

Teaching to Build Community

One Administrator's Reflection on Teaching as a Tool to Enhance Culture, Change Professional Dialogue, and Advance Student Learning

BY KIMBERLY A. MCCANN



I cannot count the number of times I have sat in a meeting with thoughtful, caring administrators, caught up in the moment discussing a new initiative, where the statement “We’ll have all teachers ...” has been uttered. This phrase is always followed by a great idea—an idea intended to advance student learning through improved instruction and increasingly sophisticated assessment. I have said this statement to my own colleagues—if the truth be told, more than once. The challenge is in how many times this statement is used, how many great ideas are added to the classroom teachers’ to-do lists. When out of the everyday routine of direct classroom instruction, I have found it surprisingly easy to forget just how challenging the implementation of multiple initiatives can be. And so I’ve tried to do something about that.

Background

I have spent days of each year of my life in the hallways of the schools within the Goffstown School District. In 1973, my mother accepted the one teaching position that would become her 40-year career at the elementary school in the community in which she and my father would choose to raise their family. At the time, she was pregnant with me. I spent 12 years being educated in the Goffstown schools. I worked in local summer day camps, beginning at the age of 12, and in the children's room of the public library throughout high school and college. I coached in town. I served as a substitute teacher. In 1998, I accepted my first full-time teaching position with the district. In 2004, I transitioned to a building-level administrator in the district. For 40 years, I have skipped through the halls, run across the fields, and been a learner in the classrooms of Goffstown.

My knowledge and experience should be vast. Yet, there is just one thing about education with which I have 100 percent clarity and certainty: teaching is hard work. And while we strive to develop strategies and routines that make the day-to-day operations of our classrooms increasingly efficient, advancing student learning with effective teaching is very challenging work riddled with ever-changing and increasing demands.

I left the classroom in February 2004. After four years as a building-level administrator, I taught a summer school class. I realized quickly this was not how I remembered teaching. My time in the back of the classroom had altered my perceptions of what it meant to be the teacher in front of 20-plus diverse individuals. Following summer school, I made the decision to teach one class each school year. Five school years later, I continue realize the importance of this decision.

As a building-level administrator, teaching just one class over the course of one semester each year, I will share with you that I have experienced lesson plans that fell flat in their implementation, assessments that missed the mark, and behavior management issues. And I am the one who is *supposed* to get it. I am the person in the building supervising and evaluating teachers. I am the person to whom teachers expect to be able to turn for advice on a difficult class, instructional techniques, the difference between formative and summative assessment, and discussions about student grading. The secret? I don't always get it right.

Layering teaching into an already demanding job is not simple. It is, though, what I have come to believe is the single most important thing I do as a building administrator. Teaching has created a framework for the scope of my administrative responsibilities that impacts how I make decisions, my supervision and

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Student Relationships

When I left the classroom in 2004, I was teaching social studies, coaching field hockey, and working as a class advisor. I knew a large percentage of the student body in many capacities. At the time, my position as an assistant principal was very traditional; I did a little of everything. Student behavior, supervision of staff, curriculum work, daily facility management, preparation and management of budgets and schedules, professional development, and more were my norm. In subsequent years, our administrative team realigned and individual responsibilities transitioned, playing on the strengths of individual team members. We hired a dean of students and a guidance coordinator. I was able to devote the bulk of my time to overseeing curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the Humanities Departments. The downside? To students, I was becoming "that woman who walks through our classrooms, looks at what we are doing, and talks to our teachers." This was not the relationship I wanted with our student population.

Stepping back into the classroom allowed me, as a teacher, to reestablish connections with students. As I got to know the students in my classes, my interactions with all students increased as I walked through the building as an administrator. My students stopped me as I went through their other classes. They showed me their work, asked questions, or simply waved. As my outside-of-class interactions increased with my students, I got to know their friends in the hallways, the café, and co-curricular activities. Teaching just one class during one semester of the school year helped me to reduce my sense of student anonymity and to make positive connections, enhancing the overall culture and climate of our school.

Collegial Interactions

Teaching is an art and a science. I believe that effective instruction occurs when balance is struck between the two. Achieving that balance is a deeply personal experience and can be isolating. As teachers, we find ourselves frequently alone, behind a closed door, facing a room of students with varying degrees of eagerness to learn. It feels as if we are judged at every turn. Our students make judgments about our choices of material, the activities we ask them to do, and the means by which we assess their learning. Parents make many of the same judgments. The teacher next door questions the volume of the video we are using, the number of students we allow to leave the room, and how we grade. Office staff may raise questions about our student management techniques. Local media question our use of resources. National media outlets assail our effectiveness. It feels as if everyone has an opinion and an idea about how we can do our job better.

As a result of this combination of factors, it is my experience that many teachers are reticent to ask for help. We tend to maintain our isolation as we work through professional challenges and strive to show our peers, our supervisors, and our community only those areas where we excel. As time passed after I left the classroom, I felt my conversations with teachers becoming increasingly superficial. When we talked, the focus was on the positive things occurring in their classrooms. I was not hearing about the lesson plan that just didn't work, the student who was both distracted and distracting, or the challenges of grading. With increasing frequency, I was seeing exemplars of student work, lessons that had been perfected over time, and observations being scheduled in class periods with the most cooperative of students. The purposefulness of my time in classrooms felt like it was eroding. I needed to find a way to change the dialogue in a manner that would allow me to feel I was having an impact on the teaching and learning occurring school-wide, my primary reason for leaving the classroom and entering administration in 2004. Ultimately, sharing in the experience of being a classroom teacher has changed the tenor of conversations I have with faculty and staff, my building-level administrative team, and my district supervisors about teaching and learning.

Over the last five years, I have shared the classroom three times with other members of my department. I co-taught with a new special educator looking to add a social studies endorsement to

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her certification, the department's lead teacher, and a mid-career teacher. I have been transparent in my experiences—sharing anecdotes at faculty meetings, within department conversations, and in one-to-one discussions with teachers. I have opened my door to anyone interested in dropping by and simply seeing how I run a classroom, as well as inviting in teachers looking to see a particular instructional strategy in action. I share the highs and the lows. And there have been plenty of lows. One year, I practi-

cally paraded a team of teachers through my classroom looking for suggestions—and help—relative to classroom management. As I said, teaching is hard work. Over the course of these five years, conversations about teaching and learning in all arenas of my job began to transition toward a more collaborative and team approach. Teaching allowed me to move from someone who had inadvertently become an observer back to an active participant in the educational process of our community's students.

Today I get inquiries about lesson ideas, student management, and assessments. Many teachers are willing to schedule observations in their most challenging class periods, and they look for meaningful feedback. When I walk into their classroom, the conversation continues—whether it is content rich or an aside about a movie someone saw that weekend—and the experience is real for the students and for me. When I share a new idea, there is understanding that I too will be doing, or attempting to do, what I am suggesting, asking, or implementing.

Decision Making

My time in the classroom influences the decisions that I make on a regular basis. Every day I am faced with choices that impact close to 1,500 individuals, almost all of whom are in a classroom. I am better at my job because of my time teaching. I understand how an announcement five minutes before the end of a period can destroy a lesson's summarizer. I recognize that taking and entering attendance at the beginning of the period is important; I also experience firsthand many of the reasons that it just does not get done. I wrestle with the challenges of assessment posed by online grade books. I reexamine my course materials, instructional practices, and curriculum goals with the advent of the Common Core alongside the rest of my staff. I too experience the ramifications of the choices that I make impacting our school community while standing in front of a classroom full of students. As a result of my time in the classroom, no mat-

ter the size of the decision I am faced with, I am able to realistically consider my options from both an administrative and a teaching perspective.

This year, I am not the only member of the administrative team in the classrooms of our school. Both the curriculum coordinator and the guidance coordinator are teaching classes. For the last two years, we have had a guidance counselor who has co-taught a course in psychology. As we collaboratively participate in the education of our students, we are removing walls, real or imagined, between classroom teachers and staff who fulfill other roles our schools. Frequently we are asked, “How do you make the time to teach?” It is not easy. However, my response to this question is simple: “How can I not?” It is my time in the classroom that allows me to better understand our students, our teachers’ experiences, and the demands on our school system. Teaching provides my colleagues and me the *chance* to make better decisions that may positively impact our school community.

Conclusions

The best part of my job is teaching. It is invigorating. It renews and refreshes me. It keeps me grounded and focused as I seek to complete the daily intricacies of my job. It is also the most important thing that I do as a building administrator. It allows me to connect with students. It creates an opportunity for collegial discussions with faculty and staff about teaching and learning that are rooted in the realities of the classroom. It provides me with a chance to actively connect curriculum, instruction, and assessment, moving beyond theory to application. It reminds me of the one thing about education with which I have 100 percent clarity and certainty: teaching is hard work. That is what makes it so rewarding.

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