Study Reveals that Christian School Heads Have Overly Demanding Job

This fictitious headline wouldn’t surprise anyone who serves in a leadership capacity at a Christian school. Ask any Christian school head what his or her daily schedule looks like and the answers could make your head spin. It is no secret how much work goes into being an educational leader. According to Fred Lunenburg (2010), educational researchers have long recognized the “heavy workload” and “unrelenting pace” that school principals operate in.

A quick survey of Qualities of Effective Principals by Stronge, Richard, and Cantano (2008) provides a glimpse into the daunting expectations of a school head. Within Christian schools, those responsibilities broaden to include “spiritual development and academic excellence” (Banke, Maldonado, and Lacey, 2012). Christian school heads are responsible for the same administrative operations as public school heads; however, the Christian school head is often solely responsible for multiple other areas of leadership. Research conducted among classical Christian school leaders identified such areas of responsibility to include school governance and accountability, personnel management, “spiritual leadership,” “instructional support and supervision” of teachers, and managing the financial state of the school (Council & Cooper, 2011).

Christian school heads are certainly not superhuman, but they are super people. They tend to be highly invested in educational goals and leading others toward educational excellence in practice and performance. They are driven by vision, expertise, and a capacity to operate within the “unknown,” trusting God to lead and direct them and their schools. Let me introduce you to two such individuals.

Dr. Jim Dolson

Dr. Jim Dolson is the superintendent of Jackson Christian School in Michigan. Though trained and employed in automotive engineering, he felt called to teach math and science at a Christian school. A trusted pastor counseled him against it. “Your skills are better off in administration, not teaching,” he said. “We need people in Christian education with solid managerial skills. I believe God has prepared you for that.” That wasn’t what Jim wanted to hear. After more than six months of resisting, however, he accepted God’s calling and began pursuing a master’s degree in education. He quickly realized that “manufacturing and engineering is not the same as education!”

Jim retained his position as a manager at an automotive stamping plant, working more than 50 hours a week while going to grad school full-time—until his company downsized and he was laid off. Forced to draw from his retirement savings to make ends meet, he was humbled by the generosity of others who reached out to help financially.

Upon completion of his master’s degree, he was hired as an administrator at Jackson Christian School.
According to Jim, “God repurposed me. He built new leadership skills in me and reinforced existing ones.” Jim’s time of need also prepared him for the challenges ahead; the Great Recession hit his school hard, and Jim found himself on his knees pleading for God to provide so the school could make its payroll that week. In Jim’s words, “God delivered that week, and every week since.... God has delivered. He has not forgotten us. He has not forgotten me.”

A lifelong learner, Jim recognizes he “will never be able to know everything about everything.” Jim relies on prayer in guiding his school financially and educationally. He also understands the importance of projecting himself as a lifelong learner for his staff and students: “People, big and little, are watching.”

Dr. Sharon Brobst

After ten years as a French and Spanish language teacher, Sharon Brobst found herself becoming stagnant. She believed she knew exactly how to educate her students and had lost interest in attending professional development presentations—until she started a graduate education program in educational administration. This “sparked a new interest in educational research, jolting me out of my apathy for self-improvement” and opened doors for her to practice her administrative gifts in two U.S. Christian schools before assuming her new role as director of the International Christian School in Vienna, Austria.

According to Sharon, moving to Austria was “one of the most humbling experiences of my life. I’ve always considered myself a lifelong learner, so having to acclimate to a new culture and learn a new language was a challenge that I eagerly accepted. In reality, it isn’t always that easy to keep learning new things.”

One of the first people Sharon sought out in her new school was an experienced teacher, a native Austrian. Sharon asked what she, as the new school director, could do for her. The teacher replied that if Sharon took an interest in the Austrian culture and the German language, the rest of the staff would develop that same interest. That teacher reminded Sharon that administrators are role models to teachers just as much as teachers are to students. “If we do not demonstrate our own passion for learning, then it is quite hypocritical to require teachers to maintain their certifications and to continue to improve their classroom teaching.”

It is one thing to have a list of set qualities and expectations that outline the role of a proven school administrator. It’s another to have the passion and tenacity to step out in obedience to the vision God gives you as a school leader. Every good school leader should always be a learner—and be able to recognize what they need to learn. So, when do you know enough as an educational leader? Probably never! But don’t let that stop you from continually learning.

References

Dale Linton, PhD, is an associate professor of education at Spring Arbor University in Michigan. Dale has taught in American public schools and international Christian schools in Ethiopia and Kenya. He counts it a privilege to serve Christian schools around the world and support current and future Christian school teachers.