

Managing to Improve

The secret to school betterment lies in the use of sound management practices.

I am the principal of Calverton Primary School in London, England. Fifty-seven percent of our final-year students haven't gone all the way through this one school. About 50% of the parents are unemployed. A vast number of the children have very, very poor standards in English and quite often are very new to the country. Twenty percent of the children have special needs. You park your car in the parking lot at your own peril.

When our students wrote the first national tests in 1996, only 8% of them achieved the required level in maths, only 16% in English, and only 20% in science. We were named as one of the 100 worst schools in the country. On the day that the results were published, I attended a conference with a lot of other principals, and I have to say I did not wear a name tag. I hid it in my briefcase.

I was very fortunate that I was able to form a liaison with a business mentor — a stockbroker, in fact. When my mentor arrived, he wasn't sure what help he could offer. He claimed to know absolutely nothing about schools.

We started to discuss what was going on in the school and some of the problems that I was having. I talked about unsatisfactory teachers, about difficulties in recruitment, about managing non-teaching staff, delegation and time management for me and for the rest of the staff, and so forth.

One of the questions that my mentor used to ask was: "Why not?" I used to make lots of excuses for why things were going wrong and why standards were low. I couldn't get rid of unsatisfactory teachers. I couldn't change their habits. I could spend more money on some areas than others, and he used to say: "Why not?" Of course, that made me think.

It made me think more creatively. It made me break away from traditional school management.

I began to work on the reduction of bureaucracy. Too many of my teachers were spending time queuing up at photocopiers and stapling bits of paper together. They were doing a lot of low-level, time-consuming administration. So I decided to employ teacher assistants.

By spending some money on extra admin staff, I became freed up. I could go and watch teachers more and give them constructive advice. Eventually, I realized that there were people on staff who were better than I at monitoring teachers; so I started getting them to monitor others.

We also made sure that we had excellent computers so that we could analyze our test results. By pressing a few keys, we found out exactly where our curriculum was weak. We could see which teachers were good at which things and which teachers needed help.

Every child in the school brings in about Cdn \$4000, and if a child leaves, that money is taken away from me. So, obviously, it's in my interest to make people want to keep their children in our school. I can spend my Cdn \$2.5 million a year in whatever way is best to meet my school's needs. Every school has a different situation and every school has different needs.

Most principals have not had management training. When I visit other schools in my district, I usually find excellent and hard-working principals. Sometimes, they even know what they need to do in their school.

They are, however, unable to delegate. They are unable to monitor and motivate their staff. They can't self-evaluate, and they certainly aren't managing their time or the time of their staff effectively. There's a lot of crisis management going on and very little strategic management. These principals often work 14 hours a day, seven days a week, and they are too exhausted to be effective.

We have a whole generation of principals who do not know how to manage and feel overwhelmed by their school's problems. I go to schools and find principals looking for lost property, principals on the front line with parents, principals answering the phone.

I would urge my colleagues in Canada to tap into the valuable resource that's in every successful country — the business sector. The director of a company doesn't expect to know everything, as principals sometimes do.

Instead, company directors make sure that they have staff who do. They have a clear vision about what their output should be and know if their strategies are working. I certainly don't know every aspect of my school. I just make sure that I have staff who do.

By applying sound business practices — such as measuring input against output, time management, adding value, taking calculated risks, prioritizing, and so on — we have achieved a great deal at Calverton.

In 1999, we were recognized as the most improved school in England. I had to go off to Downing Street to tell the prime minister how we did it.

By the year 2000, 98% of our children had achieved the required standards in maths, 88% in English, and 100% in science. We have lots of 11-year-olds achieving the levels that 13- and 14-year-old children should be achieving.

This was the result of good management. Effective principals are managers first, and teachers second.

(Adapted with permission from a speech to the Inaugural Garfield Weston Outstanding Principal Awards luncheon on October 26, 2000. In the 2000 New Year's Honours List, Sharon Hollows was named Dame Commander of the British Empire.)