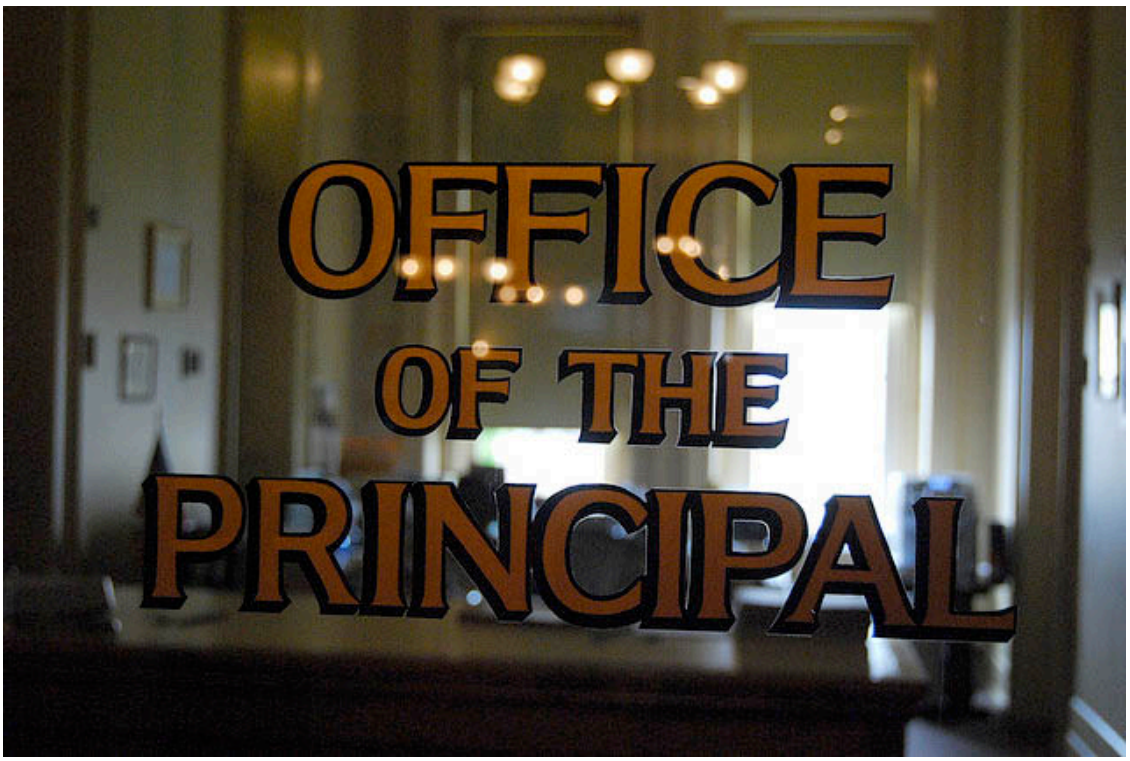
The Principal: The Most Misunderstood Person in All of Education

By Kate Rousmaniere



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A few years ago when I walked the hallways of a high school with my five-year-old niece Evie, she remarked, without prompting: "There's the principal's office: you only go there if you are in trouble." As an educator and an aunt, I wondered how the office of an educational professional had come to be symbolized in such a decisive way in the mind of a child, particularly a child who had yet to enter formal schooling. As I scanned popular representations of the school principal, I found that Evie's impression was hardly unusual. Across popular and professional cultures, the figure of the school principal is commonly reduced to a small, often disagreeable functionary of bad news, the wet blanket of progressive teacher practice, the prison guard of students' freedom. As I asked friends and

colleagues about their impressions of school principals, few actually knew what principals did, and many people confused the role of school building principal with school district superintendent. Most remarkably, those very people who did not understand what a principal did were often the first to argue for the abolition of the role.

In American public schools, the principal is the most complex and contradictory figure in the pantheon of educational leadership. The principal is both the administrative director of state educational policy and a building manager, both an advocate for school change and the protector of bureaucratic stability. Authorized to be employer, supervisor, professional figurehead, and inspirational leader, the principal's core training and identity is as a classroom teacher. A single person, in a single professional role, acts on a daily basis as the connecting link between a large bureaucratic system and the individual daily experiences of a large number of children and adults. Most contradictory of all, the principal has always been responsible for student learning, even as the position has become increasingly disconnected from the classroom.

The history of the principal offers even more contradictions. Contemporary principals work in the midst of unique modern challenges of ever-changing fiscal supports, school law and policy, community values, and youth culture. At the same time, the job of the contemporary principal shares many of the characteristics of their predecessors two centuries ago. While social and economic contexts have changed, the main role of the principal has remained essentially the same over time: to implement state educational policy to the school and to maneuver, buffer, and maintain the stability of the school culture at the local level.

An unknown female teacher and a male administrator (Smith Library of Regional History, Oxford, Ohio)

The reason for this paradoxical history of change and constancy is that even as the broader context of education has changed over the past two centuries, the core purpose of the school principal has remained embedded in the center of the school organizational structure. Located between the school and the district, and serving both, the principal has historically been a middle manager who translates educational policy from the central office to the classroom. Assigned both to promote large-scale initiatives and to solve immediate day-to-day problems, the principal has always carried multiple and often contradictory responsibilities, wearing many hats, and moving swiftly between multiple roles in the course of one day. This mobile, multitasking role has always described the work of the principal, even as the nature of those tasks has radically changed.

The complex role of the principal is not an accidental by-product of history; rather, the principal's position at the nexus of educational policy and practice was an intentional component of the role when it was originally conceived. Indeed, of the many organizational changes that took place in public education in North America at the turn of the last century, few had greater impact on the school than the development of the principalship. The creation of the principal's office revolutionized the internal organization of the school from a group of students supervised by one teacher to a collection of teachers managed by one administrator. In its very conception, the appointment of a school-based administrator who was authorized to supervise other teachers significantly restructured power relations in schools, reorienting the source of authority from the classroom to the principal's office. Just as significant was the role that the principal played as a school-based representative of the central

educational office. Created as a conduit between the district and the classroom, the principal became an educational middle manager in an increasingly complex school bureaucracy.

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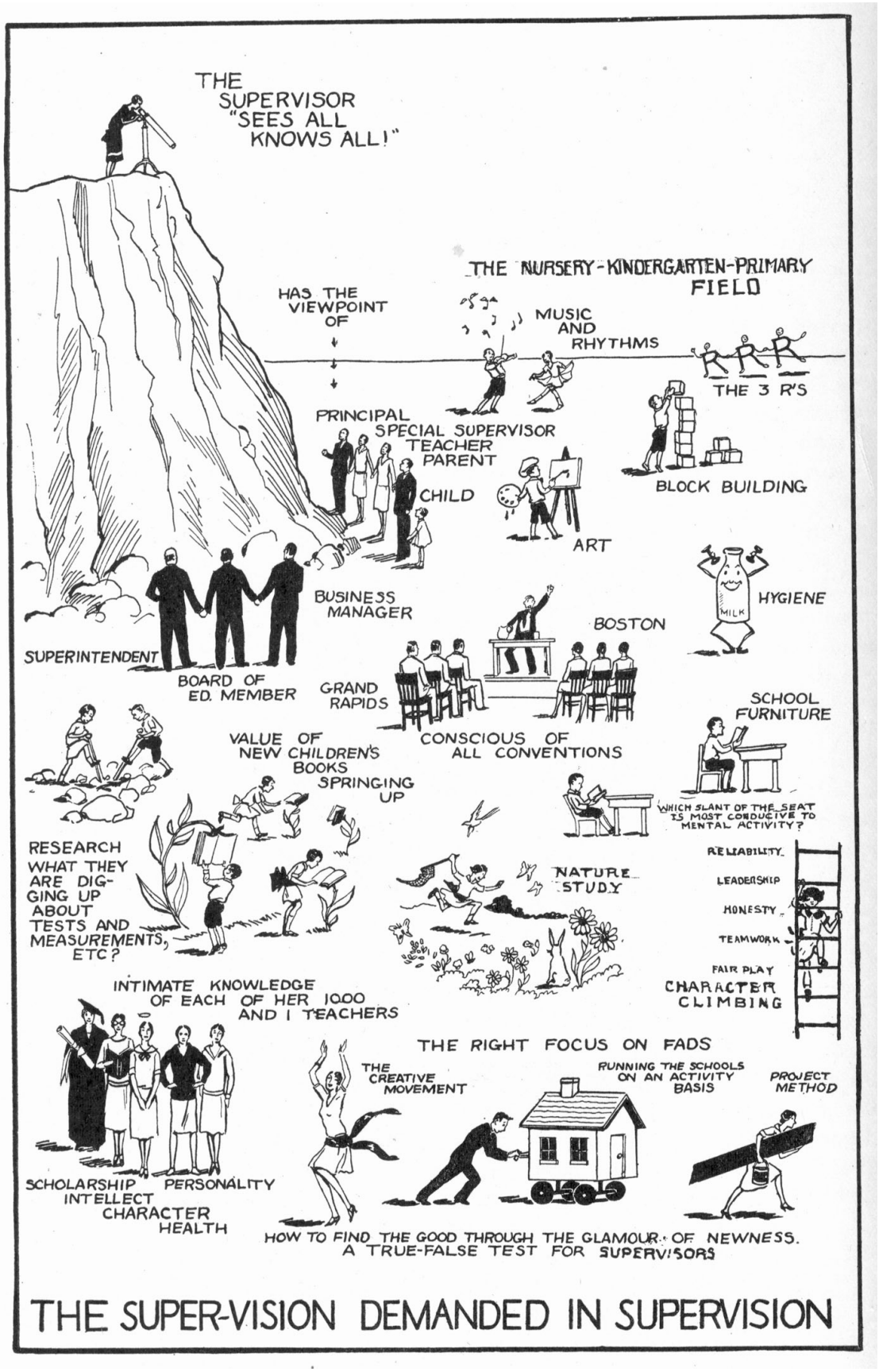
The introduction of the principal's office radically changed the overall machinery of how public education was delivered from central authorities to the classroom. Located as the connecting hinge between the school and the district, the principal was critical to the success of newly designed school systems in the early 20th century, in much the same way that the creation of middle managerial structures in business in the same period helped to consolidate the control of independent enterprises under a corporate umbrella. Modern administrative practices, including scientific management, greased the wheels of this development in late 19th-century American business, providing managerial techniques, a hierarchical decision-making structure, and an occupational culture of rationality. In the business world, middle managers were the engine behind the expansion of corporate bureaucracy, providing the smooth transition of responsibilities from the central office to the shop floor.

Like the foreman in the factory and the mid-level executive in the office building, the position of school principal was designed to be an administrator who was responsible for day-to-day building operations rather than strategic policy decisions. Standing between the district and the classroom, principals were, as sociologist C. Wright Mills described such white-collar positions, "the assistants of authority" whose power was derived from others and who were responsible for implementing managerial decisions but had limited opportunities for influencing those decisions. Like other middle managers, the principal had a "dual personality," standing "on the middle ground between management and employee," as both a loyal sergeant to a distant supervisor and a local administrator who had to negotiate with workers in order to get the job done properly. The National Education Policy Center's Larry Cuban aptly describes principals' historic and contemporary role as "positioned between their superiors who want orders followed and the teachers who do the actual work in the classrooms." Principals' loyalties, Cuban argues, "are dual: to their school and to headquarters."



"The Super-Vision Demanded": an illustration from the March 1928 issue of *Childhood Education*

The historical development of the principal reflects the growing pains of an emerging state school

bureaucratic system. Through the mid-20th century, the principalship was an inconsistently defined position, as often a teacher with administrative responsibilities as an administrator who supervised teachers. These early principals were flexible teacher leaders who maintained a close connection with classroom work and the school community in ways that might delight contemporary educators who feel burdened by bureaucracy. But for all the freedom offered by such positions, early principals suffered from the absence of an administrative scaffold to support their work.

At the turn of the 19th century, as educational reformers built up the bureaucratic framework of the state and local public school system, they realigned the primary attention of the principal from the classroom to the central administrative structure. This professionalization process involved proscribing lines of authority and accountability, establishing entry requirements and academic training, and improving compensation for the work. While professionalization improved the stature of the principal's office, it restricted the types of people who sat in that office, increasingly excluding women, people of color, and educators who prioritized community engagement over administrative tasks. Indeed, through the mid-20th century a majority of elementary principals were women, and the totality of principals of segregated African American schools were black. The professionalization process changed all that, as it also formalized the division between teachers and administrators, between doing education and supervising education, between classroom and office, body and mind, experience and intellect, and between women and men. The irony of professionalization is that it emphasized the identity of the principal as an administrator in the middle of an educational bureaucracy and not an educator in the middle of the school house.

As the principalship evolved away from the classroom to the administrative office, the principal became less connected with student learning, and yet more responsible for it. Isolated in the new principal's office, the role of school head changed from instructing students to supervising teachers of students. Further complicating the principal's role in the mid-20th century was that as public education became more responsive to and reflective of the public, principals were swept up in changes initiated by state and federal governments, legal requirements, and the increasing demands of local communities. Modern principals came to have less to do with student learning and more to do with upholding administrative structures and responding to public pressures.

Yet by the nature of their background and role as educators, principals have always been concerned with student learning, and principals across time have played a pivotal role in shaping the educational culture of schools. Middle management, after all, is a multifaceted role that can open up both possibilities and constraints, and some school principals in the past and present have been able to initiate progressive educational practices in their schools, often in spite of bureaucratic restraints. Indeed, across history, many principals' own vision of student learning has adapted to community needs and student interests. For all those efforts, however, the history of the principalship is marked by an increasing discrepancy between the popular image and the actual work of the position. Ironic too, is the dominant image of the principalship with an office, given the great variety, mobility, human

interactions, and community relations of principals' work.

This post is adapted from Kate Rousmaniere's The Principal's Office.

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