



OVERLOAD:

Maximizing Every Moment

By Kim M. Smithgall

Last spring, SAANYS administered a survey on the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) process. As you might expect, **the responses painted a picture of increased stress and anxiety for school leaders.**

“So much time is spent on gathering and tagging evidence and assigning scores appropriately and fairly that I have very little time for hands-on work with teachers.”

“We used to see and work with kids, we used to know their personal stories and their families. Now we can’t even recall their names by recognition because we have lost that rapport and interaction.”

Brian Bailey, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction in the Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk School District, relates to both comments. Before he moved into his current district-level position, his calculations showed that he spent more than 400 hours on APPR work when he was a principal last year. “That’s almost two months of time taken out of the work that I normally would have been doing,” he said. “This often means that school leaders can’t spend casual time in classrooms that they did previously – time talking with students, participating in lessons, or interacting with teachers.”

Add in the complexities of implementing the new Common Core Learning Standards, the Dignity for All Students Act, and other mandates, along with staff and program reductions resulting from education funding cuts, and the job satisfaction level for school administrators is likely trending downward even more while stress levels are surging upward. So what can administrators do to maximize every moment?

BACK TO BASICS: BUILD YOUR INTERNAL TEAM

Scott Brown, an elementary school principal in the Liberty Central School District, and other administrators have found that forming a very structured and deliberate team with the support staff has been crucial in helping to manage time.

“We hold weekly meetings with our secretaries where we talk about schedules and activities so there are no surprises. There’s always constant communication,” Brown commented, adding that he has expanded the roles and responsibilities of the support staff and they’ve responded by becoming integral members of the team. “They’re phenomenal.

There is so much work as an administrator that could keep you in the office – paperwork, for example – that they’re handling. This type of positive relationship with the office staff is almost more important than relationships outside the office when you first start off because you end up with more time to get out and work with staff outside the office to build a positive school culture.”

Kelly McHugh agrees. “The most important thing I have done is establish a partnership with my secretarial staff. We redefined the secretarial roles.” she said.

“We have set procedures and routines in place, including a daily morning meeting between my secretary and me, so there’s not a constant start-stop-start-stop throughout the day. Also, my secretary handles all my incoming mail and paperwork. Before we enacted this management methodology I was like a hamster on a wheel – always trying to catch up.”

McHugh is principal of Whitehall Jr.-Sr. High School and a presenter for The Breakthrough Coach (TBC). She attributes many of her successful strategies to TBC, an educational consulting firm that works exclusively with instructional leaders to adapt business management techniques to school settings in order to maximize time and streamline “administrivia.” TBC’s workshops always include both secretaries and administrators to ensure that successful partnerships emerge.

TIP TOP: TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR TIME

Put the priority activities on your schedule (every single one), even if it’s simply 20-minute blocks of time to conduct walk-throughs of the school, advises author, university professor, and former school administrator William Sterrett.

“Many school leaders feel they are being more reactive than proactive. School leaders do not need to be a victim of their busy schedules,” Sterrett said. “They should focus

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on carving out specific times for specific activities and mastering their calendars.”

When scheduling activities, Sterrett advises administrators to lock in priorities using the acronym DISC, which stands for district, instruction, school, and community. “First you plug in things that are district-related – principal meetings or school board meetings, for example. Then add in instructional commitments, which might be classroom walk-throughs, faculty meetings, and school-level meetings,” he said. “Then it’s school-specific events, such as sporting events or other student activities. The ‘C,’ or ‘community,’ is often neglected. You have to build in time to make connections with community partners – for example, local businesses or civic organizations. It could be organizing a volunteer night at the start of the school year to encourage participation in school activities or maybe asking businesses to donate services or gift cards to use as staff member thank-you items. Carve out and commit the time for these priority activities.”

Interestingly enough, many administrators interviewed for this article are, indeed, using very strict scheduling to ensure they’re



Sterrett’s book, *Short on Time: How Do I Make Time to Lead and Learn as a Principal?* is a quick read at 46 pages, but the suggestions for setting and managing priorities are insightful, especially considering the need for administrators to create and maintain positive learning environments. It’s available for sale on the ASCD website www.ascd.org. Sterrett’s 100 follow-up action steps can be accessed at no cost at www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/books/Sterrett2013Arias.pdf.

meeting their priorities – for example, scheduling specific time periods to meet with staff or parents and other times for observations. However, they seem to feel bad about it, saying that they’re “hoarding” their time and being “extremely greedy with every minute.” Obviously, the change has been an uncomfortable necessity, but in the end, it allows school leaders to stay connected with their staff and students.

“The most important thing I can do is be in the hallways and the classrooms,” McHugh said. “I do not schedule any meetings between 7 and 7:45 am because I am in the hallways greeting students and talking with teachers.”

McHugh makes it a habit to print out e-mails from teachers and visits faculty in person to follow up; she describes her visibility as “command presence.”

“One of the best strategies I can offer is to forget you have an office. It’s vital for school leaders to have this command presence. It sets a tone

and makes a statement about what’s important,” she explained. “Think about when you’re driving down the highway and you see a state police speed trap. What do you do? At the very least, you look down at your speedometer. Or you may be stepping on the brake. It’s the same type of effect when I enter a classroom, even if I’m just sitting in the back of the room observing or I’m on my laptop.”

Visibility and availability also helps to build trust in a school building according to Denis Sibson, principal of Miller Hill-Sand Lake Elementary School in the Averill Park School District. “The biggest impact of all the new responsibilities is the inability to informally connect with students and staff in the building – getting into classrooms or the cafeteria, for example – not just for formal observations, but more to make the personal connections,” Sibson said. “What’s really gotten me through all of the new challenges is the foundation of relationships I built by connecting personally with teachers and staff.”

COLLABORATE AND DELEGATE

Today’s successful school leaders also advise building in time for collaboration and for cultivating future leaders. Again, it’s about putting these activities on the calendar and making them priorities.

“When I was an elementary school principal, the high school principal and I would lock a time into our calendar periodically for what we called a principal PLC [professional learning community]. We would discuss the challenges in the district, successes in our schools, ideas for improving the schools, and even discussed articles that we could co-author. It was non-negotiable; we met because it was a priority to share information,” said Sterrett.

In many school districts throughout the state, the local BOCES and administrator groups provide avenues for administrators to meet and share ideas on a regular basis. Brown has found the meetings useful, as other administrators can offer different perspectives, different experiences or, sometime, just a little camaraderie. “As you’re talking to colleagues, you realize that they’re often going through the same challenges and that eases your tension and makes you feel a little bit better about what’s going on,” Brown said.

In addition, administrators have found some advantages in sharing and delegating responsibilities, as this develops a new generation of leaders. “We’ve become more reliant on colleagues to pick up some of the things we can’t do,” Bailey said. “This can be the positive aspect of all the lunacy in today’s schools. Other people can help solve problems and communicate the mission of a school. It’s a great opportunity to foster leadership, which may, in turn, be a new skill set that administrators develop.”

LITTLE TOUCHES OF TECHNOLOGY GO A LONG WAY

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Sibson and other Averill Park administrators are using iPads. "Our district uses the Charlotte Danielson Framework for Teaching and one of my colleagues created templates on the iPad for domains two and three, which cover the environment and instruction," Sibson explained. "With the template right on the iPad, we can type in comments and information. This can be a huge timesaver in terms of streamlining workload." [See "A Lesson In Time Management: Using an iPad for Teacher Observations" on page 37.

Averill Park and Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk use StaffTrac software from Educational Vistas,

Inc. to make APPR work more manageable. "We can actually plug in the elements of data into matrices within this software and then share observations electronically with staff. There's even a function for scheduling appointments," Bailey said.

Sibson likes the StaffTrac's information-gathering capabilities. "It captures all of the observation and evaluation information from both the teacher side and the administration side. So I can pull up a teacher observation and see every document teachers used and links to YouTube videos or any other supplement they used for their lesson. To me, that is a great resource not only for me, but my teachers, as well," Sibson said.

Sterrett feels video technology can play an important role in today's schools, too. "When principals are out and about in their schools, they can be taking short video clips of effective instruction and then showcase those videos at faculty meetings," he suggested. "This gives teachers a chance to share their skills with peers."

Sterrett promotes the use of technology in other ways, as well. He feels Twitter is a must-have. "Everybody in education should be on Twitter. It is the best professional development tool out there right now. You can share ideas and connect with colleagues," he said.

Brennan agrees. "All six of our principals in Farmingdale are using Twitter. They're using it to promote our schools and show what teachers and students are doing. It's wonderful," he commented. "A few are also using Twitter as personal learning networks. They're out there

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ANOTHER RETURN TO THE BASICS: REMEMBER THE BIG PICTURE

While sharing strategies for becoming more efficient in an era of ever-increasing responsibilities, several school leaders felt the most important activity they can engage in is to keep the big picture firmly in mind.

"You can't lose sight of what's most important and that's the kids," Martinelli said. "Once in a while I have to remind myself of this. I go

down to a classroom and just spend five or 10 minutes with the students or go down to the gym before a basketball game starts to shoot a few hoops with the kids. We're here for the kids."

And remembering this just might make prioritizing the endless activities just a little easier.

KIM M. SMITHGALL is an award-winning communications specialist and freelance writer, designer, and photographer.



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