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Time to reform principals' roles, responsibilities

By Joe Killoran And Brendan Sweeney,
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Many recall their school principal as a purposeful presence in the hallways, familiar with honour students and miscreants alike, in tune with teachers and staff. This type of principal is a dying breed, rendered nearly extinct by legislative and societal changes.

Today's principals, through no fault of their own, are often ill-equipped to meet the demands of an increasingly complex occupation, the demands of which leave little time to interact with pupils or staff. These may be among the reasons Ontario school boards face challenges in principal recruitment and retention - a persistent problem expected to worsen as the workforce ages.

In short, Ontario faces a crisis of leadership in schools unless the roles and responsibilities of principals are reformed.

The principal's role was fundamentally redefined when they were removed from teachers' unions in 1998. Although it made sense to establish principals as "bosses," the unintended consequences of this measure were widespread.

Common union membership long meant that teachers and principals regarded each other as allies. Unionization also offered principals job security and limited autonomy to operate schools in a manner that met the needs of students, with less fear of reprisal from school board personnel, trustees and parents.

Currently, principals lack formal job security, although the dwindling supply of willing candidates offers some protection. Furthermore, principals are all too often required to serve their school boards and the Ministry of Education before they address the day-to-day needs of individual schools. This raises the question: Do principals exist to implement the policies of a central authority or to respond to the unique needs of a school community?

Principals must advance the Ministry of Education's agenda (which can include implementation of more than 60 initiatives annually) while maintaining good relationships with teachers, support staff, parents, media and the community.

These stakeholders seldom have shared goals, although principals must try to please each group. For example, a politically savvy parent familiar with school board personnel or trustees can jeopardize a principal's career. In turn, principals become hypersensitive and devote a disproportionate amount of time and resources to the most engaged and activist parents, many of whom sit on school councils.

Although principals should maintain good relationships with parents, their careers should not be based on addressing the demands of those whose primary responsibility is parenting, not educating.

Acquiescing to every parental demand also poisons relationships between principals and teachers, as the latter tend to be less sympathetic to parental criticism. Little wonder that two separate studies by Queen's University researchers in the past decade report high levels of frustration among principals regarding the lack of collegiality with their former teaching colleagues.

These challenges could be addressed through training. Principals' qualifications are overly focused on educational theory - much of which is unrelated to the practical reality of the job. Little training is offered in budgeting and logistics, public and media relations, human resource management or the operations of the physical plant - a task that occupies significant energy, especially in older schools. The lack of practical training may also explain the rising incidence of stress leave among Ontario principals.

Furthermore, pay is comparatively low, when responsibilities are considered. Principals must manage dozens of staff with little assistance, while ensuring a safe and healthy environment for hundreds of students, and in a manner that is satisfactory to school boards and parents.

In exchange, principals get a wage roughly 10 per cent more than that of a senior teacher and much less than the salary of other civil servants with comparable experience, credentials and responsibilities.

Capable teachers who observe the workload, stress and unrelenting pressure facing principals quickly conclude that such a career is not worth the modest raise. It is also possible that teachers who are less capable, less collegial and thirsting for power may find refuge as principals.

All things considered, exploring alternative models may prove worthwhile. Additional compensation and staff support would certainly make sense if budgets permitted. More specifically, and because they now are less responsible for curriculum delivery, perhaps it is time to revisit the requirement that principals be trained as teachers.

There are examples of health administrators successfully performing as principals in Ontario. Principal qualification could also be redesigned to include an apprenticeship of sorts, similar to the studentteacher model offered by education faculties.

Finally, the roles of provincial principals' councils could be expanded, empowered and better-defined through statute, in order to address the challenges of principal recruitment and retention. All these models warrant consideration if Ontario hopes to address these challenges.

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His current research, funded by the education ministry, examines labour relations in elementary and secondary schools.

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