Hill where I attended meetings of the board of trustees and board committees, observed classes, talked with teachers and administrators and, in general, watched Northrup "in action."

The goal was simple: shadow a successful head of a successful small school and pick up valuable pointers.

The 2000–2001 school year marked Tom Northrup's 20th as headmaster at Hill. This, in itself, is somewhat remarkable. Today, the tenure of school heads is more analogous to Major League Baseball managers than to Frank L. Boyden, who headed Deerfield Academy for 66 years. Northrup's tenure at Hill is understandable. In 1981, his first at Hill, the school had limited facilities on four acres, minimal annual giving, and a \$200K endowment. Not

This article can also be viewed at the website:

<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=8672850>

surprisingly, it also struggled with enrollment. Today, the school enjoys four new buildings completed since 1995, \$250K annual giving, and a \$4.5-million endowment. And the struggles with enrollment today have turned into a different kind of struggle: waiting lists. In addition, a current \$12-million capital campaign will fund two new buildings, double the endowment, and landscape the 137-acre campus.

So what did I learn from Tom Northrup over the course of the mentoring year? Many things, but, most importantly, I learned his recipe for success in leading a small school. It involves four ingredients: students first, translating spirit into culture, the 60/40 balance, and creating a core administrative team.

Students First

When Northrup and a friend of his with more than 40 years of independent-school experience were asked to identify the essential ingredients of successful school leadership, the friend replied, "You have to be able to manage students, teachers, parents, and money."

"That's right," Northrup responded, "but students must be first on that list. Heads must never forget that schools are about the students."

Northrup's strategic planning revolves around this question: "What is best for the students?" In recent years, Hill has completed three buildings and has two to go. The first four are academic buildings. The last one will be a new administration building. First things first for Northrup; facilities for students take precedence over facilities for adults.

Hill is also engaged in developing a master plan for landscaping the campus. But landscaping at Hill is not just about creating an aesthetically pleasing environment. This plan incorporates curricular needs as well — in other words, the students. For example, a quarter-acre wetland area was added to the plan to allow second graders to study wetlands and for eighth graders to conduct groundwater monitoring for a unit on watersheds. A surface archeology area was incorporated into the plan. It allows third graders to engage annually in a dig for "artifacts" that they create in art and science classes and subsequently break and bury in order to study the Virginia Contact Period. A colonial herb garden will complement the fourth-grade study of American history. Meanwhile, the fifth grade monitors bluebirds on a trail containing 12 bluebird boxes.

Northrup continues to be deeply involved with students. He personally provides high-school placement counseling for all eighth graders and their parents. He is also known to be actively involved in major disciplinary issues. During one of my visits, Northrup and other staff members engaged in a lengthy meeting with several boys who had displayed inappropriate behavior on campus. Later, one of the faculty participants at that meeting talked about Northrup's role in such matters. "He will take as much time as necessary to patiently talk with the kids to make sure they fully understand their behavior and its consequences. These are teachable moments, and he makes sure they come away educated."

I wanted to test this "Students come first" focus with the students. I chose the fifth grade and found them at lunch. Separate conversations with the boys and girls (that's the way I found them sitting in the cafeteria) confirmed that it works. When asked about their impression of Mr. Northrup, they all smiled or nodded approvingly when one said, "He's not like a usual headmaster who sits in his office all day." Another piped up, "He knows all our names." A third said, "He gives people a second chance," to which a fourth added, "He likes to hear about kids and their problems and do something about it." And finally, "He's a good basketball player."

The girls had similar comments. "He's all over the place." "He says, 'Hi.'" And again, "He knows all our names." It was clear from their tone and their smiles that the feelings for their headmaster were warm, strong, and genuine. He is someone to whom they feel connected.

Translating Spirit into Culture

Northrup has a vision for Hill School, based on what is best for students — and he believes it is essential that the Hill School staff understands, believes in, and lives this vision. Jack Bowers, math department chair and Hill teacher for 24 years, calls it "living Tom's spirit," and he firmly believes that this spirit is translated into a pervasive, school-wide culture.

I checked out Bowers' belief with two teachers I found working in the computer lab during one of my visits to Hill. When asked to identify the prevailing school culture, they both agreed that it was "to help the whole child develop." Pressed to explain how this plays out in the classroom, one of the teachers noted that, "At Hill, all children, even those who are struggling, discover their gifts. At a small school with our culture it becomes easier to make sure that all

This article can also be viewed at the website:
<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=8672850>

children find ways to be successful.”

The other teacher pointed out, “We also know the children — even those not in our class. We watch out for all of them.”

“Yes, and with a small faculty that interacts daily it is also easier to develop interdisciplinary projects,” added the first teacher. “Interdisciplinary projects allow students to bring their strengths to subjects where they are struggling.”

I was curious to know the origin of this culture and asked. Without hesitation the reply from both was, “Tom.”

“The school, as it is today, is really his creation,” one added.

“How does he do it?”

“Through faculty meetings, disciplinary meetings, parent meetings, and books he buys for the faculty,” the teacher said. “He clearly expects a lot of teachers, and if you only care about academic success, you won’t be comfortable here.”

I remembered a comment from my meeting with Jack Bowers: “If Tom is away, the administration will handle it. If the administration is away, the teachers will handle it. If the staff is away, the students will handle it.” I wanted to know just how that statement was connected to the statements of these two teachers, so I returned to Bowers. He recalled that Tom had once said at a faculty meeting that he wanted a school where, if for some totally inexplicable reason all the staff suddenly left school, the eighth grade would calmly know how to handle the situation and keep order in the school. In a culture where students come first, the students are ultimately groomed to be first; they develop not only the academic skills but also the self-confidence and the character to be responsible citizens.

One of the keys to translating spirit into culture is providing sufficient staff. During my visits, I noticed that Hill School had staff members that many schools this size would consider luxuries. There is a full-time math intern. The school has a full-time drama teacher who also directs community theatre at Hill. One full-time language arts teacher only teaches two sections so that he can assist the faculty with developing writing across the curriculum and work on other curricular issues. The science department chair only teaches one grade (two sections) so he can help develop the school’s landscaping plan and assist other teachers with integrating the new school landscape into their curriculum. The school employs a reading specialist who, as director of special academic services, supports both teachers and students. There is a lower-school tutor who is a half-time equivalent. Another part-time employee runs a Saturday community-service program and runs special class meetings. The development office has the equivalent of three full-time staff. The business office employs the equivalent of two full-time staff. Education is labor-intensive, quality education is very labor-intensive and education that emphasizes students first in every way is highly labor-intensive. Including 17 part-time employees, Hill employs a total staff of 59, rather remarkable for a school of 220 students.

The 60/40 Balance

During Northrup’s first years at Hill, he was predominately engaged in the internal affairs of the school, with 90 percent of his time spent on teachers, curriculum, discipline, hiring, evaluation and other day-to-day operational matters. The dramatic changes experienced at Hill over the past decade required that more attention be given to external matters: working with the board on strategic planning, master planning, friend-raising, and fundraising. The time and attention given to these matters, of course, resulted in a \$250,000 annual-giving campaign, a \$4-million endowment, a substantially larger campus, and new academic buildings.

What I found surprising, however, is that he estimates that he still spends 60 percent of his time on internal matters. According to Northrup, “Being a hands-on headmaster is an important part of the development effort at a small, nurturing school like Hill. People expect it, and I don’t want to spend less than 60 percent of my time on internal matters.” Hence, Northrup is highly visible to parents, teachers, and students. He knows all their names, finds time to assist with the basketball team once a week, teaches a grammar course once a week, attends assemblies, and is solely responsible for guiding the placement of eighth graders into high school.

The move from 90/10 to 60/40 took several years, and Northrup carefully prepared his staff for the change. Assistant head Treavor Lord recalls hearing the same theme at faculty meetings for three or four years:

“Tom would let us know that we’d see less of him, why that was so, and how it was all in the best interests of the school and especially of the students.”

This article can also be viewed at the website:

<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=8672850>

Nonetheless, those teachers with the longest perspectives note little or no difference in Northrup's style. Twenty-four-year veteran Syd Bowers notes, "When you need Tom, he's there." Twenty-year veteran Tal Mack hasn't noted much difference in Northrup's style since moving toward the 60/40 balance. "I still get to see him when I want to."

The fact that these veterans have noticed very little difference in Northrup's availability is partly a reflection of Northrup's personable style and of his work ethic. It is also a reflection of the excellent administrative team that reduces the need to see Northrup.

Create a Core Administrative Team

Shifting the balance of time spent on internal, versus external, affairs from 90/10 to 60/40 required Northrup to develop a core administrative team to which he could shift responsibility for internal affairs and with whom he could expand external affairs. This team had to be dedicated and reliable. "I look for administrators who care about the school," says Northrup. "Do they worry about the school in off hours?" Good administrators step into the breach whenever and wherever there is a void and understand that this is an unwritten part of the job description. Northrup only intervenes when he believes it is necessary. "As long as a staff member does the job," he says, "I let them operate autonomously as much as possible."

At Hill, the core administrative team is composed of six individuals, four of whom teach part-time: Northrup; Treavor Lord, assistant headmaster; Andrew Stifler, director of development; Vickie Ralph, business manager; Don Woodruff, director of admissions, summer programs, and buildings and grounds; and Silvia Fleming, administrative assistant to the headmaster. Northrup believes that quality begins with the administration and cutting corners here will have negative ripples throughout the school program.

Creating a reliable core administrative team took several years and included additions (Andrew Stifler), promotions (Treavor Lord), and rewriting job descriptions (Silvia Fleming). Northrup notes that it takes time for individuals to adapt to their new roles. It also took time for the rest of the school staff to accept the team in its new and expanded role. According to Syd Bowers, the adjustment took about three years, by which time most faculty members could see the value of this change.

Conclusion

Tom Northrup encounters the same types of problems that all heads face. He has his share of bad days and all of us in the profession would find them all too familiar. One need not spend much time on the campus of Hill School to realize, however, that it is efficiently run and highly successful. Northrup has worked hard for 20 years, slowly and steadily building a strong school. He started with a vision that put students first. Then, he built an administrative team that shared this vision, worked outwardly to engage the entire staff in this vision, and made sure that he remained an integral, daily component of this vision.

Heading any school in the 21st century can be a daunting task. Those issues that confound independent-school heads tend to be more similar than different, regardless of size or philosophy. Therefore, we all can learn from each other, even as we seek our own unique identities.

So, too, as each independent-school leader seeks an authentic leadership style, there should be more shared learning opportunities. In my relatively brief tenure as a school head, I have learned that it really is lonely at the top. Moving past the monthly lunch meetings and annual conferences and creating deep and meaningful connections with other heads is critical to our survival. In my early years of leading Green Hedges School, I was greatly buoyed by my experience at the Institute for New Heads sponsored by NAIS. My year-long mentorship with Tom Northrup has provided me with fresh ideas and energy. It has also made the job a little less lonely.

Northrup's strategic planning revolves around this question: "What is best for the students?"

Those issues that confound independent-school heads tend to be more similar than different, regardless of size or philosophy. Therefore, we all can learn from each other, even as we seek our own unique identities.

As each independent-school leader seeks an authentic leadership style, there should be more shared learning opportunities.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE):

This article can also be viewed at the website:
<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=8672850>

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE):

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Scott Votey with his mentor, Tom Northrup.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE):

~~~~~

By Scott Votey

Scott Votey is head of school at Green Hedges School (Virginia). He wishes to thank the board of trustees and the staff at Hill School for their unfailing support and kindness.

---

Copyright of Independent School is the property of National Association of Independent Schools. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

Source: Independent School, Fall2002, Vol. 62 Issue 1, p57, 6p  
Item: 8672850