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Professional Concerns

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PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS

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Professional Concerns is a regular column devoted to the interchange of ideas among those interested in reading instruction. Send your comments and contributions to the editor. If you have questions about reading that you wish to have answered, the editor will find respondents to answer them. Address correspondence to R. Baird Shuman, Department of English, 100 English Building, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

The success of elementary school reading programs has normally been directly proportionate to the extent to which elementary school principals have involved themselves with such programs. Elementary school principals, even those who are not reading specialists in any sense of the word, can make or break the reading programs in their schools.

In the article which follows, Evelyn Hill, principal of Gertrude Ealy Elementary School in the West Bloomfield School District of Birmingham, Michigan, suggests specific ways in which the elementary school administrator can promote the reading program within his/her school. Ms. Hill provides sensible suggestions which any elementary school administrator should find rather easy and practical to apply.

THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL AND THE READING PROGRAM

The foundation upon which any reading program flourishes or dwindles away is the philosophy of the school. This can and should be a collective statement arrived at by the staff and the building principal.

Reading is the core of much learning that goes on in an elementary school. The building principal must be involved in all aspects of this vital program. The media center, Bucket Brigade program, classroom teaching and reading habits of the children should be of concern. Standardized test scores, end-of-book tests, creative writing, reports are other facets which should supply the administrator with information about the total reading program.

The elementary school principal must encourage reading instruction at all levels. It is imperative that he/she be aware of new techniques,

materials, and research, while being equally aware of what is being done in his/her school in reading.

The administrator is responsible for arranging opportunities for staff to become aware of new materials and techniques. This can be done by planning extended staff meetings focusing on this concern, taking the teacher's class so that he/she can visit other classes or meet with the reading consultant, encourage teachers to attend workshops, seminars, etc., by providing funding within the budget for such expenses. If the staff includes a reading consultant, this person can be a helpful assistant in keeping the reading program moving. The principal must communicate with the reading consultant constantly in order to be aware of test scores, progress being made by students, groupings and changes being made within the groupings. Visits to classes on a scheduled basis also is an aid to the administrator. The teacher and the principal working together can enrich the program and can investigate materials which might be of use to students and teachers.

Because reading is the foundation of the educational program in elementary schools, it is important to teach children how to read different kinds of materials. It is important not only that reading instruction be emphasized but that reading in other areas be taught as well. The reading of mathematics, science, and social studies should also be taught. Looking to the future, it is incumbent upon educators to teach children that reading is an acceptable leisure time activity. It is something which one can do alone and requires only a book or magazine for equipment. The number of good trade books published each year affords ample resources to implement this.

Implementing any new programs must begin with the kindergarten. Knowledge of child growth and development is primary. It is important that children have developed gross motor, fine motor and other perceptual skills before they are expected to perform reading readiness tasks. Teacher made or commercial programs may be employed to teach thinking skills. These include picture cards, story completion exercises, listening skill lessons and body awareness. It appears in many cases that an inordinate amount of emphasis is being placed on reading skills alone in the kindergarten and primary grades, excluding thinking skills which are a higher level of learning. Attribute games, conceptualizing and problem solving are all means of getting students to expand their thinking skills.

Curriculum in the area of reading needs to be developed as a cooperative effort between the administrator and staff. This can be achieved only if lines of communication are open and time is available. The assistance of the reading consultant is a great help. This person can suggest materials, preview texts and provide an opportunity to pilot some reading approaches. As more is learned about cognitive style, it behooves educators to investigate the many ways in which people learn. Success is the key to effective learning, and unless the most appropriate vehicle for each child can be found, learning diminishes.

The philosophy of a school can make a great difference in the attitude

of the staff and students toward reading. If there is a media center which serves as the hub of the school, it can provide a broad spectrum of activities for the students. Within the framework of the media center, listening centers, interest centers, featured books areas, book report displays, and student displays (diaramas, reports, etc.) all pique the interest of the boys and girls. This area provides a place where children may come to do many different kinds of things. There are rocking chairs and pillows for leisure reading, tables and chairs for research; tape recorders and headsets for skill building, filmstrip previewers and tapes for story listening, many many books, realia, and a TV. All of these items meet different needs of children during the course of their education. The building principal must be aware of the use of such materials, suggest new ideas and procedures, and listen to the person in charge of the media center to be sure it is being used to the optimum.

Visiting classrooms assists the principal in his/her efforts to be cognizant of the progress of students and methods and materials being used. Another way is to substitute in a classroom and actually work with the students. On a less formal basis, just chatting with the boys and girls about what they are reading—what they like to read—and how much time they spend reading, provides insight into habits that they are forming.

Providing a time during each day when *everyone* in the building is reading for 20 or 30 minutes emphasizes the importance reading can assume in everyone's life. Although such activity is not formal instruction, reading is a skill and to become more proficient in it requires practice. Arranging opportunities for such things to happen is the responsibility of the building administrator.

It behooves the building principal to read widely about new ventures, to ask questions, to be creative and above all to be supportive of staff who wish to explore new trails.