



Strike up the band: Lessons in leadership

It's hard to believe that later this year, I'll be traveling back to Burton, Ohio, to attend my 30th high school reunion. As I think back to those good ol' days, I remember when I played alto saxophone in high school band. Our band director, Mr. White, was passionate about music and had what some of us believed was an overabundance of confidence



in our abilities. Sometimes, during those first few days looking through the music he'd chosen, we'd simply laugh and think, "There's absolutely no way we'll be able to play this in time for the concert!" Mr. White, our organized, committed, and visionary band director and leader, believed much differently. In the end, he tended to be right.

Mr. White lived the Leadership standard of the Standards for Professional Learning. Like an effective principal or a department chair in a school, he **developed our capacity for learning and leading**. He struck that amazing balance between recognizing our learning needs and espousing unwavering high expectations. We were expected to practice at home, during our study hall periods, and of course during eighth-period band. Those playing like instruments were divided into learning communities that supported the members' growth and development, and often their members practiced together during shared study halls. In the end, often without even

realizing it, we worked harder than we ever imagined in order to be our best. He had built within us an intrinsic desire to learn and improve our abilities.

As a leader, Mr. White was also an **advocate for our learning**. A small rural district with limited resources, Berkshire High School's band members had everything they needed to be their best. Instruments were offered to those who couldn't afford to buy them. Practice rooms were available for those learning groups who sought to improve their abilities. Time was made available both during and after school for the entire band to prepare for its performances. I imagine Mr. White at times needed to work with the building or district office to secure the resources of people, time, and money in order to maintain those conditions that were so favorable to our learning. I imagine Mr. White worked hard on our behalf to cultivate those relationships among key stakeholders and community groups.

Finally, Mr. White worked to **create support systems and structures** that led to our individual and collective learning and continuous improvement. Many of those I've already mentioned, but let me describe another. In addition to Mr. White's role as director, there were also other leadership positions within the band, namely band sergeant and corporal. If for any reason he was held up in a meeting or phone call during eighth-period band, these student leaders without hesitation would pick up Mr. White's baton and lead the practices. Systems were in place that enabled

learning and continuous improvement to continue despite any unexpected changes in conditions.

A recent Wallace Foundation Perspective titled *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning* (2013) makes this thought-provoking statement: "Education research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal." In our case, Mr. White operated much like an effective building principal. There were many variables in play that had an impact on our learning. However, as our leader, he harnessed the resources and created the conditions that enabled those variables to work on our behalf so that we could perform our best.

So, Mr. White, if you're reading this, let me just say now what I didn't back then: Thank you for being a leader of learning!

REFERENCE

The Wallace Foundation. (2013, January). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning*. New York, NY: Author. Available at www.wallacefoundation.org.

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