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John Klein
Washington Writers' Academy

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John Klein

Nine Principles for a Writing Principal

In *Crafting a Life in Essay, Story, Poem*, Donald Murray (2003) points out that a person's differences are the source for good writing. When I joined the Third Coast Writing Project's Invitational Summer Institute at Western Michigan University (a local writing project of teachers affiliated with the National Writing Project), I knew that I would bring a different perspective to the group, but I wasn't sure that my different perspective would produce good writing. I wasn't a writing teacher. In fact, I hadn't taught in a classroom for over three years. I enrolled in the Summer Institute as the principal of Washington Writers' Academy (WWA), hoping to lead my teachers in taking on rigorous and meaningful professional development by example. Secretly, I hoped to experiment with different genres and even . . . just maybe . . . find my creative voice along the way.

Vicki Spandel's (2005) *The 9 Rights of Every Writer*, a writing project required text, inspired me to begin thinking about the things I should be doing as a principal to protect my writers' rights. Robert Marzano (2001) reminds us of the power of the principal in *School Leadership that Works: From Research to Results*. The building principal plays a critical role in setting the vision and creating an environment of high student achievement. The principal should:

- Provide a clear mission and goals
- Influence school and classroom climate
- Influence teachers' attitude
- Influence teachers' classroom practices
- Provide organization of curriculum and instruction
- Improve students' opportunities to learn

Principals in their schools, much like teachers in their classrooms, can create a culture of success. In studying about the habits of writers and effective writing instruction, I started wondering what principal practices might encourage creating a culture of writers—within classrooms, school-wide, and in the wider community.

Teachers, not a program, must be the foundation for building a community of writers. A community of writers share a fundamental commitment to the writing process and a passion for teaching writing, view themselves as writers, and believe that the act of writing is more than a subject to be studied in school. Writing is an activity that is creative, expressive, and empowering. When people engage in this activity, they realize this and are completely hooked.

So how does a building principal create a community of writers? The easy answer is: not alone. Any student of the research on leadership in the last 20 years will immediately recognize this truth. Much has been written in the field about bringing about cultural change, the change process in adopting new strategies and curriculum, the practices of effective leaders, and so on. However, what strategies and practices specific to developing a writing community might a principal adopt?

WWA's plan for building a writing community calls for synthesizing concepts from several areas—writing research, educational leadership, and my personal experience. Consequently, I have identified Nine Principles of a Writing Principal designed to create a school culture of adult and student writers:

- Articulate a vision for why writing matters
- Protect time to write
- Become a writer
- Celebrate writing
- Trust teachers
- Provide time for teachers to collaborate
- Support professional development in and out of the classroom
- Assess student writing and the teaching of it
- Share best practice in teaching writing with fellow administrators

What follows is an explanation of each principle as well as strategies that translate the idea into action.

Principle #1: Articulate a Vision for Why Writing Matters

In *A Principal's Guide to Leadership in the Teaching of Writing: Helping Teachers with Units of Study*, Lucy Calkins and Laurie Pessah (2008) write, "Clarifying the value system and breathing life into it are the greatest contributions a leader can make" (p. 4). The principal must understand why writing matters and be able to clearly articulate this message to teachers, parents, students, and the community. Practically speaking, writing matters because it improves the quality of teaching and learning in all content areas, not just writing. The strategies for teaching writing translate to teaching anything. Opponents of teaching the writing process point out that the writing on tests is unlike writing in writers' workshop. However,

Calkins and Pessah point out that the 2002 NAEP data shows a positive correlation at grades 4, 8, and 12 between students who used process writing in their classrooms and an increase in test scores. Writing, though, is more than a tool to raise test scores. Donald Murray, William Zinnser, and Peter Taylor (21 x 20 Media, 2010), to name a few, suggest in their own ways that writing is thinking. It is a creative act of expression, communicating information, thoughts, feelings, and the writer's singular perspective of the world. It empowers writers to know that at one time there was a blank page and now there is something—something that has the power to elicit thoughts and feelings in readers. Murray adds, “(t)he ability to collect and organize information, discover its significance and make that available to others, gives the writer significance. . . the writer becomes a presence, existing in a way that he or she does not when silent” (p. 3).

Principal Practices:

- Include a rationale for why writing matters in your staff handbook.
- Share (repeatedly) in staff and parent newsletters the reasons why writing matters.
- Write goals and strategies to support your beliefs for why writing matters into your school improvement plan.
- Utilize the school's website to communicate why writing matters.
- Invite writers and publishers to speak to students.
- Highlight staff and student writers on the PA/morning announcements.
- Write using various technologies—texting, blogs, social networks, email, etc.

Principle #2: Protect Time to Write

As a principal, I am careful to remind myself of Stephen Covey's (2004) admonition to schedule my priorities. If writing matters, then as an educational leader I must protect the time to write. Frequent practice is necessary if writing is to improve and such practice requires devoting time to writing in class. “Particularly useful are . . . writing workshops during which the teacher is free to provide guidance to individuals as they engage in the writing process, provides time for students to talk about their work and ask for feedback” (Cawelti, 133).

WWA's leadership team has written into the school improvement plan a requirement for a 50 minute writers' workshop at least 4 days a week. But simply mandating a writers' workshop isn't enough. To schedule our priority, we have created a school-wide writing block schedule for every grade, in much the same way as many schools schedule uninterrupted reading blocks. If we are serious about giving our writers time to write, we must be intentional about devoting enough time to make it happen.

Principal Practices:

- Schedule writing blocks before scheduling special subject classes to avoid fragmented writing periods throughout the week.
- Communicate to all school staff and parents that writing time, just as any other period of instructional time, is not to be interrupted.
- Be visible during writing blocks to send the message that writing time is important to you as the instructional leader.

Principle #3: Become a Writer

Regie Routman writes, “The simple fact is we have to see ourselves as writers if we are to teach writing well” (p. 35). It's difficult to share why writing matters unless you know it through personal experience. Although one may teach writing well, our students will receive the implicit message that writing is purely a means to an end and nothing more. They will miss out on the truth that writing is an end in itself. When we begin to see ourselves as writers, we are transformed.

Naturally, I wondered how I was supposed to get my teachers to see themselves as writers, not just teachers of writing. To begin with, the principal has to lead by example—become a writer yourself. Take risks, write, share, and model things we want to see in our teachers. I enrolled in the Third Coast Writing Project Invitational Summer Institute to do just that. While I expected to learn more about writing best practice and perhaps begin to experiment with some creative writing, I didn't count on this professional development opportunity changing my life. Over four weeks I found my creative voice. The message of the writing project was that I could be a writer. Before the summer of 2009, my experience with writing was that writers belonged to a secret club and I did not know the password to enter. The summer institute taught me to accept that I had something to say and I could do that through my writing.

Routman (2005) shares that in her work with schools across the country, “One of the best ways to begin to view ourselves as writers is to write together as a staff” (p. 36). It creates opportunities for closer collegial interaction, sensitizes us to how we teach writing in the classroom, increases our confidence as writers, and encourages us to write for publication.

Principal Practices:

- Publish staff writing in staff and parent newsletters
- Display staff writing in the office or hallways
- Open staff meetings with writing
- Use writing as a way to process thinking about professional development experiences
- Encourage staff to submit their writing for publication in journals, magazines, etc.

- Create Writers' Response Groups to build trust, to take risks, and examine our own writing process.

Principle #4: Celebrate Writing

Routman best expresses a leadership truth in that "What we choose to celebrate sends a message about what we value" (p. 18-19). The term "celebrate" involves sharing writing with an audience. When students read their writing to their peers, we celebrate in listening and applauding after they've shared. It can be that simple or more elaborate. I've come believe that not only what we celebrate, but also the ways we celebrate that become part of a culture. It's best to diversify our approach to writing celebrations on three levels: within classrooms, school-wide, and beyond the walls of the school.

Principal Practices:

- Begin staff meeting with celebrations of children's writing in order to generate conversations about what kids can do.
- Schedule regular writing celebrations.
- Pair up classrooms or grade levels as "Writing Buddies" to share and celebrate writing.

Principle #5: Trust Teachers

As principals, we find ourselves pulled in many directions, trying to respond to the demands on our time made by students, teachers, parents, central office, and the community. Typically principals find themselves pressured to choose between being the "strong principal" and allowing teachers to be "autonomous" (DuFour & Eaker, 1992, p.47). Neither ruling as a tyrant, nor adopting a laissez faire approach is an effective approach to school leadership in the long run. I'm embarrassed to admit that although I never sought out to become a tyrant, in many ways I found myself talking and acting like one, especially when faced with opposition. DuFour and Eaker rightly argue for "directed autonomy" where an organization identifies a few core values that give direction to the activities and decisions of all members and then demands rigid adherence to these few non-negotiable values on the part of its members. At the same time it promotes innovation and autonomy in the day to day operations. This is a comfortable leadership space; I'm not abdicating my duties as a leader while I'm encouraging my teachers to be leaders. Once a school has a clear vision for why writing matters, a staff must clarify its core beliefs and then allow for room to innovate and tap into the creative energies of its members. Anthony Alvarado, former Superintendent of Community District 2 in New York City, widely regarded as a high achieving urban school district, echoes this principle: "Set clear expectations, then

decentralize." He adds, "Good ideas come from talented people working together" (Nagin, 2006, p. 58).

Principal Practices:

- Engage staff in conversations aimed at clarifying core values about writing.
- Publish documents that identify the school's core values about writing on-line, in newsletters, and communication with parents.
- Share your personal beliefs about writing with teachers and parents.
- Support and celebrate teachers' innovations.

Principle #6: Provide Time for Teachers to Collaborate

Although collaboration is widely regarded as best practice, schools are hard-pressed to find the time in the schedule with enough frequency and appropriate length to effect change in classrooms. Teachers at a grade level, within a content area, or on a team need time to plan, review student work, and evaluate their practice. The way to best honor teachers' time is to schedule grade level meetings during the school day. Meetings during the day allow for everyone to be at the table, especially if there are support staff that may participate in the meeting.

Principal Practices:

- Provide teachers opportunities to celebrate successes, share frustrations, and problem solve as a team.
- Make it a priority to participate in grade level team meetings with teachers as much as possible; if leaders value collaboration, they should give some of their time to it.
- Utilize technology to support asynchronous collaboration such as social networks—Ning, Facebook, Moodle, etc.

Principle #7: Support Professional Development In and Out of the Classroom

Jim Gray, founder of the NWP, writes, "School reform can't happen just by passing laws and publishing mandates. But real school reform can happen when teachers come together regularly throughout their careers to explore practices that effective teachers have already proven are successful in their own classrooms" (Nagin, 2006, p. 66). It's in this spirit that the Summer Institute takes its cue for four weeks of professional development in the teaching of writing. Teachers teaching teachers is a highly effective form of professional development. Most principals will see themselves in a scene from my life: During a staff meeting a third grade teacher makes a comment about the need for greater collaboration. Around the room I see

most of the teachers nodding their heads in agreement. I sit, dumbfounded about what has just happened. I had been talking for months about the benefits of collaboration and the need to work out a plan to make it happen, but because a teacher suggested it the other teachers “got it.”

Another critical element for optimal professional development is to make sure it is ongoing and job-embedded. The one-shot workshop where we send teachers away for a day, are widely regarded as an ineffective way to change practice. Professional developers recognize that adult learning must be respected—teachers need time to process new learning, practice it in their classrooms, and return to ideas to reflect collaboratively on how things went. For these reasons, I passionately advocate for academic coaches. Coaches satisfy the requirement that professional development be both job-embedded and on-going. WWA is blessed to have a reading coach and a writing coach to work with teachers on planning units and lessons, modeling strategies, implementing new practices, providing frequent feedback, asking questions to prompt reflection, and utilizing sources of data to inform instruction. Dollar for dollar an academic coach is the best investment a school can make.

Principal Practices:

- Allocate Title I funds for a literacy coach.
- Utilize an inquiry approach at grade level team meetings so that teachers can analyze their own teaching practices in light of student performance.

Principle #8: Assess Student Writing and the Teaching of It

We cannot effectively teach our young writers until we know what they already can do. Assessment, specifically formative assessment, is critical. Teachers gather data through observations during mini-lessons, one-on-one conferences, and during sharing at the end of the workshop. WWA has created templates for gathering student data during the writers’ workshop so that teachers get a snapshot of their students and look for any patterns that emerge for small group lessons or guided writing opportunities.

During writing grade level meetings, teams can use range-finding techniques to gain a deeper understanding of how writing is assessed at that grade level. Teachers learn to build common understanding with respect to grade level expectations and identify model or anchor papers that best illustrate degrees in the quality of student writing.

Benchmarking student writing can also provide important information about what students can do on their own and allows teachers to monitor growth over time. WWA uses Lucy Calkins’s K-8 Continuum for Assessing Narrative Writing to score pieces. In September, January, and May we provide students with a prompt at every grade level and instruct students to do their best work.

We collect the pieces and score them at grade level meetings or professional development sessions. The scores are entered into a template that allows us to track our students’ progress. At first glance, on-demand writing might seem incongruous with teaching the writing process, but even Calkins supports its use to track a student’s progress as a writer. We will be working in the upcoming school year to develop a spreadsheet database that will be used to record and analyze data on our writers.

Principals make inferences about a teacher’s effectiveness through assessments of their students’ progress. The educational leader no longer accepts, “I taught it, but they didn’t get it.” However, monitoring how teachers are teaching writing must be a frequent practice for principals. Monitoring the teaching of writing requires principals to be out of the office and in classrooms. It also demands, as McGhee and Lew (2007) found, that principals know about effective writing instruction so that they act in ways that allow teachers to perform their best.

Principal Practices:

- Formalize ways for teachers to collect student data from writing conferences, e.g., data charts and templates.
- Research and develop a portfolio assessment system.
- Take advantage of the advancements in digital technology to scan and store student writing samples using virtual portfolios.

Principle #9: Share Best Practice in Teaching Writing with Other Administrators

I think the best way to stave off burn-out is to connect with other professionals. The importance of knowing we’re not alone cannot be emphasized enough. Working toward a common goal is professionally affirming and refreshing. My vision is to create a network of principals who are passionate about writing and would like to lead their schools toward becoming writing communities.

Principal Practice:

- Join the Principals’ Writing Project at www.principalswp.ning.com (an on-line social network) to post questions, give support, and share resources.
- Take charge of your professional development in writing.

Baby Steps

So where is a principal to begin? We can take our cue from two unlikely sources—Richard Dreyfuss and Bill Murray. The movie *What About Bob?* has a wonderful scene where Dr. Marvin (Dreyfuss) explains to the neurotic and multiply phobic Bob (Murray) that he needs to take baby steps to get home, rather than think about all

the things he has to do to get home. Any undertaking can become overwhelming and eventually incapacitating, much like Bob's phobias. Remembering that change takes time. We must think in terms of baby steps in order to develop writing communities in our classrooms, schools, and beyond.

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John Klein has been an elementary educator for over 12 years and, for the last 4 years has been the principal of the Washington Writers' Academy, an elementary magnet school in the Kalamazoo Public Schools. He is a Co-Director of the Third Coast Writing Project.

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