



The Principal's Office – GASP!

by Tara Zielinski

The Principal of Ecole Pauline Johnson SD#45 frames her answer to the question:

“So ... what do you actually do?”

I had a teacher join me with a group of students one day a few years ago to plan a special activity to elicit their talents. When they all piled in for the chat, I overheard one child say, “Oh, I’ve never been in here before.” The teacher responded so naturally to her, “Well if you haven’t been that’s a good thing!” Honestly? That bugged me.

I hate to disappoint you, but I think it’s time the myths of what actually happens behind the looming door and between the degrees-bearing walls of the Principal’s Office were dispelled. Maybe what I am about to tell you (no, it is not classified) is not true for some Principals’ offices, but it certainly is for mine.

It is interesting to me that everyone ‘knows’ what a Principal is...but very few really know what a Principal does. People ask me all the time, “So, what do you actually do?” For all you other current and/or past Principals out there, I know you’re thinking, “Ok, Tara...you’re really going to write a quick blog to sum it up? Ha! Impossible!” And in truth they are 100% correct. Our role encompasses so many variables and moving pieces every year, every term, every season, every day, every minute. One of my mentors (congrats on your retirement this year, btw!) once said to me, “The longer I do this, the less I know.” While he was absolutely

right, I will take a shot below in the hopes that, as a new school year is upon us shortly, it might give you a better idea of what I do and of who I am.

I am a problem solver.

I work daily with families that have children with incredibly varying degrees of talents and challenges to address student needs and family complexities. I lovingly, yet firmly, support Kindergarten students that need the third reminder that week to use their words and not their bodies when they are frustrated. I work with teachers that experience conflict, professional journeys, and the realities of their everyday personal lives. I console, respectfully advise, and celebrate with parents. I manage Ministry mandates in a way so as to lessen the load on my staff and still obtain the best possible outcomes for our students. I direct traffic at heavy volume times and work with our local Police to support student safety. I orchestrate passionate Grade Four students, sweaty from the playground, that need support to problem solve a reoccurring social conundrum around handball. I plan assemblies, concerts and ceremonies. I support bake sales to champion students’ passions as they take authentic action for local and global initiatives. I clean cuts and I ice bruises; I admit I am pretty seasoned in Band-Aid application.

I am a planner.

I start in January to ensure that fall calendars, events and important learning opportunities are thoughtfully considered and booked for students, staff and our PAC. I meet with our School Base Team monthly to set goals and objectives for students with learning, behaviour, and social-emotional needs. I organize staff functions, faculty meetings, PAC speakers and outside community resources. I strategically allocate Federal and Provincial funding, grant monies, and PAC donations to ensure equitable and innovative purchases

are made to enhance student learning and to create a safe, caring and invigorating environment.

I am a listener.

I lend an ear to Grade Seven pre-teens that are asking for help to work through the anxieties of balancing an impending assignment deadline with the demands of high-performance extra-curricular commitments. I hash out pedagogy with my teachers as we creatively look to gather and utilize effective French resources that can often seem scare in a BC French Immersion context. I navigate perceptions, intent, and often a lot of human emotion when I am asked for guidance in composing a particularly strategic email to a stakeholder. I participate in ongoing professional learning opportunities in leadership and in instruction with my colleagues and with my teachers. I apply information gleaned from articles, social media, podcasts and TedTalks to my everyday approach as a leader, sharing new information and strategy with my team. I read to students, and listen to them as they proudly read to me.

I am a caregiver.

I flush toilets and help children wash hands. I pick up lost and found items and return them to their owners. I guard laptops and cellphones when they have been left behind. I pick up garbage in hallways and on the playground. I tie hair back and do up jackets. I wipe down dusty surfaces and deliver lunches dropped off from home after the bell. I hang pictures, unload the staffroom dishwasher, pass out spoons to children who don’t have one in their lunch box and deliver a hot cup of tea to a teacher going through a rough time. I buy snacks. I text staff members when they have an exciting or heartbreaking event in their lives. I write thank you notes and I give hugs...to many. I smile to project confidence and a sense of calm, even when it’s hard some days.



I am an advocate and a cheerleader.

I write letters to the Tooth Fairy with a First Grader who lost, but can't find, his tooth on the playground. I apply for grants for students' extra-curricular endeavours when their family cannot afford to put them in organized sport or lessons. I clap, a lot. I clap for our Choir as I hold back tears of pride. I applaud our Primary students as they proudly present at their Christmas production. I cheer for our Band as they showcase their musical growth, our Environmental Club as they present with intent and passion in our assemblies, and all of our many athletics teams. I celebrate our intermediate students that bravely compete in coding challenges, public speaking, debates, and science fairs. I wear my school T-shirt and colours with pride.



As the summer months unfold, as Principal I work a few weeks into July before taking some time to enjoy the sunshine with family and friends. However, each year when I do eventually lock up, I miss my office. It is a second home for me – a place where I have built and fostered many types of relationships. It's a space in which I have provided reassurance to, solved problems with, and learned so much from children as young as 3 years old to parents, grandparents, neighbours, school alumni, colleagues, and community partners. It is a place where tears are welcome and where laughter truly has been proven to be the best medicine.

While each year I embrace the weeks for a rejuvenating summer, I also know that coming back to my office in August to prepare for the energy and excitement of another school year brings me joy. It is something I genuinely look forward to every fall because I know that, while it is never going to get easier, there really is no better job on earth.

I hope you, too, have all enjoyed your summer. And please – come by to see me in the Principal's Office when we're back in a few weeks; I promise...you're not in trouble.

Happy New School Year!

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