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The Principalship—A Look to the Past and Projections for the Future

by Kenneth E. McIntyre

When I was asked to write an article on the past and future of the principalship, I accepted the invitation, albeit with some trepidation. After having wrestled with the challenge, I developed McIntyre's 35th Law: "Anyone who is smart enough to describe the past of anything as complex as the principalship is too smart to project its future."* Having thus established my credentials, I shall plunge ahead with my assignment.

I assume that one reason I was selected to write this article was that, having arrived at a somewhat advanced stage of senior citizenship, I can look back on several decades of association with and observation of school principals, and can thereby draw on personal experience as well as the scholarship of others in looking to the past. Unfortunately, the use of personal experience exacerbates an already serious problem—that of generalizing about highly diverse matters that are subject to the impacts of time, place, and circumstance. As Lady Mary Wortley Montagu so succinctly put it, "General notions are generally wrong." The reader should thus keep in mind that regardless of what is said about things in general, one can always identify a wide variety of exceptions.

A Look to the Past

The following comments on the past will highlight only a few of the recent trends that I consider to have important influences on the school principalship in the United States. I shall make no attempt to complicate matters further by extending my look to the past beyond the 1940s. Most writers agree that even if we were to go back to the 1920s and earlier, the schools haven't changed as drastically as it might seem. (Humorist Will Rogers made a cogent observation when he said, many years ago, "The schools ain't like they used to be, and they probably never was." The point is that most of us tend to assume that "the good ole days" were better than they really were. Whether referring to schools or

Kenneth E. McIntyre is a professor emeritus of the University of Texas, Austin.

to other important organizations or institutions, we seem to remember more pleasant aspects of those "good ole" days and compare them with the not-so-pleasant features of the current scene. However, stability has been a more persistent characteristic of our past than change has been.

The People in the Principalship

Despite all the evidence indicating stability, some important changes do appear to have occurred that have made a significant impact on the school principalship. First, the *people* in the job are different in some fundamental ways. Women, although seldom occupying positions as principals in secondary schools, held more than half of the elementary principalships in the late 1920s; currently, only about 20 percent of the elementary school principals are women, despite the evidence that women tend to do as well as men if given the opportunity. Minorities, too, have not appeared in principalships in proportion to their numbers in teaching. With regard to educational preparation for the job, principals have much more graduate training today than they had a half-century ago; however, neither teachers nor principals have done well, in comparison with people going into other fields, in either academic work or performance on standardized tests, and the picture has not improved in recent years.

Organizational Changes

It is obvious that, over the years, the principalship has become increasingly specialized, with diverse organizational arrangements. Since its beginnings back in the "principal teacher" era, usually in very small schools, the job has evolved predominantly into a full-time position adding one or more assistants and other staff members as the schools increased in enrollment. Although not widespread, organizational variations such as "house" principalships are not unusual, and administrative team arrangements exist in various forms in many schools. Recently, an increasing number of principals serve two schools, especially where declining enrollments and budget problems combine to produce economic pressures. Despite all of these ramifications, however, the typical principal would still be recognizable by a modern-day Rip Van Winkle who had been asleep for 20 (or more) years.

Increasing Difficulties

Undoubtedly the most obvious change, almost universally agreed upon by principals is the increasing difficulty of the job. This has many features and causes, some of which will be cited here.

A major factor contributing to school principals' difficulties has been the devastating effects of out-of-school impacts on young people. Many elements combine to produce a bad scene, including widespread use of drugs and alcohol; the inordinate amount of time spent watching TV pro-

*Anticipating an eagerness on the part of my readers to know some of the other McIntyre Laws, I hereby share a few of them:

Everything is more complicated than it seems.
(ref. "Other things being equal . . .") Other things are never equal.

Any good thing, carried too far, becomes a bad thing.
The higher you are in an organization, the more you have to deal with people who are crazy.

grams—many of which are trashy, at best; and the influence—in the rock culture, in the movies and TV, in athletics, and even in government—of “heroes” whose behavior is disappointing if not shocking. The most obvious disaster has been the breakup of the nuclear family, which was once considered to be taken for granted. Now, almost half of the students nationwide live with a single parent, without the encouragement, support, and financial security that young people need. Recent evidence also indicates that children who live with stepparents tend to have more problems than those whose parents have not been divorced.

Another shocking trend has been the litigiousness that is tying up our judicial system and encouraging people to resort to frivolous suits that are amusing to read about, but tragic in effect. Not surprisingly, a word has been coined (hyperlexis) to use for this tendency to sue over grievances previously ignored. About three years ago, I wrote a song titled “We’ll All Sue Each Other for a Living.” It was obviously a satire, but since I wrote it many of the seemingly ridiculous examples that I had used in order to exaggerate a real problem were actually taking place. For example, one stanza in the song proclaimed:

We can sue for each presumed offense, regardless of its gravity—The dentist, when a tooth develops any tiny cavity—The preacher who has failed to come to grips with our depravity—We’ll all sue each other for a living!

The line about suing preachers was intended to be satirical, but in recent years malpractice insurance for members of the clergy has been a rapidly growing reality. The suing of school principals and teachers has been an all-too-common and growing phenomenon, for such outrageous wrongs as a student’s receiving a *B* instead of an *A* in a course.* The upshot of it is that principals must devote increasing amounts of time and energy to defending themselves against lawsuits as well as grievances, complaints, and even threats that would not have been expressed a few years ago.

Declining test scores over an almost 20-year period, at the same time that school costs were mounting, along with reports of student crime, drug and alcohol abuse, and assaults on teachers and fellow students, created an atmosphere in which schools and their leaders have been the targets of much more criticism in recent years than was the case previously—from students, parents, and the public at large. Many of us who grew up in “the good ole days” can remember the admonition, “If you get a licking at school, you’ll get another one at home.” And, although individual teachers were sometimes considered to be unpopular with students and their parents, the responsibility for academic failure was generally placed on the shoulders of the students rather than the schools. There is a far greater tendency now to blame the schools rather than the students themselves or the homes that have let them down.

*Yes, Virginia, there have already been several lawsuits of this type. Perhaps the most ridiculous example (so far) involving a school came out of Redding, Calif., recently. According to San Francisco’s well known columnist, Herb Caen, “a burglar was paralyzed after falling through a skylight of a school he was breaking into. He sued for \$3 million, charging that the school failed to warn him that the skylight was unsafe. He got \$260,000 in an out-of-court settlement plus \$1,200 a month for life.”

Reform Movements

Out of all of the bad news generated from the problems cited above has come an avalanche of reform movements and laws, involving most of the 50 states. Although thoughtful educators admit that reforms were needed, the specifics of the legislation have been attacked by many because of what was regarded as gross over-simplification of extremely complex matters. Career ladders and merit pay are two of the remedies, common to many of the reform programs, which affect school principals most. Evaluation of teacher performance has been a red-hot topic at principals’ conferences and training programs in recent years, as they struggle with the tasks involved in making important decisions concerning teachers. University preparation programs have also been affected by requests for more emphasis on school law, curriculum and program development, school management, and supervision of instruction.

The Instructional Leadership Role

Even with all of the foregoing developments in mind, one must conclude once again that there has been much stability in the role of principals. The principal is still the top person in the administrative hierarchy at the school level, devoting a great deal of time to the management of the school, handling problems that arise from day to day, and responding to the needs and pressures that arise from above and below in the organization. However, one interesting development that has surfaced in recent years has been the increasing recognition of the importance of the principal in determining the school’s effectiveness. Along with this recognition has come the acceptance, by more and more principals, of the “instructional leader” as well as the manager role. This growing acceptance of the role of instructional leader as an *ideal* does not mean that *actual* performance has changed significantly, however.

A common complaint of school principals is: “I would like to spend more time on instructional leadership, but there are too many other demands on my time.” I am never quite sure that I know what is meant by statements like this, though. One problem with our perceptions of instructional leadership is that we tend to define the term too narrowly. For example, when I developed a set of 32 instructional leadership competencies as part of the UCEA “Atlanta Project” several years ago, I discovered that many of the competencies—found to be significantly related to principal-effectiveness measures—were the type of thing usually thought of as “management.” In other words, I discovered that much of the instructional leadership impact that a principal makes is determined by the way in which management tasks are accomplished. This is not to question the importance of skillful observation of teaching, planning growth activities with individual teachers, conducting helpful in-service training sessions, and the like—the type of thing we usually associate with the term “instructional leadership.” It does, however, raise a question concerning the identification of trends in role performance of principals, when so much depends on how we define terms.

Summary: The Recent Past

A look back at the past few decades, then, suggests that there has probably been more stability than change in the principalship in the United States; that women and minorities have not been employed as principals as much as their numbers in teaching would indicate—in fact, women especially have **lost** ground drastically over the past 50 to

60 years, as far as elementary school principalships are concerned (and they never did occupy secondary school principalships in significant numbers); that the job of the principal has become more specialized as schools have grown in size and organizational complexity; that the job has become more difficult and pressure-ridden, with more conflict and criticism from all directions; and that there is growing acceptance of the "instructional leader" role, at least as an ideal.

Projections for the Future

As I acknowledged earlier, attempting to forecast the future is a tricky business, and I admit that I have never been noted for my prescience. When I first started reading Genesis, I predicted that the people would experience a long dry spell, only to read a few pages later that it rained for 40 days and 40 nights. Another one of my failures to predict the future haunts me whenever I watch "The Tonight Show" on television. When I was a high school teacher in the early 1940s in Norfolk, Neb., one of my students was Johnny Carson. We got along fine, but I have often lamented my lack of foresight in not predicting his success and making him "teacher's pet"! I take comfort, though, in the fact that my ineptitude in looking ahead is not unique with me—some futurists in the 1960s were projecting a huge surplus in the national treasury of the United States!

Before making my predictions, I feel obliged to confess that the general tone of my comments will probably appear to be pessimistic. I am reminded of H. L. Mencken's definition of a cynic: "A cynic is a man who, when he smells flowers, looks around for a coffin." If my pessimism seems to suggest that I am looking around for a coffin as I project the future of the principalship, I plead almost guilty.

The People in Principalships

It seems unlikely that the current situation with regard to the people in school principalships will change much, at least in the near future. There should be a slight improvement in the number of minorities holding the job, partly because the competition will continue to be attracted to other positions; however, I see no indication that the rapidly increasing proportion of minorities in our population will be reflected in their proportions holding school principalships. Competency testing could have an adverse effect on minorities, since they tend to do less well on tests. Partly because of this, however, I doubt that competency or literacy testing will be taken very seriously in the long run, even though it should be—at the point of entry into both teaching and administration.

As far as women in principalships are concerned, their numbers will probably grow, although slowly. University preparation programs are enrolling a far larger proportion of women these days, and this will make an impact, at least in the short run.

The quality of the people in school administration compared with other business and professional fields, as measured by standardized tests and academic performance, has long been an embarrassment to educators. This will certainly not change very soon, because more and more capable people who once would have become teachers and eventually principals are going into other work that is more lucrative and less stressful. At the same time, many people who entered the teaching profession a few years ago—especially the more able teachers—are leaving. Whether this gloomy picture will change in the long run is possible,

but I see no signs that the situation will improve much in the near future. The implications for the principalship are obvious—not only for the job of the principal but also for the talent pool from which principals are drawn. To make matters even worse, surveys indicate that when young people are asked what they want to do when they finish school, school administration is almost never mentioned.

School-age Population

School-age population is not difficult to predict, especially into the short-range future, but school enrollments are less predictable. Overall trends and projections are misleading, because of wave patterns that forecast growth at one school level simultaneous with decline at another level. For example, over the next five years (1985-1990) the population of age group 5-9 will rise sharply, for age group 14-17 the population will drop sharply, and for age group 10-13 the population will remain fairly stable and then start an upward movement. Over the long run, however, there will be a downward trend in the age 5-9 group after 1995, whereas the numbers in the 10-13 age bracket will increase after 1986, and in the 14-17 age bracket after 1990. These figures deal only with potential enrollments, however. Should substantial movement toward vouchers or tuition tax credits occur, or should confidence in the public schools decline markedly, then enrollments in public schools could decline regardless of school-age population figures, with corresponding increases in private school enrollments, home-based schooling, and ventures by entrepreneurs who can utilize resources better—especially technology, which will be discussed later.

In addition to predicting enrollments, we can now look forward to a time in the very near future when we must consider the effects of certain capabilities in the field of medical science that could dramatically affect the educability of the enrollees. For example, the genetic and/or chemical alteration of human intelligence is certainly just around the corner.

Technology

Perhaps the least risky prediction of all is that technology is going to make some major differences in our lives in general, and that schools and principals will not escape the effects. It is easy to write off the current evidences of an incipient technological revolution with references to the negligible impact of previous experiences with teaching machines and educational television. However, this one seems real, and the effects on schools will almost certainly be tremendous. We are told, for example, that millions of people will be linked to electronic work stations as early as 1990, permitting people to "communicate to work" rather than having to live near the job. We are told that technology will make home-based education much more feasible—at least in the basic skills—with two-way computer-based systems fully in operation by 1995. The job market will be greatly affected, with millions of current jobs being obsolete by the year 2000, and with a sharp increase in human service jobs. School principals will certainly have to stay on top of these developments, or non-public-school alternatives will be utilized.

The good news about all of this is that the utilization of technology will permit teachers to individualize instruction more effectively, to concentrate on higher-order thinking skills, to diagnose problems and plan remediation better, and to be more efficient in many ways. Technology will per-

mit principals to plan, organize, schedule, and manage activities and programs more effectively, and to analyze data much more completely and efficiently. Many school management tasks will be centralized via automation, relieving principals of some of the "chores" of the past, although the technology itself will introduce some new ones.

Societal Factors

What about some of the societal factors that have had such deleterious effects on the schools in recent years—what lies ahead? As Mark Antony said, as he spoke at Caesar's funeral: "If you have tears, prepare to shed them now." I do not foresee a major change in the devastating societal problems affecting our schools. Although divorce rates fluctuate slightly from a short-run perspective, the long-term prospects for one-parent homes are hard to refute, and the consequences for children—the trauma, the anxiety, the malnutrition and even hunger—are heartbreakingly real. Even a slight downturn in divorce rates, such as appears to be the case at the time of this writing, is probably due more to the growing acceptance of "living together relationships"—a euphemism for what we used to call shacking up—than it is to an upturn in happy marriages. Whatever we call this whole dismal picture, its effects on schools are not likely to make the principal's lot a happy one.

Global Problems

Looking at our situation globally, there is even more reason for concern. The spoliation of the environment and the atmosphere, the exploitation of resources, the uncontrolled growth of population—all of these problems are with us now and will surely increase in severity. Although school principals have no special burdens to bear with regard to these global problems, in the long run the schools and everyone connected with them will be affected. We surely cannot continue as a nation to squander our resources while growing millions of people throughout the world are starving to death.

The Aging of America

A quite different—and more optimistic—perspective on our destiny comes from the research on aging. A headline in our local newspaper recently proclaimed "Average American Growing Older," which surprised me, because I thought that *all* Americans were growing older. Unquestionably, the average age of Americans is increasing rapidly and will continue to do so, barring some cataclysmic influence that we shudder to contemplate. This relatively rapid aging process will have many effects on our society in general and on schools and principals in particular. Obviously, given the tendency of older people to become more conservative, it is not unreasonable to expect that impact to be felt on our entire social and political system. We are already beginning to feel the effects of having an increasingly larger proportion of our people receiving old-age assistance, retirement benefits, and medical/hospital care, with a smaller proportion of working people to pay the costs. This growing conservatism, together with the increasing competition for scarce resources, is bound to create serious challenges for schools. On the other hand, principals have always had many unused opportunities to bring older people into the educational process in productive ways, and those opportunities will grow in the future. The benefits would be mutual—to the schools and to the older people who have something to offer and need something to do.

The Lawsuit Phenomenon

The future with regard to the lawsuit mania is especially difficult to predict. On the one hand, given the growing impatience of the American people—including Chief Justice Warren Burger of the U.S. Supreme Court—with the crushing burden of frivolous lawsuits, one might well anticipate a pendulum swing back toward sanity and responsibility. On the other hand, the number of people coming out of our law schools, who need to make a living, creates a built-in impediment to change. Perhaps the "me generation" influence will gradually fade away and people will tend to be less inclined to blame somebody else for every problem that arises and to sue the person(s) or organization(s) with the most money—if they were even remotely connected with the grievance. My inclination, however, is to foresee little or no abatement in this deplorable condition in the near future. School principals will be well advised to take courses in school law, to be sure that their actions are both legal and ethical, and to be sure that their malpractice insurance is adequate.

The School Reforms

It is likely that there will be a slackening of the current "school reform" legislation and activity, due to the inching up of achievement test scores since the early 1980s, as well as the inevitable disillusionment with results of most of the quick-fix remedies. I am in no way suggesting that the criticism will stop or even diminish very much; I am predicting that there will be considerable disenchantment with some of the reforms or disappointment in the results. This might provide a bit of temporary relief to principals and teachers, at least with respect to some of the specific reforms, although I doubt that the slippage of control from local school districts to state boards and legislatures will be reversed.

Personnel and School Evaluation

The evaluation of effectiveness—whether at the school, principal, or teacher level—has always been a tough problem to solve. We have heard the word or the idea of accountability increasingly of late, in reference to teachers in particular, and it is implied whenever a pitch is made for merit pay, career ladders, or the need to "get rid of the deadwood" in schools. In the future there will be increasing emphasis on *products* of schooling rather than *processes*. Although the layman tends to think only in terms of outcomes such as test scores (effectiveness), such a focus must be matched with a concern for how well one's given resources are used to produce the desired outcomes (efficiency). In times of increasingly limited resources relative to needs, it becomes imperative that schools utilize efficiently whatever raw materials they have.

An exciting and potentially highly productive development that originated in the field of business and has recently been applied in an improved manner in schools is Constrained Facet Analysis (CFA), which utilizes an input-output model to measure the efficiency of schools and to compare only those schools having like inputs. CFA provides an equitable way of measuring school efficiency, but also suggests ways in which inefficient schools can better utilize their resources to improve their efficiency.

I am now involved in a project, through the Educational Productivity Council at the University of Texas, that applies the input-output model at the classroom level. Efficiency scores are being generated for individual teachers, using

combinations of multiple input and output variables to indicate whether the teacher is doing as well with his/her raw material as other teachers are with the same level of inputs. We are now studying the classroom behavior of teachers, in terms of their efficiency scores, to learn what efficient teachers (score of 1.0) do that is different from the behavior of less efficient teachers (score of .99 or less). Keep in mind that only teachers with the same input levels are compared, using quantifiable data for both inputs and outputs, which makes the process infinitely more fair than the usual teacher evaluation process. To compare achievement test scores of students from inner-city slums with those of students from upper-middle-class neighborhoods, and to blame or credit the teachers on a basis of the outcomes, is like having heavyweights box featherweights and then judging the managers in terms of who wins the fights. I rather confidently predict that school principals in the future will be increasingly involved in school and teacher evaluation based on this model.

Summary: A Look to the Future

In summary, I have projected a future for the principalship that includes a wide range of general trends that must accommodate many situational and individual differences, especially where long-range predictions are concerned. I do not foresee any rapid changes in the personnel involved in principalships, in terms of quality, quantity, or race, but I do think that a somewhat larger proportion of women will be holding principalships. In the short run, at least, it will be difficult to maintain even the relatively low levels of performance of those entering school administration, in terms of test scores and scholarship. Student population will in-

crease or decrease, depending on the location, the grade level, and the number of years into the future that the projections include. The average age of our population in general will surely continue to increase, with consequent impacts on economics, government, and quality of life. Globally, a host of problems are increasing in severity and portend a disastrous future for all of us if they are not dealt with. Problems in our own country that involve principals most directly include the growing tendency toward "suing each other for a living" and the terrible consequences of the breakup of the nuclear family. Although the current wave of school reforms will probably produce much less real change than some critics expect, the pressures on schools to improve will no doubt continue. Technology will rapidly provide new capabilities and challenges to school principals and teachers, and at-home or at-work education will grow, partly as a result of the new technology. For public schools to prosper, there will have to be more interdependence and collaboration among organizations, institutions, and agencies. Finally, improved methods of evaluating schools and school personnel will be perfected, taking some of the guesswork out of the process for school principals.

Admittedly, some of my predictions have been on the gloomy side, and I cannot argue with the statement of the English economist, John Maynard Keynes: "In the long run, we are all dead." However, I think that the school principalship will survive, even if some of the mid-management positions between the principalship and the superintendency do not. Perhaps it is best that in the long run, as Keynes promised, I won't be around to find out whether my predictions are right or wrong.