



Principles from a former Principal

How to make your Principal your ally for good student nutrition

By Patricia Gray, Ed.D

Principals struggle daily prioritizing the wants and needs of their community. They must decide who needs what, why, and whether they have the capacity to make it happen. A retrospective look at some of my most significant non-academic decisions that supported academic acceleration for my students, pinpoints my decision to proactively implement my school district's ban on sodas at school.

Removing soda from our vending machines and sports events (even before we were required to do so by the school district) was a primary contributor to a decrease in suspensions of 50% at my school. It was a risky decision at the time, because we used the money from the soda sales to pay for some school programs, but we were able to brainstorm other ways to raise that money. For the students, not feeling that caffeine buzz all day long led to an immediate improvement in their behavior and their ability to stay focused in class, so it was the right decision to make.

As I reflect back to 2003, when improving nutrition at my school first began, there are a few nuggets of information that I would like to share with those who would like to approach a Principal to advocate for changes in the nutritional choices in their school.

- Be a "present parent" and active observer in what is happening at your school. Being a "present parent" means being at school when you can be. Principals understand that it is hard for working parents to volunteer during the school day, but be sure to come to school events that are held in the evening or on the weekend, and do make time to attend your child's parent-teacher conference. Principals are well aware of which parents make an effort to be involved at school, and which ones are never seen at all.
- Read the school newsletters to find opportunities for your support, talk with your child about what's happening at school, and make contact with other parents who can provide opportunities to help out, for example, your child's room parent. The room parent can help you find a way to help out at school that fits your schedule and your budget. Some parents only have time to write a check, while others can only afford to show up in person, and schools need both kinds of help. Can you give some money to help pay for the teacher appreciation lunch, or can you send a food contribution for the event to school with your child that day, or can you come in to help set up the event or clean up after? All help is welcome!
- Understand that nutrition is probably not the primary problem on your Principal's mind. There are Federal, state, and district compliance reports, guidelines, and targets that must

be met, as well as the day to day running of the school. Be well informed about what you want to tackle, and when convenient for the Principal, have a conversation.

- Recruit a critical mass of supporters for your cause. The Principal wants to know that you are not the Lone Ranger in your quest.
- Quiet the voice in your head that whispers that the Principal is not committed to these efforts if he or she is not acting as quickly as you believe they should. It's just not high on his or her list, especially when the school is in turmoil. That's when you give the reasons that add credibility to good nutrition. This is the right time, place, and circumstance for good nutrition.
- Actively listen to the Principal and teachers' needs and be supportive when you can. Principals need as much support as they can get; so be creative in finding ways to provide that support. The Principal needs help more than anything else, so if you can provide that help in some area while also asking for your Principal's help with your project, it makes the relationship more reciprocal - mutually supportive.
- Even if you can't be at school during the day, there are ways to be supportive. Offer to search online to find and apply for a grant that could help support a school nutrition program. My school got a two year, \$70,000 per year grant to pay for fresh fruit to be given away free to our students in the classroom; students wanted to find a way to have more fruit for hungry students, and a parent found the grant and helped the students apply for it.
- Help the Principal to monitor what's happening at school, either through students or parents (talking to their children about what is going on at the school.) Are students bringing chocolate syrup to school to add to white milk after chocolate milk was banned? The students will know about it, and some of them are bound to mention it to their parents. Is there a teacher using candy as a classroom reward? The students will all know about that! Is there something that parents are telling each other over the Mommy Grapevine that your Principal should know about? Give the Principal a call and share what "everyone is saying."
- Ask probing questions that can lead an intelligent educator to your side. Are the school's lowest-income students missing more days of school because of asthma, or illness? Does the Principal know that asthma is exacerbated by obesity, and that overweight students are more likely to miss school than students of a healthy weight? Are the students with the most absences also the ones who are scoring lowest on standardized testing? Would helping these students reduce their number of absent days help them score higher? What about those who are chronically late to school - could an improved school breakfast help get students to school on time? Connect the dots between what the Principal needs to accomplish (better student attendance, improved classroom behavior, higher test scores,

maintaining a calm and orderly campus) and what your suggested changes can accomplish; show that by helping you, the Principal can be helping him or herself.

- Appeal to the Principal's sense of social justice, if needed; this can be ammunition for naysayers. School may be the only place that low income students will be educated to make good nutritional choices; hungry or malnourished children will eat the good choices offered at school; have the data regarding adult diseases exacerbated by childhood obesity.
- Come with solutions. Help the Principal brainstorm ways to educate the students about making healthier eating choices. Anticipate barriers and have possible solutions close at hand.
- Student Nutritional Services can be your ally. They certainly were mine. They worked with me to find alternatives in the cafeteria that the students would accept and they determined ways to help students make good food choices. The idea to have a salad bar in our cafeteria came from our students; when Student Nutrition Services saw that the students were asking for it, they found a way to make it happen.
- At parent or parent teacher meetings, discuss ways to help students to make healthy choices a priority in their home. Make PTA topics include ways to do that.
- Understand that it may be difficult to educate your peers (parents) that selling junk foods to raise money for great causes is a road-block to your efforts. Provide the Principal and parents with alternatives to the candy, corn dogs, and cookie dough as fund-raising ideas. Discourage the sale of junk food by the parent organization. Believe that the Principal wants nothing more than to raise the extra funds for a special project with healthy choices.
- Do your research and understand how changes have been made elsewhere, including what successful changes cost, and whether changes have resulted in loss of income. It's not easy to make the change, because changes in the status quo always meet with resistance. Choose your battles wisely. Inch by inch, it's a cinch.
- Most importantly, don't grandstand or push too hard. Work together, share successes and talk honestly, openly and respectfully about what it really takes to meet your goal. Remember that this is monumental and takes an immense effort; no one action and no one person can solve the problem; so partner with your Principal and make your school's students the priority.

Return to "How To Guides" [home page](#)

Return to PEACHSF [home page](#)

February 2011