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# What Great Principals Do Differently: Fifteen Things that Matter Most, by Todd Whitaker

M Josepha Van Camp

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university life that Ford addresses are service learning and character formation. These two activities help further the goal of diversity and put classroom theory into practice, fulfilling the school's mission statement.

Overall, this reviewer would highly recommend this resource book for anyone who has accepted the vocation of working with college students. As emphasized in the text, the role of student affairs staff is integral in the execution of the school's mission statement and beliefs. More importantly, the role of the student affairs staff complements that of their academic colleagues. Most would agree that a student's education inside the classroom is of equal value to the education one gains in the residence hall, student center, athletic arena, or retreat service.

This reviewer would also take this recommendation further and suggest that student activities offices at Catholic colleges and universities provide this book as a reference material for their student leaders. This opportunity would allow students directly working with the school's administration for change, to see the perspective, responsibility, and accountability of student affairs personnel to align all activities with the overarching school mission.

*Michael Paul Fierro is a middle school teacher at St. Gregory the Great Catholic School in San Antonio, Texas.*

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## **WHAT GREAT PRINCIPALS DO DIFFERENTLY: FIFTEEN THINGS THAT MATTER MOST**

TODD WHITAKER  
EYE ON EDUCATION, INC., 2003  
\$29.95, 117 pages

*Reviewed by M. Josepha Van Camp*

Principals who seek to improve their schools, will find the book *What Great Principals Do Differently: Fifteen Things That Matter Most* empowering. Whitaker, a former principal who works with more than 50 schools each

year as a consultant, believes that all principals are intelligent and knowledgeable. However, the author asserts that effective principals do things differently, with the focus on “doing.” The conclusions presented are drawn from research studies as well as personal experience in discerning the specific practices that effective principals have in common. Aware of the stresses that principals face, Whitaker limits discussion to 15 main topics, and the advice provided is practical and designed for immediate implementation. The powerful insights and clear and engaging style make this an informative and entertaining read. A short summary of each of the 15 topics follows.

**It’s the people, not programs.** A school’s degree of excellence is perceived from the quality of its teachers. Administrators have two choices: hire new teachers or improve the current ones. Effective teachers build relationships and motivate students to do their best. Effective principals do the same and use input from their most effective teachers in making decisions for the school.

**Who is the variable?** The few teachers in every school with the most discipline problems are the “elephants” of the school; these teachers have and cause huge problems that must be recognized and dealt with. The starting point is to examine their attitude toward students. Good teachers blame themselves when students do poorly on quizzes and tests and constantly search for ways to improve their teaching, taking a high degree of responsibility for their classes. Applying this standard to principals, effective principals take the attitude that they are responsible for everything that happens in their schools. In response to a query about who is responsible for school climate, ineffective principals placed responsibility on the faculty or simply the teachers. “The more effective principals responded, ‘I am’” (p. 16). Effective teachers and effective principals have high standards for themselves.

**Treat everyone with respect, every day, all the time.** The importance of teachers treating students with respect and principals treating staff and students with respect cannot be overstated. Effective teachers choose every student to be their favorite. Along the same vein, effective principals can improve school climate by increasing positive interactions with staff members, especially through praise.

**The principal is the filter.** Principals set the emotional energy level of teachers and students through many different means. By responses to simple questions such as “How is your day?” to sharing the latest news, princi-

pals affect the desire of teachers to give their best effort in the classroom. While lying is not condoned, it is essential that principals selectively choose what information and attitudes to share with the staff and students, especially when the principal is angry or frustrated. A principal's goals should be to squash negative attitudes and encourage enthusiasm for school among the staff and students. Anything that a principal says or does that opposes these goals is counterproductive.

**Teach the teachers.** One of the principal's most important tasks is to help teachers improve their instruction and rapport with students. Finding an effective means of helping teachers improve is critical to school improvement. Usually a good assumption is that teachers already are doing the best that they can and would do better if they knew what to do. One solution the book proposes is to have teachers observe each other in action: Get the ones who need improvement into the superstars' classrooms. Such exchanges will benefit the entire school in building professional relationships among the faculty.

**Hire great teachers.** As a principal, set your standards high: look for educational leaders rather than applicants who would fit in with the non-leadership of the current staff. The author encourages principals to search for and hire teachers with the most talent.

**Standardized testing.** Standardized tests are a reality, at least for the foreseeable future, for public schools and a small but increasing number of private schools. The principal can encourage the staff to work together for the good of the students regardless of how they feel about the tests.

**Focus on behavior, then focus on beliefs.** While ideally everyone in the school shares the same beliefs on issues such as the best teaching and classroom management techniques, there are usually a few staff members whose past negative experiences or simple fear of the unknown cause them to resist change. When change is needed, avoid philosophical arguments. Rather, focus on the desired behavior. Teachers' beliefs are not as important as their actions, and with practice in new methods, their beliefs will likely come around as well.

**Loyal to whom?** Principals often have a choice to make when hiring a new teacher: Should they hire someone whom they feel will be loyal to them or hire a teacher who is talented but obviously strong-willed? Furthermore, questions sometimes arise where concern for an individual student will conflict with concern for the rest of the students. Dozens of other scenarios can

be imagined where the good of teachers and students can come into conflict. In all of these situations, the real question should be: What is in the best interests of all students, all teachers, and for the school? A strong-willed teacher may be difficult to handle, but his or her loyalty to the principal is secondary. What is important is getting the most talented teacher in the classroom. These are not easy choices to make, but the question of loyalty is clear: The principal must act in the best interests of all students and staff for the good of the whole school.

**Base every decision on your best teachers.** Each high-achieving teacher in the school is a treasured resource, one that should not be wasted. Principals should ask for input before making decisions that affect the staff, surveying them afterward for feedback. Guidelines that make it easier to identify the best teachers is provided. Ask these valued staff members to model any school improvement idea because they are already respected by their peers. Rather than waste time with trying to convert the resistant or mediocre teachers to new ways, let the “superstar” teachers lead them. Do not hamper these innovative teachers with research-based suggestions; rather, let them start in a limited way in their own classrooms, then introduce research to expand whatever creative direction they choose. Principals are warned not to ignore their best teachers but to always seek-out and show appreciation for their contributions. These teachers can bring much energy and creative force to bear on any school improvement plan.

**In every situation, ask who is the most comfortable and who is least comfortable.** Principals are familiar with the scenario where an issue is discussed and there are strong feelings on either side with no easy way to come to consensus. In such a case, the principal needs to ask himself or herself, “Who is the most comfortable and who is the least comfortable in this situation?” (p. 73). The implementation of ideas that causes some teachers to feel uncomfortable may be good, especially if they are ineffective teachers. However, if the effective teachers are uncomfortable, the plan is poor and should not go forward. The habit of asking “Who is comfortable and who is the least comfortable?” can also be applied to parents and students, and one of its implications is that everyone should be treated as if they always do the right thing.

**Understand high achievers.** The effective teachers in the school are rightly seen as sources of creative energy and power that can launch any school into an improvement mode. But how do principals protect this precious resource? The high achieving teachers in the school are just that – they desire to help and support everything and everyone, and taking responsibil-

ity is their automatic response to any request for help. The principal must delegate tasks that others can do because there are many tasks that only the principal can perform. Likewise, high achieving teachers must not be given work that other teachers can do, because there are many tasks that only these achievers can perform. Strategies for accomplishing this goal are discussed.

**Make it cool to care.** This section deals with some of the hardest things that a principal will ever have to face. When individual teachers or even an entire school staff support an apathetic, actively negative attitude toward students, it is a daunting challenge to change the situation. Whitaker describes in some detail tactics for approaching this problem

**Don't need to repair – always do repair.** Certain teachers are insensitive to others' feelings and frequently cause hurt by what they say or do. In contrast to them, effective teachers and principals constantly "repair," that is, they constantly work to avoid hurt feelings, apologizing quickly for any hurt that they believe they may have caused. They are on alert for the feelings of others, and in the case of effective principals, they have a great deal of knowledge about their staff's families and interests. Engaging in constant repair, even when things are not obviously broken, is a way to keep school relationships strong.

**Set expectations at the start of the year.** Some practical suggestions are provided for getting the school year started right. The beginning of the year is the only time when the principal can talk about classroom management and not have the teachers and staff feel guilty or angry because no one has had any negative interactions with students yet. This is the best time for the principal to set forth school-wide classroom management expectations. Bringing up this subject in an effective and positive manner will set expectations at the beginning of the school year, and make it easier for the principal to discuss these issues with teachers if any problems do occur.

Finally, all schools, regardless of size or grade level, face the same issues. What are the most important strategies principals can use to improve their schools? What areas need special attention? Every principal must create a plan to make a difference in the school for the teachers and students. Whitaker's overall focus on the importance of teachers as expressed in several of the "fifteen things" is most helpful. The idea that respecting, involving, and developing staff is the best way to improve a school is exciting. Not only is it within every principal's means to implement, but this approach is certain to enhance the learning environment regardless of any school

improvement goals. When people believe that they are valued, they are motivated to give the best of themselves to their work. These ideas have the power to transform a struggling school into a hope-filled one where the “golden rule” is active on an administrative level for the benefit of all students and staff.

*Sr. Mary Josepha Van Camp is principal of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel High School in Wyandotte, Michigan.*

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## **NO EXCUSES: CLOSING THE RACIAL GAP IN LEARNING**

ABIGAIL THERNSTROM & STEPHAN THERNSTROM  
SIMON & SCHUSTER, 2003  
\$26.00, 352 pages

*Reviewed by Tamela J. Loggins*

*No Excuses* is a detailed account of how the public education system is not only failing today's youth, but more importantly, how it is perpetuating racial inequality in this country. Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom state, “The racial gap in academic achievement is an educational crisis, but it is also the main source of ongoing racial inequality...and racial inequality is America's great unfinished business, the wound that remains unhealed” (p. 1). In 13 chapters, the authors explain why schools are failing, outline the importance of standards-based testing, describe the amazing schools that are successfully serving disadvantaged youth, present the cultural differences among minority youths, and examine the reasons why past government reforms have failed.

Chapter 1 is the driving force of the entire book. This chapter is full of provocative facts and statistics that define the racial gap in education. For example, “The average Black and Hispanic student at the end of high school has academic skills at about the eighth grade level” (p. 22). The authors further explain that while many of these students will go on to attend college, as minority college student enrollment is on the rise, great numbers will