

# What the Heck Do

Letting Teachers Run with the Ball By George Shea



**didn't set out to do this principal thing.** I was happily teaching and generally minding my place among the lesser-tenured staff at my school. Sure, I had my hands in several school and district initiatives. I had a hard time suppressing my opinion, which is probably why I was often saddled with managing projects. "Let's let 'Mr. I Know All There Is to Know About Bus Lines' handle dismissal procedure then." I knew less than I thought about everything, of course, but I had a boss who knew how to convert teacher ideas into actions. She sat with me, asked me about my plans for the year, and then asked, "How can I help you get there? What are your obstacles?"

She had confidence in my ability, but knew well the armadas of inhibitors that can stifle any ambitious educator: initiative overload, administrative minutiae, plate balancing, and inertia. She backed up her talk by clearing the debris from my days. The next thing I knew I was a principal at a school where nobody seemed particularly amped about picking up the bus lines cause.

I had no idea how to be a boss, but using TV bosses as my muses, I figured I should probably start telling people lofty stuff to do. That failed. Teachers and teams need clear goals and principals need to provide tools and identify stages and steps toward desired outcomes. Initiatives need to be broken into tangible and manageable chunks with defined timelines. If this sounds like a 504 plan accommodation, I would attest that staff development often suffers from an executive functioning disorder: lots of swirling goals, with no plan. Mission

statements come easy, but the mission's hard. It requires establishing priorities, identifying actions to meet those priorities, and clearing a path for growth by eliminating incursions and distractions.

As a school leader, it's my job to prioritize learning above all by advocating for instructional and planning time. What we decide not to do assigns value to what we do. I'm fortunate to work in a building full of smart individuals and teams doing smart work. I'd like to think I have some small hand in that, but my daily work is removing obstacles to ensure they're able to do their thing. I spend more time as a blocker than a quarterback.

Schools are hounded by paparazzi wanting a piece of their time and students. There's the nonprofit pushing their free "Bully-Free Scrapbooking Zone" assembly. Then the financial planner who wants to bring munchkins to a staff meeting and provide free financial advice for teachers ("Drop the munchkins and slowly back away from my staff meeting"). My school is besieged by suitors looking for an in with our adorable student population. Beware the local bank parent who wants to run his or her "Finance Is Fun!" curriculum in the fourth grade. And then there are the poster contests; everybody wants our kids to make posters for their cause. Someone should tell the private sector that posters went out with Farrah Fawcett. I know I may sound like a jaded party pooper, but the volume of distractions to learning, from inside and outside the building, is alarming.

Most of our solicitations are worthy and noble causes and fronted

# Principals Really Do?



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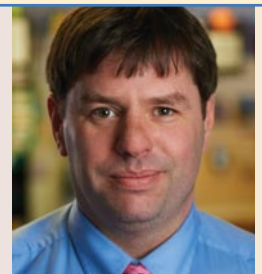
by good people looking to do good things for kids. They just aren't our priorities. We have to clearly quantify how much wiggle room there is in the span of our instructional day. Ask most teachers and they'll tell you, "Not much."

Sometimes it's just taking a hit for the team. The district Attendance Committee that wants a representative from each building—I take that one. A parent heading to a classroom to complain about lice, please step into my office. The clubs, student council, and lost lunch box announcements that interrupt teaching, they go straight to email. Inputting mandatory assessment data into the state performance database—let the guy in the tie handle that. Teachers should do the smart stuff.

Teachers often suspect that administration jumps on every program and penny drive that comes down the pike. My staff may feel the same way, because you don't advertise the list of stuff you didn't do. No one has ever graced the cover of *Principal's Daily* by publishing their list of nonstarters, but in quality schools focused on staff and student growth, there needs to be a lengthy list of "didn'ts" and a compact and clear list of "dids" that everyone understands.

There's no glory for the principal who spends the majority of his or her time clearing a path for student and teacher learning. I wish there were more scenes of me shouting a rallying cry with pencil raised high, standing triumphant atop a defeated mound of illiteracy, and fewer scenes of me covering a kindergarten recess duty so a team can finish drafting a unit of study. In the former, I have better pecs. In the latter, I'm wiping more noses, but I know that somewhere in the building there is a group of educators who didn't have to, so they could focus on teaching.

**George Shea** is the principal of New Franklin Elementary School, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. This year the school was inducted into the state Commissioner of Education's Circle of Excellence for its innovative approach to serving children. New Franklin has for seven consecutive years seen incremental growth in its NECAP standardized test scores. George shares his thoughts on best practices in a collaborative learning environment and leadership in a series of articles published in the Heinemann Digital Campus Reference Library ([heinemann.com/digital-campus](http://heinemann.com/digital-campus)).



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