

## **Principal in Seattle**

Seattle is one of the most amazing districts. Lots of things go on and lots of things always did. I wanted to be a principal in a middle school and they only had one middle school open. It was a 300 student middle school called NOMS. It was at first funny and then very sad. When I got there they told me that it was an outstanding school and had been selected as one of the ten chosen to give a special grant out of the 90 schools. About three weeks later I was notified that the school was being put on probation and could possibly be closed if it didn't improve the school. Then Arlene Ackerman was the Assistant Superintendent and she called all the schools identified to be put on probation.

I like to work with people in a school together. Teachers were able to close their class doors and ignore what happened in the school. Some didn't have problems with students others had daily problems. NOMS staff, when it started six years before, had attracted students who were for the most part students whose parents didn't want them in regular schools. They believed that NOMS would provide for their children in a smaller environment where they could develop as individuals.

Within the first week I discovered that the school had scheduled all 300 students to have a 40 minute lunch, no staff supervising them because they were eating lunch, and students collecting all over the school. In that first week, two fires were set at lunch in male bathrooms and on one of them we had to go through a fire drill. There were students who enjoyed doing things to the school with their friends.

Arlene Ackerman and other principals were formed in a committee so that the principals, who were the head of designated failing schools to be closed, were confronted. Those I saw besides me in this situation were quiet, polite, and afraid they would lose their jobs. On the other hand, after just a few weeks as the principal of NOMS I decided that the district needs to resolve its own responsibilities for schools. I was willing to make some necessary changes at the school to improve things but if the district didn't do its part I would be happy to resign from Seattle Public Schools.

Instead of sitting at a table and being quiet, polite, and afraid I was angry at the district for not doing its half of making sure every school serves every child. So, I decided to do a presentation instead of just simply talking. I took a big pot for the stove. I put a frog figurine in the bottom of the pot. I told them the story about a frog that is in a cold water pot first. Since the heat goes up slowly the frog does not recognize that it is getting hotter. The pot would get so hot that it would eventually destroy the frog and the frog would never understand what had happening to him. I also had cut out red pieces of paper shaped as fire flames and blue paper cut as rain drops. They asked me what I was doing. I then got out a large green frog puppet. I put him on my hand. I said to them that the frog had things to share with them. I used the puppet to put all the fire flames one at a time explaining what was happening. Then I used the frog to put rain drops on the fire flames

and put them out based on which rain drops the district had to do and which rain drops the school needed to do. My presentation worked. I got support from the district that was needed. I told the staff what I had presented. I told them that to have our school survive I am going to direct staff to do what was necessary to survive. We were not going to decide these changes together. I am going to make the decision as the principal because if we don't change quickly this year we won't survive. I like to work collaboratively because it is tops. Sometimes, as in this school's case, there isn't time to do that and survive.

We made some dramatic changes that year and we were successful as were our students. There is lots more about what we actually did over those school months rescuing our school but we all learned a great deal. Sometimes I think I should write a book about these experiences and what was learned both by staff and students. Most important is that we never forget that students are first and foremost. Everything we do to be successful requires that we never forget to focus first and foremost on students. Even though staff might want to go in a different direction if it is in conflicts with student success we must stay focused on students. NOMS became a K-8 alternative school renamed as Salmon Bay. It is a wonderful school for kids and parents and changes have occurred because we were able to improve NOMS leading to it surviving.

## **Madison Middle School in West Seattle**

About two thirds of the year our new Superintendent, John Stanford, decided to move me from NOMS to Madison. I felt sad leaving NOMS because things were getting better, teachers were feeling better, and most important things were working well for kids.

Madison was a middle school, 6-8, with 900 plus students. There was a great deal to be done to improve the school but there were wonderful teachers there. We worked well together and I stayed with them for five years when I had reached 30 years. I felt young and that I could form a company so I could use that to help other principals and schools move to their best.

What I liked most is that at the middle school grades can be organized so that teachers work together as a team. We had five teachers plus a counselor and special ed. teacher on each team, The head teachers of each team met weekly with the principal and worked together so the school became better and better.

I believe that we all need to know each other and what we need to accomplish to serve each student. In order to do that we developed a handbook that every staff member would have. The handbook had the following sections; Vision/Goals/Philosophy, Nuts and Bolts, Fieldtrips and Activities, Counseling Services, Student Intervention Services, Discipline, Professional Responsibilities and Procedures, Supplies and Procedures, Crisis Plan, and Safety/Emergency Procedures. Having all these sections extensively developed ends staff and administration wasting a great deal of time because procedures and policies are spelled out and clearly. If we don't have schools organized that way then the same things are addressed over and over because students, staff, and parents don't know or understand how we do things so everyone is successful.

I received the first Foster award of \$50,000 as the best principal in the secondary schools in the district on 1999-2000. This was the first time that award had been given. I was supposed to give half of it to the school and the other half to myself personally. I gave my half to the school and at last we could adequately address getting the computers we had not had ever before to serve our students.