

ARTICLE: Expectations of a New Principal (abridged)
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DESCRIPTORS:

School administration; school culture; character development; moral education; school administrator; principal, humanization of schools.

SYNOPSIS:

The school principal is a leading figure in the field of education. He/she can be an efficient propagandist for the ethical underpinnings of school life as well as an established authority on the moral aspects of education. The principal of a school can be a defender and an inspirer of classroom teachers and everyone involved in school education.

Expectations of a New Principal *Dr. Nadezhda Shurkova¹*

For a long time our schools have been dreaming of a new type of principal. Traditionally, principals excluded themselves from the realm of children's moral education because there was always a vice-principal responsible for all aspects of curricular and extracurricular activities. Lately these activities have been transformed into pure entertainment.

Until recently, we had to accept the fact that a principal could not dominate the sphere of education. The process of real education was left behind by the professional necessities of schooling. The necessity of caring about students was also left behind. Instead educators became involved in the process of "filling" the minds of future citizens with purely scientific information.

Today, looking at the results of our carelessness over the last twenty years, we have come full circle in our understanding that moral education and character development are the primary professional responsibilities of our schools. We are back to square one.

The vestiges of the past are recalled and reproduced but are not accepted. Moreover, the shape of education now is poorly perceived by the minds of our contemporary, educational professionals whose consciousness is still oriented towards the traditional forms of education. The situation is made worse by the absence of an ideology in our current social environment.

Today, the need for an exemplary model for a principal, a figure of utmost importance, has become extremely critical and urgent. Teachers are tired of making no headway. They are eager to begin a truly professional voyage, but every ship needs a

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captain. The crew (school staff) is waiting for the captain (principal) to give them the ship's course (pedagogical strategy.)

WHERE SHALL WE SAIL?

New times have brought the need for a new pedagogy; one that is designed to create a new concept of education. The primary objective of education today is to fully understand and formulate its goal that serves as a model for its final result. It is the principal who provides schoolteachers with their professional strategies. **A principal must lead his or her team of educators towards the ideal of developing individuals of worthy, noble character.**

The principal's pedagogical thought should be like a compass needle. It should always point to the best model of a school's graduate whose character development is compatible with the contemporary culture and which definitely surpasses the level of a student in the first grade.

That is why the entire system of the school's activities is subordinated to the higher goal of moral education and character development. Whatever is done in school should be checked against the principal's understanding of this primary educational goal. **Beyond the scope of a principal's managerial function:** the cleanliness of the floors, cafeteria, classrooms, and restrooms; quiet classrooms; proper student appearance, language, and manners; and the management of the office, **the principal must see the image of young, decent people, school graduates, who are ready to lead worthy lives.**

A principal should be a practical philosopher of education. Philosophy, like the sun that brings us light, brings insights to the solutions of common problems and helps to identify and create fundamental guidelines for preparing every student for adult life. A principal may never be able to put aside technical, financial, and bureaucratic concerns, **but a principal can never simply be a school manager or a bureaucrat. Since he is a strategist, he has to know of the works of Hegel, to revisit Marx, to rethink Bakhtin² and Kagan,³ check out and read books by Erich Fromm, Viktor Frankl, and history's greatest teachers; starting with Socrates.**

However, here is what students from one school wrote when asked to complete the sentence, ***"If I were the principal, I would..."***

- Bring modern equipment to classrooms. (34% of the students)
- Use LCD monitors instead of the old ones. (28%)
- Introduce and use new technologies in the educational process. (29%)
- Perform a Western-style renovation in our school. (24%)
- Add new books to the school library. (15%)

² **Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhailovich** [In Russian: Михаил Михайлович Бахтин] (1895-1975) was a Russian philosopher, literary critic, semiotician, and scholar who wrote influential works of literary and rhetorical theory and criticism. His works, dealing with a variety of subjects, have inspired groups of thinkers such as neo-Marxists, structuralists and semioticians who have all incorporated Bakhtinian ideas into theories of their own.

³ **Kagan, Moisey Samoilovich** [In Russian: Моисей Самойлович Каган] (1921-2006) was a famous Russian philosopher whose concept of the philosophy of culture and theory of values were widely known and used.

- Increase teachers' salaries. (8%)

At first, when we looked through the results, we were moved. Children were so sweet to express concerns about the school facilities. But then, one of the teachers said, "They think facilities determine the character of the school." And really, no student mentioned interpersonal relationships. Relationships are beyond the scope of attention and aspirations of our children.

In other schools where students completed the same task, children suggested: sell orange juice in the cafeteria; protect everyone from noise; and exchange straight chairs for soft armchairs.

These children's wishes don't do principals any favors. Their focus on material things and physical conditions makes us think that in these schools, the process of real moral and character education doesn't exist at all.

What is most important is that, subconsciously, the students' responses show that they consider their principal to be primarily a maintenance person. They don't see the principal as an educator at all. Should they get what they want, soft armchairs, clean toilets, and juice for breakfast, they would forget about the principal entirely. Isn't it strange that, when given an opportunity to let their imaginations run wild, students don't? And that is where we are today.

In the remote school of the Barsovo Settlement⁴, second graders made a poster with the words of Socrates: "Speak, that I may see you," and hung it on the wall in their classroom. For them, Socrates turned out to be truly useful in shaping their behavior. If even children need a philosopher to guide them, then more so the principal needs to lift his/her eyes from the plumbing to the stars.

If this happens, students will have a better appreciation of their principal. Only when students stop being afraid of a principal, and stop having a desire to blend into the wall when a principal passes by, will they finally learn to have a true heart-to-heart dialogue with this same principal. Then they will discover practical solutions to their vital questions. In some schools such dialogues with children already have a name, "Five minutes with the Principal."

Children expect to talk about "life in general." They ask teachers to tell them something, but their teachers turn a deaf ear to these calls for help because they suspect that there is something wrong in these requests. They don't understand that such a conversation about vital human problems could benefit students' yearning souls. Their range of interests would widen and include not only material interests but also embrace issues of the spirit.

When a principal is a philosopher, the content of the educational process soars, enabling the ethical enrichment of a student's personality.

Founded on new pedagogical principles, philosophically interpreted education is based on different mechanisms for personality development than were utilized previously. From century, to century, the art of education has become more intricate and complicated. The usual "household" attitudes and beliefs in education, though common and traditional, are apparently inefficient. Only with extensive training in education theory and psychology can school educators develop their professionalism,

⁴ School No. 1, Barsovo Settlement, Surgut Region, Tyumen Oblast. Principal Victor V. Gudkov.

since working with people, and especially with children, is always creative by nature. Time flies. We witness now how rapidly the world is changing. Children are growing very quickly. Teachers have to develop new teaching methods accordingly. Every day they create something new in continuously changing conditions.

Every principal should encourage creativity, facilitate introduction of various forms of innovations and stimulate continuous development of teacher creativity. To accomplish this, a whole system of post-graduate studies exists in different forms and variations.

The fact that teachers constantly study is surprising for young learners. "How come teachers have to take courses?" The older students are accustomed to it. They like it when their teacher goes somewhere to study. Afterwards they can ask, "Please, tell us what you have learned there." Sometimes a teacher tells them about his or her experience and passes along new information to the children who react to it in this way: "And when will you have your next class?" They impatiently wait for the next meeting with this teacher.

Students feel exhausted by poor communication with those teachers who spout trivial phrases and generalities and rarely think about what they say.

The ideal principal can't fail to notice it. This situation should concern him/her. An analogy would be that of a ship captain who notices that his navigator is losing skills and his boatswain no longer knows what the sailing situation requires.

HOW SHALL WE SAIL?

The question, "How shall we sail?" is equally important. That's why someone who can comprehend the whole range of social and psychological factors of school reality is needed. The principal has to do it as the primary educator in the school.

It is the responsibility of the school administration to ensure the efficiency of teachers, and the principal is the head of the administration. That's why he has to be able to match the goals of education with the professional competencies of school specialists.

Teachers are not waiting for a king with a pointing finger and immediate demands. On the contrary, they expect a **thinker**, who is encouraging their constant professional development. To be even more precise, teachers are waiting for the one who will help them to gain pedagogical professionalism that wasn't provided by their original training that usually helps only the acquisition of teaching skills.

In this role, any principal becomes a helper for all the members of the school team. He is invited to classes. Teachers ask him, "Please, come and take a look. Tell me if I am doing something wrong." He is asked for his advice. "What if we organize an intellectual marathon?" He is given suggestions. "Let us arrange a dancing club with classical music." And so on...

Both children and teachers badly need such a principal who can focus on school issues and provide help that is within his power and professional skills. On St. Valentine's Day, he wouldn't tolerate a dirty, green box by the school entrance bearing a sloppy slogan: "WRITE LOVE MESSAGES!" But he would gladly accept the idea of a "do it yourself" creative competition; support the plans for "a lesson in the woods"; help

in organizing a “Spring Equinox Ball”; participate in a “literary lounge”; invite a local, veteran, artillery-general to speak at the school; help to equip the library for continuing education; etc.

He gives everyone the freedom of creative ideas: musical contests, singing contests, poetry contests, recitation competitions, dancing contests, competitions for storytellers, young tailors, embroiderers, repairers, painters, bakers, as well as “Good works on Earth.” These would be for the little ones, the weak ones, the old ones, and for the wise ones, for those who walk past the school and for those who study at school, and also daily good deeds for the close ones and the loved ones.” These are a form of self-presentation: what I like; what I can do; what I create; what I learn; what I accept; what I can’t accept; and what I dream but don’t speak about.

Events including the entire school have a great influence on the personal development of students. While participating in such events, a student becomes a public person, one who represents himself, asserts himself and grows. What’s most important is that the child learns to create which means that a destructive instinct cannot choke off his personality.

The system of school traditions: cultural, ethical, aesthetic, hygienic, educational, cognitive, and consequently, the public opinion of the school itself, depends on the principal. It is also necessary, though, to have a faculty board, a parents’ board, and a trustees’ board who, together, create and preserve school traditions.

Communicating with people, the principal as the leading nurture sets a great example of how to treat people and interact with them.

Whether it was his life experience that taught him this intricate art or he spied on life in the world and mastered what he had seen; whether his communication skills were polished during some professional courses or he learned them from books, no one ever asks such questions. Everyone wants to see a role model for manners and communication style in his behavior. Children imitate him. Teachers learn good manners from him. Parents modify rude behavior when they interact with this most important person in the whole school.

Cultivation of the “person to person” attitude is the principal’s direct responsibility. A psychological climate is the key factor of the school success. The captain of the ship knows that the ship will sink if his crew falls apart. The classic example is the story of Magellan’s voyage round the world. It is of utmost importance to know and develop humanistic relationships. They determine who’s who in the sailing crew.

WHO SHALL SAIL WITH WHOM?

The kind of principal who we so much anticipate has practical knowledge of psychology and ethics. He observes children’s facial expressions and body language; notices postures, the pace and rhythm of teachers’ movements; hears the melody of their voices; evaluates their vocabulary; catches smiles. This principal starts worrying when he doesn’t see smiling faces in the school building. Children are brought to his office not to be threatened or scolded but for him to help them in finding a solution to a possible problem. He is an ethicist because he is in charge of moral attitudes in his

school. He is a practical psychologist because he is always oriented towards the individuality of those who are entrusted to him.

The principal himself is looking for different ways to use his kindness. He would:

- mention something nice to some child in passing. ("Today, you are especially beautiful.")

- ask someone to repeat something and, in this way, make them start thinking about their words. ("If I understand you correctly, you wish you had polished students with good manners? Then why would you need to work with them?")

- invite someone to his or her office for a cup tea. ("Here is your favorite lemon pastry," or "Please, drop in just for five minutes.")

- address a request to a teacher. ("I would be happy if someone did this...")

- bring a book for someone to look through. ("Could you take a look from the point of view of group discussion?")

- invite someone to his office together with the children. ("Could you please drop in together with your wonderful students?")

The principal is a role model for treating people and communicating with them. He is the first one to introduce new, gentle, and delicate forms of "touching" someone's personality. The students of his school can see how respectful he is to the old, school janitor; how tactful he is with a young, inexperienced teacher; how broadly he smiles watching the younger children; how courteous he is with the girls and easy with the boys. They can also see the principal is respectful to their parents regardless of appearance or social status.

The principal is no longer scary. It's just in his presence that one feels ashamed and uncomfortable with one's unworthy behavior. And, the children are catching up. Teachers are adjusting their behavior. Parents are loosening up. The principal himself is grateful to them for being interesting and worthy people.

Children and parents hope that the principal will turn out to be an interesting, funny, and courageous person who loves life. Teenagers and younger children yearn for vivid impressions until they learn to discover wonderful colors of life against the background of their daily routine. A principal is always a poet. He or she inspires children to conquer the Mont Blanc of culture by leading everyone, assuring them that they will have enough strength and nerve to do it, promising that no one will ever get overstrained while learning culture.

Children need very little, one captivating activity, one joke during class, one friendly teacher, one sweet look, one personality triumph, and a student is ready to make stronger efforts to move upwards.

Of course, local authorities demand that a school principal be responsible for the school's tangible property: roof, heating, lighting, windows, floors, food, plumbing, bathrooms, technical facilities and aesthetic appearance.

Any school's financial and economic situation fully depends on the intelligence and efficiency of its principal. A school is destined to fail if its principal is inactive and ignorant in the financial sphere. Any ship should be well equipped with the latest technical achievements in order to set sail on its endless voyage.

WHAT KIND OF SHIP SHALL WE SAIL ON?

Starting the trip, one should be concerned about the ship itself. Will it be a worm-ridden scow, a tramp steamer, a luxurious liner, a trim yacht or a battle cruiser?

All the inhabitants of the school are aboard: stern, security officers; maintenance employees; the non-professional staff; the education professionals; the principal at the helm; and the children, from grade one to the graduating class. This statement is not a metaphor because everyone is responsible for his/her own strictly defined area, executing duties on the vessel.

The principal is the first person in the management system because he is in charge of the whole operation. To fully perform this duty he must be financially and economically competent. He is the one on whom the whole range of student well-being depends including the combination of all material and technical elements providing physical comfort in this institution for both children and adults.

Unfortunately, the general expectations for a school principal's obligations have been minimized to his/her possessing only professional competence and management skills. Principals attend lectures, meetings, conferences, training courses, and workshops where they learn how to document their work. They do this perfectly well. Their work statements and reports are a skillful "make pretend" of things as they are in reality. It is disturbing and not as harmless as it might look. Our society should be definitely more concerned about it since "glossy papers" conceal a truly poor condition of our children's personal development. Instead of supporting the principal's philosophical, pedagogical, psychological and ethical proficiencies, the education authorities drive him/her into the narrowest corners of formalized reporting.

The principal's social and pedagogical role is multi-sided. However among these different sides, we should single out one central aspect. We have to expose the existence of an unstable confrontation between the material and the spiritual in our society as well as in people's personality structure. Russian spirituality hasn't been strangled completely, yet. It is too early to certify a complete victory of the material over the spiritual, but the predilection for the spiritual seems to have no priority. Spirituality is being squeezed out under the pressure of "the market-oriented mind."

School is an institution of spiritual culture. Material things are only the means for school life to run smoothly. Spiritual substance should be the content of school life. *The principal is guardian of the school's spirit.* Let's put aside, for a moment, the possibility of a religious interpretation of *spirituality*. The ancient Greeks were the first to introduce the word, "soul." They discovered that humans possess the ability of a private, inner, autonomous, independent world with its own personal laws.

At the same time, we should keep in mind the nature of our present life, its utilitarian and pragmatic approach to everything, and the popular desire to make money out of schooling. **The principal stands guard in his/her school. He treats the school as the place where the child's soul is being nurtured; where the top vital values are being learned; where humans show their inner self, the very essence of these bearers of social relationships.** That is why the children in his school are beautiful. Their faces are bright and shiny. Their manners are refined. Their speech is intelligent and kind. They are happy, joyful, and creatively active. That is why the teachers in this school are also beautiful. They are gentle yet strict, open yet reserved, free in individual manifestations yet unified in presenting to children a model human being.

In his/her school, the ideal principal cultivates value statements like: Human Being, Life, Society, Nature, Kindness, Truth, and Beauty. He/she puts these values into practice daily by:

- Entering the school building with a “Good morning!”
- Noticing a small child in the cloakroom and saying, “Hey, let me help you.”
- Seeing a sad face and inquiring, “Any problems? Are you OK? What can I do for you?”
- Coming into a classroom saying, “How fortunate we are! What bliss. Our brains are working.”
- Receiving an invitation for breakfast with a: “What a pleasure to share a delicious meal in the company of friends.”
- Seeing the school paths covered with snow and suggesting: “We’ll clear the way! All we need are shovels.”
- Hearing a violin playing in the school assembly hall and pronouncing: “My soul is singing. For some reason there are tears in my eyes.”
- Cheering during a game in the gym: “Come on! We are with you! You can do it!”
- Viewing a performance in the school theater and commenting: “My heart skipped a beat when the curtain was opened.”

So what are we yearning and waiting for? The principal who will come to school tomorrow or for a new worthy school life? We are expecting a new principal. We are dreaming of his/her image because we have finally understood that it is impossible to continue living the way we have lived at school for so long now. Schools very much depend on their principals as their central and most important figures. We need new principals to create new schools in order to have our dreams come true.

So have we described a perfect image? Is it difficult for a human being to be human? Is it difficult to be a “thinking,” Homo sapiens? Is it difficult for an educator to be a professional? I trust that there is only one thing which is truly difficult for a school principal and that is to stop being just an administrator.

COMMENTARY:

Professor Shurkova speaks clearly about a problem facing Russian educators since the fall of Communism. Under the Soviet Union, the schools had a moral force that guided all their activities, the Theory of Communism. Trained ideologues guided every school in all aspects of curriculum and activity. Parents were motivated by the party in a variety of ways to support the schools. Students had the motivation of party youth organizations and the pressures on their parents to conform, behave, and study.

With the changes of the past twenty years, educators have seen their former moral authority dissolve along with the Communist philosophy. The search began to replace the highly organized structure of former times with a replacement. Will it be the Russian Orthodox Church? Will it be a Western view of “Democracy?” Will it be a philosophy and structure developed in Russia by Russian educators themselves? Professor Shurkova describes her hopes and those of other educators for an ideal leader/moral authority who, with true, Russian values and real, Russian solutions will help rescue their schools.

I feel that this article accurately describes the deep desire of Russian educators for a just, fair, kind, humane, ethical, and deeply intellectual future for their students.

American administrators might use this article as a guide to examining their own consciences.

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