

It's May. This is the time of year when people often say to educators, "are you winding down?" The truth of the matter is that we have to crank it way up and keep it up at a frenzied pace before we can "wind down" when the kids walk out the door for summer break.

After many years as a high school principal, I decided that there was a special place in hell for principals where the period of May 1 to commencement replayed – for all eternity! What torture that would be!

In this column, I've often given kudos to many of our employees and this week, I want to focus on our building principals. It is my contention that no business would ever expect a middle manager to have as many responsibilities as a school principal. The job is fast-paced and BIG. They have to deal with hundreds of students, hundreds of parents and staffs of 30-60, balancing everyone's needs and distinctly unique personalities. They work with the demands of all these people while trying to keep in mind the directives of the central office and board. That's a lot of personalities to deal with – a lot of personalities!

Principals have to understand child development. They have to have a good handle on what is appropriate development at each age level and what is not normal. They have to understand group dynamics when working with groups of students or teachers and also have a sixth sense for counseling when they meet privately with students and teachers.

Principals are expected to understand many different curricula. While they can't be content experts for every subject, they are well versed in the methodology of teaching. They are to be the instructional leaders for their buildings which requires knowledge of finer points of pedagogy, grading philosophies, assessment strategies and classroom management.

Principals have to be judges and interpreters of human behavior. They need to make decisions about the behavior of students and sometimes employees. These decisions are sometimes simple and sometimes complex. Human behavior is a frontier yet to be fully conquered yet they are criticized for their decisions in this area.

Principals also need to understand and effectively use technology. Classroom instructional technology is constantly evolving and the principal needs to be cognizant of the developments. They have to use laptops and iPads every day to perform administrative functions. They have to effectively use our student information software to retrieve student data, schedule classes and monitor student progress.

Special education is another large area for which principals are responsible. The federal IDEIA law pertaining to special education has 755 distinct points of audit - and God help us if we miss one! They need to understand autism, mental retardation, learning disabilities, giftedness, hearing impairments and a host of other diagnoses. And if a student doesn't qualify for special education services, they have to understand the federal law known as "Section 504" under which most maladies will qualify for special treatment.

The physical building plant presents another area for principals to conquer. They need to be quite familiar with the building and its quirks. They also have to be well versed in school security measures related to the physical plant, building processes and school climate.

Principals face a mound of paperwork everyday yet they are pulled in 100 directions. I remember research in the 1980s that showed that principals have to change their focus an average of 88.3 times per day. I'm sure that number has increased since then. If you don't come into the job with ADHD, you certainly leave with it!

Principals spend many nights at school for sporting events, musical programs and parent meetings. They live in our community and are often questioned, probed or chided when at the grocery store, little league field or other public area. Everyone wants them to know their child while principals also have children of their own to know and nurture. Everyone's problem is the most important, demanding immediate attention, and their personal needs are often set aside.

I don't know if I've done a good job outlining the enormous job duties of a principal. I think there is a danger in this district of underestimating the difficulty of the job because our principals do it so well, they make it look easy. They navigate a quagmire of systems and human demands to keep our buildings running smoothly.

Lancer Letter #132

In Praise of Principals

I learned quickly as superintendent that if principals are doing a good job, my job is made easier. I am grateful for their expertise and commitment.

Make it a point the next time you see one of our principals to give him or her a high five or some words of encouragement. June 6 seems like an eternity from now!