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Voices of Women in the Field

The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly

Barbara A. Marchese

Editor's note: One of the frequently mentioned challenges noted by principals is finding adequate time to complete all the tasks that present themselves. Writing for journals is not on the priority list of most principals. Although Dr. Marchese agreed to "write" an article, in fact the real world of the principalship took precedence over the writing task. This article, then, is the result of a telephone conversation, lunch and a writing "collaboration"—my fingers, her words. (Grady)

The Good

The good is about *being here long enough*. I have been here for 14 years. I've been able to see many of the kids grow, change their value systems, and their sense of responsibility and maturity grow so much. Kids who have had major issues to contend with have mastered them and grown incredibly.

Perhaps some of this is because of our ideal size. We are a school of 200 students. I know every one of them. I can call each student by name. I think it makes a difference.

When it is time for high school, a large number of our students are given scholarships to attend the private high schools in our area. The students do very well in academics . . . kids with major issues have blossomed.

The good is about *the staff*. The staff here is very supportive and unified. They actually like and enjoy each other. We have a very low turnover. We have individuals who are in their 6th year and individuals who are in their 29th year. The staff average is 15 years in this school. Another key is that we have the right people in the right positions.

The school is on the map. We are not a small, lost school. The students have excelled academically and musically. The students have produced three CDs of their choral efforts. They have sung at the Governor's Inaugural Ball and the Archbishop's Dinner this year.

I support and believe in all of these student activities. The kids compete in speech contests too. Before I came, there was no participation in speech. We have a junior high teacher who is good at this. Math was not a strength at

About the Authors

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the school. Now there are math trophies in our entry way. We have worked to achieve these accomplishments. I wanted the students to compete. Now they are doing far more than competing, they are winning the prizes. These accomplishments are possible because we have the right people in the right positions. The staff take more ownership of the students and their accomplishments. The view has changed from being simply this school to being members of a larger system. Our students have gained recognition beyond the boundaries of the school. The staff and students feel good about their accomplishments and have the confidence to move out to the diocese at large.

I now have teachers as well as students participating at the system level. One of the teachers is on the Archdiocesan Board of Education. Another teacher is a safe environment trainer for the diocese. When I was trained as a safe environment trainer, I took a teacher to the training with me. Now we both train other people. By doing this, the teacher's confidence in her abilities has been reinforced. We can move beyond the building in the work we do. I am just dumb enough to think all the teachers in this school have the capacity to do it.

The good is about the *new Activity Center*. The activity center was a parish dream. Plans for the center were made during the 1970s. It took people to risk enough, to say we'll do it, we'll move ahead. For the first time in the school's history we can finally be a home team in our own gym. We can host other teams here. Building this center sends the message that we are here to stay. What it has done for the parish and everyone else around is incredible in terms of building community and commitment.

We are not poor enough to get much attention, but we're not rich enough to get anything without a lot of effort. The activity center signifies what we get when we make an effort. The center has led to increased parent involvement in many ways, from working the concession stand to cheering for our teams. The transformation has been incredible.

The good is about *the Media Center*. Members of the community donated labor to build all new library shelves. We now have state-of-the art technology thanks to the collective efforts of our stakeholders.

The good is about the *planned Renovation for the Summer of 05*. This will be the second big building project that calls for \$600,000.00 that is outside the parish budget. For this project, the skin will be removed from the building, the windows will be replaced, the electrical system will be updated, a new entry way will be built and the building will be air conditioned.

The only way to raise this much money is through the people who are watching the school and like what is going on. It has taken a period of time to build this level of confidence. We now have \$293,000.00 in hand without a big donor of \$150,000.00.

Our students are involved in contributing to these fund raising initiatives as well. During the first part of the 2004-2005 school year, the students have raised \$8,000.00 from the sale of the CDs, bake sales, dress down days, SPN Stay Strong Bracelets, Boxtops for Education, and a student-directed junior high play. This effort is a result of students, parents, and staff coming forward with suggestions for student ownership.

The Bad

The bad is about *Changes of Leadership*. What I have discovered is that the principal is the person who has to adjust to the change. The new person who comes in doesn't have to adjust. I have had four pastors in 13 years. Every single time I have had to adjust to the new person's leadership style or lack of style. That has been the key. Half of the new people have been exceptional leaders. Half of the new people have had serious problems: emotional, mental, and lack of leadership skills.

The bad is about *the situation I am in*. For instance the financial worries effect every aspect of this job. Finances are key in the teachers you can hire, the benefits you can offer, the additional benefits you can offer to students such as a counselor, foreign languages, or special education support. We, as a school, are limited in what can be offered because of what's available in terms of finances. I feel compelled to take on the development activities, the public relations activities, the fund raising activities, I take on everything. If I don't we won't have the resources we need to support the school and its activities. I'm on my own, and I know it. I feel alone and responsible although I have many volunteer helpers.

We are located in a middle class neighborhood, yet, we have extreme cases of wealth and poverty. Where we are situated, we do not qualify for much help. We're not able to write a check. We don't get considered for

grants. We have to rely on outside sources that we tap into through fund raising.

The bad is about the *home life of some of the students*. I see parents who do not have basic parenting skills. They are frustrated. It is hard to help parents understand what children need, what is really important. The parents must help the children become accountable and responsible for their actions. They should not give the kids everything they want. There is not a lot of follow through from some of the parents. I see more and more as kids go home to empty houses. I try to spend time teaching parents what they need to teach their kids.

I take junior high kids out to breakfast and lunch. I am amazed, disappointed, and concerned at the movies they have seen and where the kids have been. It is as though in their whole life there are no boundaries. They have no sense of what is important.

Although I see my job as instructing the parents, some of them aren't very open to it!

The bad is about *the added responsibilities schools have to assume*. It's a tale of constant add ons with no new resources. We are now responsible for asthma! There are more and more things that schools have to know. Many of these new issues are not about instruction or education, these are medical, health or social concerns that are expensive and unfunded.

A new issue for us will be the use of defibrillators. This again is a medical or health issue. We will not get any help with this. We will all need to be trained. It is hard to sell this need for training to the staff. The staff is good. The staff does much "parenting at school." In fact the teachers do more parenting and counseling than they ever expected to do in a school setting. There is so much to do and you just have to do it.

There are so many more medical issues we must be alert to. We constantly need more training on these medical issues. All of the teachers are CPR trained. When I became a principal, I never thought these medical aspects would be part of my responsibilities.

The bad is about the *expectations that follow acquisition of an Advanced Degree*. For me, once I received the doctoral degree, everyone looks at me differently. They look at me as though I should have all the answers. They look at me and question why I am still at that school? You're expected to move up an imaginary ladder and you must do it quickly.

I don't see things like that. After I completed 18 hours of graduate classes, I decided to go ahead and get a masters degree. I didn't start taking those courses with the idea of getting a masters degree. I didn't have that goal in mind. My approach to my doctoral studies was similar. I was

motivated by the learning opportunity not by the acquisition of a terminal degree.

I hear all kinds of conversation from others about where I should be. Degrees are equated with capability when I don't necessarily agree with that.

The Ugly

The ugly is about the *Death of a Colleague*. The first year I was here, the pastor was sick and ended up dying. This was a person that I was close to and the person had become a support to me.

Other people have died in the years I've been here. One died very suddenly. I see my support system changing constantly. Another individual moved away. Another principal got fed up and retired. Your support system changes. People experience burn out.

I know that I make new friends and that keeps me going. When I look at the classes I took in my masters and doctoral program, they didn't talk about the people you'll become close to. They talk about curriculum and instruction. It's a very lonely job. You don't have a lot of people to share your work with. It has an emotional impact on me and I carry it home with me. Other people who do not do this job, don't get it the way people who do it everyday get it.

In crisis situations, I am looked to as the big mentor to help them. Maybe this is because I know how they feel. I get at least a call a day from people who don't know what to do when tragedies occur.

The ugly is about the *Brokenness of Staff Members*. I am struck by the sadness and brokenness of staff members who have issues in their families. It's very hard because they call me whenever something happens in their families. I'm called when the family has been blown out of the water by a crisis or tragedy. All I can do is be present. Then I am the one who has to call everyone else so they're not blindsided when they come to work and discover what has happened. In the months following these events, you are reminded daily of the tragedies because the individuals are with you every day. The anniversaries come, and you're reminded again. I am not complaining, it is simply that not in my entire life did I think I'd be sitting and experiencing this with someone else. The loss of a 14-year-old, the premature death of a spouse, the arrest of a family member, I feel these losses, and others, 100 times over every time I have to share the events with other staff members.

The ugly is about the *threats to the safety of children*. When child protective services shows up and wants to question a child, I must wonder what in the world do they want to question the child about? As a principal I

have to have training in all these areas. For instance, I need to be educated about the internet and what is appropriate and inappropriate internet use. The internet affects the family and the rest of the school when inappropriate internet use has occurred.

As principal, I must act with sensitivity and confidentiality as the complex issues of school and family are handled. I have been through one court case. I don't think families are aware of what's out there. In spite of all the educating we think we've done, parents never think it will happen to them and their kids. When I look at this, I have a second instance with the same child. Now I'm in a position of checking up on the parents and the child to make sure that the medical and psychological things are being taken care of.

The ugly is about the *Confidentiality Challenge*. I am the only person in charge. I carry a lot home with me each day. I can see how people get sick of carrying this load around. I have all this information and I can't share it with anyone. I don't have an assistant principal. I have chosen a teacher to help me sort through these things, to analyze and help look through the situations to draw conclusions and make recommendations.

My job is much more about relations than it is about curriculum and instruction issues. I believe the key to the success I have had is that I have taken the time to get to know the students, families, and teachers. I think I have proven to them that I first and foremost care about them.

The frustration I have with this aspect of my job is that my efforts may not show up on standardized test scores. The issue for me is that you can't evaluate these efforts by looking at a piece of paper. I believe the success of our school is that we are able to do both—the academic and the relationships. I care about and I know these kids. They know they are important. Because the kids know that people care about them, that is the reason for their successes.

In order to be a good principal, you need to have common sense, a sense of humor and compassion. I don't think my greatest strengths are what is written about the principalship in the books. It isn't about what I read in the books. I simply think "I get it" from being around people. I understand what they are feeling. People who work with kids have to get it because kids know if you get it.