



AUGUST 7 WEEK (11-HOUR DAYS)

Wow! This is it — my first administrative position and my own building. What will the future hold?

I surveyed the building, opening classrooms and closets and made a mental inventory. I sat at the secretary's desk and looked around at tasks. My eyes traveled to the principal's office. This position has been empty for many years because the high school principal tried to cover two schools. There were old boxes, files, and notes from 1984. Dust-covered boxes were piled to the ceiling and had been there so long that they were stuck to wood cabinets.

AUGUST 14 WEEK (74-HOUR WEEK)

Our computer server is down; there are no schedules for students; and a teacher quit. Tomorrow morning one hundred alternative high school students will walk through the door with no schedule, no secretary, and no teacher. Bats keep finding ways into the building and fly through the halls.

This was a Murphy's Law day. Maybe this is like the theater: If the dress rehearsal goes badly, then the play

itself will be great. If the day before opening day is disastrous, then the year will be fantastic. Right?

AUGUST 21 WEEK (76-HOUR WEEK)

We are full! Our numbers are averaging eighty students per day in a building meant to hold sixty elementary-age students. Even the toilets are designed for elementary students! We have run out of lockers, and class rosters are approximately fifty students per class. There are three teachers, twenty-hours-per-week counseling service, four-hours-per-week nurse service, one hour-per-day custodial services, no food-service employees, and a 5.5-hour secretarial position. The building is becoming unsafe. Too many students are attending without proper supervision. We have students on parole, in gangs, dealing drugs, and pregnant, and some who actually want to learn and graduate.

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1

The school resource officer started his day at our school. Coincidentally, only half of the students came to school. Once the officer left, more students showed up.

Friday! I made it! We made it! It is a great day! I still love this job; I would not trade it for another. This is one of the most challenging work experiences in my career. If I can make a difference for students and teachers, then I have accomplished something this year. The only way to move is upward, and we are on the right path!

SEPTEMBER 11 WEEK

A smooth week: just two police tickets, one gang-related graffiti report, two students sent home for making threats, one baby born, one ceiling leak, one teacher absent (no substitute), one phone call from the superintendent's office, and another appearance by our friendly bat. Maybe the bat will become our mascot.

As I reflect on the week, I conclude that the hardest part is making those split-second decisions that affect a student's life.



Volunteer Demonstrating an Art Project.

SEPTEMBER 18 WEEK

Five police cars and reporters at our door, all over a pizza! Let me explain. I was in the office talking with a university doctor about a student returning to our building. We were discussing the preparation needed for the student's safe return. In another part of the building, a student ordered pizza by cell phone in another student's name, which caused a confrontation and big scene requiring police intervention. A reporter was driving by to drop off his child at another school and saw the police, so he stopped to see what was going on. We explained nothing. Confidentiality is important.



Student Celebrating Earning a Credit.

NOVEMBER 12 WEEK

I am getting to know the students; they are beginning to trust me. The stories and baggage that these students harbor are more than any one person should carry. One young woman lives on her own with her two-year-old daughter. Her parents and grandparents have passed away, so at sixteen she is alone and on her own. The hardships she has encountered at this age include trying to get her birth certificate to get a driver's

license; getting a birth certificate, unfortunately, requires a parent's signature. This struggle has been frustrating for her. Yet she comes to school each morning with a smile on her face, yells good morning to everyone, and states that she is hungry for breakfast. Since the beginning of the year, a hot breakfast and hot lunch program has been in place, which the staff and I serve. She is usually an hour late because she takes a taxi to her daughter's babysitter and then to school.

OCTOBER 16 WEEK

Courts, citations, cell phones, and evaluations. Gun shots in the community, and guess which students were involved! A student ran into my office, shut the door, and started explaining the location of a hidden safe. I told the student that I would call the detectives and let them know the information. After he left, I called the detectives.

FEBRUARY 2 WEEK

A student died over the weekend from a drug overdose at a party. I went to school in the evening to call our crisis team. Students started calling the school to see if anyone was there and if I had heard about the tragedy. Several were crying as they called, saying that they knew I would be there. This tragedy brought a focus and closeness to our small community. Many alternative high school students had attended the party, but none talked.

FEBRUARY 18

I took an eighteen-year-old student to the emergency room Sunday evening. She called me to see if I could help her. She had spent the night in jail after an altercation with two women. After the courts released her, she asked for my help. She had a swollen face with one eye completely shut. Her mouth would not open, and her jaw was out of place. She had many bruises. I asked if her mother knew, and she said yes, but her mom would not take her to the hospital. I called her mom on her cell phone, and she was clearly under the influence of something. She gave me permission to take her daughter to the hospital. I sat in the emergency room with her for several hours and helped her answer the questions asked by the nurses and doctors. She needed someone with her, and I was glad that I could help. This student had lived in a foster home her whole life and returned home on her eighteenth birthday. Both the mother and daughter have been in and out of treatment centers. She is trying to graduate this school year.

FINAL REFLECTION

The transformation from walking into a new position to the end of the year has been huge. At the beginning, the neglected building did not have a lived-in feeling. I still thought it was great! The school building has not changed much; however, the atmosphere is now buzzing with people. Books are on shelves, pictures on walls, and students in desks. Some of the cobwebs are even gone.

I cannot imagine my learning curve this year. It is difficult to see the transition in myself, but I know that I am learning and growing daily. The big picture is not the tricky part; details are what make the job difficult. Making the tough decisions that influence a child's life are so significant. Many times, I want to be easy on the student, but sometimes being easy is not the best answer. That is tough.

I remember the first week of school, looking at the year-long calendar and thinking, can I make it though this year? I was afraid, nervous, anxious, excited, and worried all wrapped up into one feeling. I remember counting down the weeks and days on the calendar and

STRUGGLING TO SUCCEED

Will is a twenty-year-old African American male attending our alternative high school. He has inconsistent attendance with several stretches of unexplained absences. I asked him if graduation were a goal. Will stated, "yes." A few weeks later, he missed school for ten days and returned. Will broke down and cried in my office. His girlfriend had an abortion, and it was his child. After a few minutes, he explained how the impact of this death was like the gang-fight shooting that left his younger brother dying in his arms.

Will stayed in school for a few months, missed several days with no explanation, and then returned saying that he needed to be taking care of business. Time was running out for Will. He was going to be another dropout statistic.

In May, Will missed another twelve days, which seemed to be the end. He walked into school with shoulders slouched and head down, asking for the principal. This was the second time that Will broke down and cried in front of me. This time his aunt had suffered the brunt of violence: A bullet had hit her in the back while she attended a family picnic in the park. I held his hands while Will cried his way through another heartbreaking story. Will then held his head high and said that he was going to finish school, though finishing would be next to impossible with only a week left. Will stayed long into the evenings working.

The last day of school came, and there was no Will. Finally, Will walked into the building crying. He had spent the night in jail, and officers there would not let him do his homework. He walked the three miles from jail to school that mid-morning. I explained that he could stay a few extra days if needed. Will came those extra days. During that time, he explained his desire to graduate. His mother banned him from home and told him not to return until he had a diploma. His mother lives in Alabama, and Will lives on his own.

In spite of all of these setbacks, Will finished his credits and headed home proudly with his diploma in hand.



thinking, I need to take baby steps and get through this year one hour, one day, and one week at a time. Now weeks are flying by, and each day is gone in the blink of an eye. Both students and I are in a routine. Our team knows how to work together, and they ask questions and question ideas. It is great. I have not looked at our year calendar since the first week with students. I guess that is good. I have taken many steps forward and not looked back. Making decisions is becoming natural, and discipline is getting easier.

We are at another turning point. Our first trimester is complete, and we are looking at the transformation of our second trimester. I have gained the trust of many parents while others are angry. Some parents think that I am fair with students, and others disagree.

I am learning that other people can do jobs, too. It is difficult to let go and let others do the work, but everyone has talents, and I need to let them use their talents to make our school even better. If I try to do it all, the school will sink because I will drown. It is better to let everyone take ownership in improving the school. For example, today I was preparing for a parent orientation of our new program. I had information in PowerPoint but had not taken the time to polish it with transitions. An idea came to mind as I had a student working off some extra time who needed something to do. He was in business classes and talented in using computer programs. He was thrilled to take the PowerPoint and work on it. He not only worked on the PowerPoint, but he also asked to stay and set up chairs after school and even stayed through the presentation and helped clean up. I originally asked him for help on a ten-minute project, and he helped for four hours! Ownership!



Laurie Noll

I still need to take the same lesson and apply it to teachers. I had a workshop for teachers; we designed a new school day. We split students between two sessions, a morning or afternoon school day. Then we designed a menu of learning for students from which they can choose their instructional method. This session created synergy among our staff, and they were a part of the plan. I hope this can happen more often. I had several teachers

bring items for the chili dump to help with the supper for parents. I needed to let them help and praised them for all their work.

Overall, it is a positive year with many accomplishments. New learning experiences and many opportunities will help transform me into a better educational leader. I am excited to see what the future holds!

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Students in an Award Assembly.