
**What Do Principals Do?
A Study of a Principal's Job and
How Long It Takes To Do It**

What Do Principals Do? A Study of a Principal's Job and How Long It Takes To Do It

By
Jonathan Hurst



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PREFACE

Referring to a principal's job, I once heard someone say, "The only thing you can count on is the time you arrive." So true. I'm a morning person, and I always tried to arrive at work at 6:00 am. It would have been sooner, but for the longest time we had a student information and an e-mail system that were unavailable to us until 6:00 am. So, I got into the habit of getting to work at six. I think that I hoped to get a lot of work done before seven—before most people arrived—but as this study will show, that didn't really happen. While it's true that most people don't arrive until after seven (with a 7:30 school start time, the mode of arrivals to work is probably between 7:20 and 7:30), there were a few teachers who always seemed to beat me to school. One social science teacher was always there ahead of me. Occasionally, when I had to get something done before school, I would arrive at 5:30. This teacher was still there ahead of me. I remember once I arrived at 5:00, and I actually caught him pulling into the parking lot (ahead of me). At least I had learned what time he arrived every day.

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The purpose of this book is to show how a principal spends his time, and how much of his time is spent on various tasks. To do this, I collected data on how I spent my time for the last three years of my principalship. I began with the intention of generating one year's worth of data. In the 2013–2014 school year, I began documenting how I spent my time for what I thought would be my last year. But I didn't retire that year as I had planned. I worked a year after that and then one more year after that, but I kept collecting data. So, I ended up with three years of data. This is helpful because, although a year of data is significant, one could argue that any given year could be an outlier year. I would disagree with that and say that it seems that every year brings something unusual, so that unusualness can really be considered an expectation. But three consecutive years of data pushes this toward the category of longitudinal data, and that strengthens the credibility of the data.

Much has been written on the skills a principal needs, much has been written on what makes an effective principal, and much has been written on what a principal does. This study shows how much time a principal spends practicing his skills, being effective, and simply doing what he does. Data is presented that is both empirical and quantitative. But the book also has a qualitative aspect. My intention in writing this book was to produce interesting, useful data and to enlighten, amuse, and entertain. The life of a principal can be exasperating, and I think one needs a good sense of humor to navigate the dynamic journey of a principalship safely and successfully.

DEDICATION

To my caring wife of 52 years, Beverly, who loved me, supported me, and shared me with Elsinore High School for 28 of those years.



INTRODUCTION

How much time is involved in being a principal at a large, comprehensive high school? And what, exactly, does one do as a high school principal? This study shows what I did and how much time I spent doing it as a high school principal over a three-year period. I worked at Elsinore High School, a comprehensive high school of over 2,000 students in the Lake Elsinore Unified School District, for 28 years, from 1988 to 2016. I was a teacher for 14 years, an assistant principal for three years, and the principal of the school for 11 years, from 2005 to 2016. For the last three years before my retirement, from July, 2013 to July, 2016, I kept track of what I did and how much time I spent doing it in down to as little as five minute increments. I broke down everything I did into 72 categories (see Appendix A), and I fit everything I did into from one to eight of those categories. For instance, let's say I spoke to a parent on the telephone for five minutes, and she complained about a teacher giving her daughter a C on an essay because the teacher was stupid and unfair. That's five minutes spent in six different categories—five minutes talking to a parent, five minutes discussing a grade issue, five

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minutes discussing a teacher, five minutes listening to a complaint, five minutes dealing with a student issue, and five minutes talking on the telephone. Most of what I did fit into at least four categories. Over the course of the three years of this study, I logged a total of 20,838 discrete actions. That’s an average of 6,794 actions per year or 18 per day. It’s much more per workday (my “work year” consisted of 220 days a year—so 30 actions per workday) and even more per school day (there are 180 school days in a year, so 38 actions per school day), and that is displayed in Appendix B.

Figure 1 illustrates the breakdown of the percent of the 20,838 actions that included the indicated number of categories. Obviously, 100 percent of the actions involved at least one category, but over 90 percent involved up to four categories. Most events involved 5–6 categories.

This study will show that the job of a high school principalship is much more than a Monday—Friday, nine to five job. I may have worked a little harder and a little longer than an average principal—that’s my nature—but I don’t think I worked too much harder or too much longer than the average high school principal (see Chapter 1). The truth is, and this study will validate it, a high school principal works long hours. Most likely, this assertion will not hold for an elementary school or a middle school principal; I suspect the hours they work don’t approach the hours a high school principal works.

The results presented here may contain some surprises. There were surprises for me, and I was the one working the job. For example, I would have thought that I spent more time dealing with complaints than I actually did. Dealing with

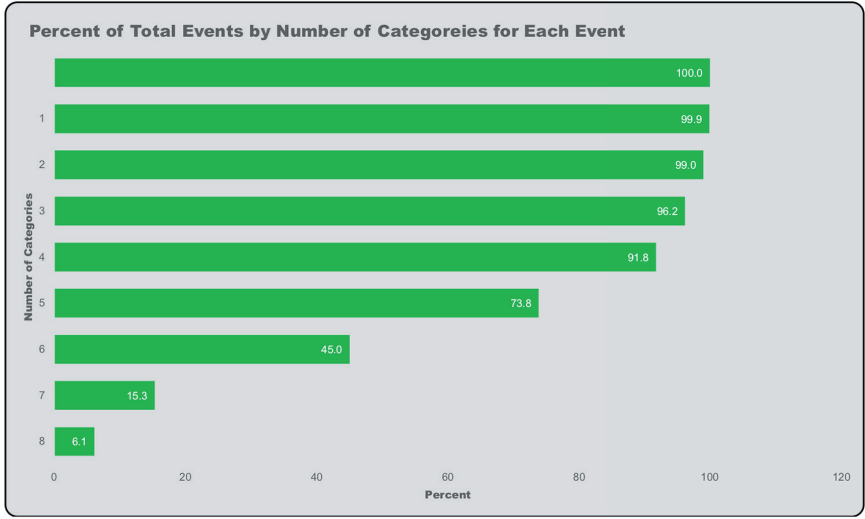


FIGURE 1.

complaints wears on a person and can jade one's sense of reality and accomplishment. As I logged my time, I remember thinking I was in the process of producing compelling evidence that a principal spends most of his time dealing with complaints. I was surprised to find that over this three-year period, I spent less than seven percent of my time on complaints.

Chapter 1 discusses the nature of the time a principal spends on the job. What does a principal's work day look like? How many hours per day, days per week, and weeks per year does he work? Many people—my wife included—don't understand why a principal has to work during the summer. There aren't any students—what could he possibly be doing? And even if there is work to be done, surely it doesn't take eight hours per day to get it done, does it? Two national surveys are presented in Chapter 1, and results from this study are compared to the results from the two national surveys.

Chapters 2–73 present the 72 work categories for a principal, from what he spends the most time on to what he spends the least amount of time on (see Appendix D). Tasks in every one of the categories need to be done, and they all end up on a principal's plate. I spent the least amount of time on School Messenger, our automated school notification system of sending telephone and e-mail messages to parents, students, and others. I spent just .19% of my time with School Messenger, but that amounted to over 255 minutes or 4.25 hours per year. Four hours a year that I spent sending messages to parents and students.



CHAPTER 1

TIME

HOURS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

The work year for a public school administrator is delineated in his contract by a number of work days. In my school district, a high school principal's work year is 220 days. These are 220 days when a principal is required to be at work. One could reason that means there are 145 days when a principal is not required to be at work, and, technically, that is true. The reality, though, is far from the technical truth

A calendar school year runs from July 1 to June 30. A typical school year for a high school student is 180 days. That works out to two semesters of 90 days or 18 weeks over a nine-and-a-half month period. So, a high school principal works 40 more days than school is in session—40 days of work during the summer. From the end of one school year to the beginning of the next school year is about two and a half months. Forty days is eight weeks of five-day work weeks,

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so there is room during the summer for a principal to take a couple of weeks off. He could actually take more time off—and many principals do—if he works days during the Thanksgiving, winter, or spring break periods. Besides the two and a half months without students during the summer, we used to get one week off for Thanksgiving break, three weeks off for Christmas break, and one week off for spring break. An administrator could work some of the off time during Thanksgiving, Christmas, or spring breaks (when there really is little to do) to bank more time to take off in the summer, and some do just that. But summer is the time to prepare for the next school year, and there never seemed to be enough time for that, so I always took off all of the Thanksgiving, winter, and spring breaks and worked most of the summer.

If a principal worked eight-hour days for his 220 days per year, it would come out to 1,760 hours per year. But a principal works much more time than that. School days for students are determined by the State, which sets a minimum of instructional minutes for the year. The current required instructional minutes for high schools in California is 64,800. A typical school day runs about 375 minutes for students, which is about six and a half hours. Throw in a 30-minute lunch period, and you've got about a seven-hour day for a high school student. Students at my school attended from about 7:30 to 2:30. A principal *could* work an eight-hour day on most days and get away with it. He could come in at 7:00 (thirty minutes before students arrived) and leave at 3:00 (thirty minutes after students left), and many would be non-the-wiser about his relatively short day. I've known principals work such hours, but I can only think of one that I respected—and he wasn't lazy—he was just that good.

HOURS BY DAY OF THE WEEK

I could never get enough done in an eight-hour day. A typical principal probably works at least nine hours a day during days when students are in school, which would be 1,620 hours per year on school days (i.e., 9 hours X 180 days). I worked much longer than that. My average Monday-Friday work day for this three-year period when students were in school was 12.3 hours per day or a total of 2,220 hours per year or 54% more than an eight-hour day (which would be 1,440 hours per year) or 37% more than a nine-hour day. This doesn't include the work I did on weekends. For the weekends during the school year when students were in school, I averaged working 3.2 hours every Saturday and 4.2 hours on every Sunday, which is an additional 310 hours each year. That brings me to a total of 2,530 hours per school year or 75% more than an eight-hour day or 56% more than a nine-hour day. Table 1.1 shows the time I worked during the three school years of this study, which covered 180 days per year (540 total days) for students. Weekends were all the weekend days between the students' first and last days of school.

I averaged over nine hours per day for every day of the school year, weekend days included. If you just look at the average hours per weekday during the school year (excluding holidays), I worked an average of 12.3 hours per day. Fridays

TABLE 1.1. School Year by Day of the Week

	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
Total mins	68,775	78,165	80,690	83,610	88,445	24,040	31,930	455,655
Days	95	110	113	114	108	38	38	266
Mins/day	723.9	710.6	714.1	733.4	818.9	170.7	211.0	566.8
Hours/day	12.1	11.8	11.9	12.2	13.6	3.2	4.2	9.6

were the longest days, averaging over 13 and a half hours per day, and Tuesdays and Wednesdays were the shortest days, averaging just under 12 hours per day. Weekends weren’t free from work. I averaged over three hours a day on weekends—more on Sundays than Saturdays.

A principal’s year is more than the 180 days when students are in school. Total work hours during the days of my work year were, of course, more total hours than my hours during student days, but less hours per day (work did ease up once students were out of school). My work year was 220 days—40 days more than the student 180-day year—but during the summer we worked four ten-hour days rather than five “eight-hour” days per week, so I did those extra 40 days of work in 33–35 actual days. For those days, I worked an average of over 10 hours per day (most of those were 10-hour days, remember). But if you spread that time over 40 days, it comes out to just nine hours per day.

Even when I wasn’t working, I was working. Subtracting my 220 work days from a 365-day year leaves 145 non-work days a year. But because of the four ten-hour work days during the summer, I had what appeared to be another 6–8 non-work days a year. For the three years of this study, I averaged 152 non-work days per year—days during which I worked an average of 3.2 hours. I averaged the fewest hours on non-work Fridays (2.0) and the most hours on non-work Sundays (3.8).

It’s not much of a stretch to say that a high school principal’s job is a 24/7 job. When something after hours happens at the school (e.g., a broken water pipe or a break-in), the principal is one of the first to be notified. For this three-year study, I worked an average of 8.4 hours per day. That’s over eight hours per day of every day of the year for the three straight years of this study! I suggest that this is even less than I worked throughout my 11 years as a high school principal, because the last two years of this study were the two years leading up to my retirement, and I admit to slacking off somewhat as my retirement approached.

Figure 1.1 illustrates the average total hours I worked per day of the week over the three years of this study. I worked the most hours (10.7) on Thursdays (affected by the 4–10, Monday–Thursday, work weeks during the summer hours), and I worked the least hours (3.0) on Saturdays (reflecting that I spent Saturdays resting up from the just-completed work week.

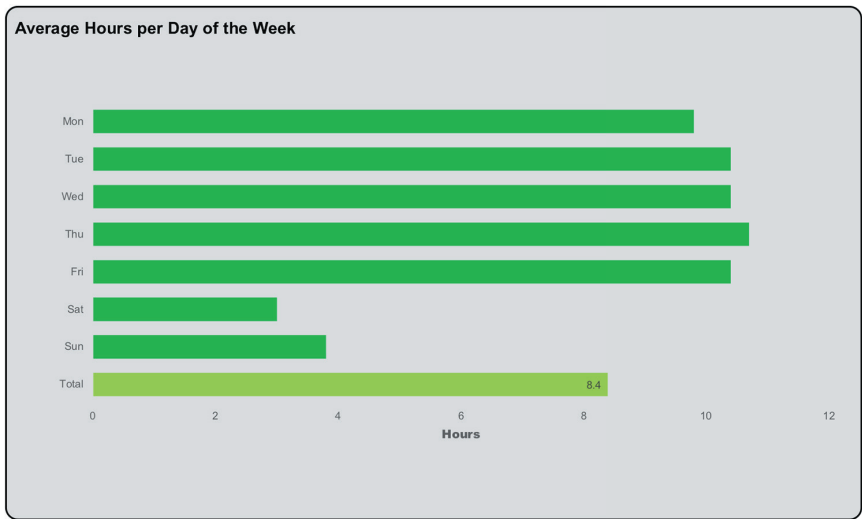


FIGURE 1.1.

Figure 1.2 illustrates the average total hours I worked per day of the week during my work year across the three years of this study. My work year never included weekends or holidays, which are included in the total hours I worked in a year. I tended to work much less during weekends, holidays and vacation time,

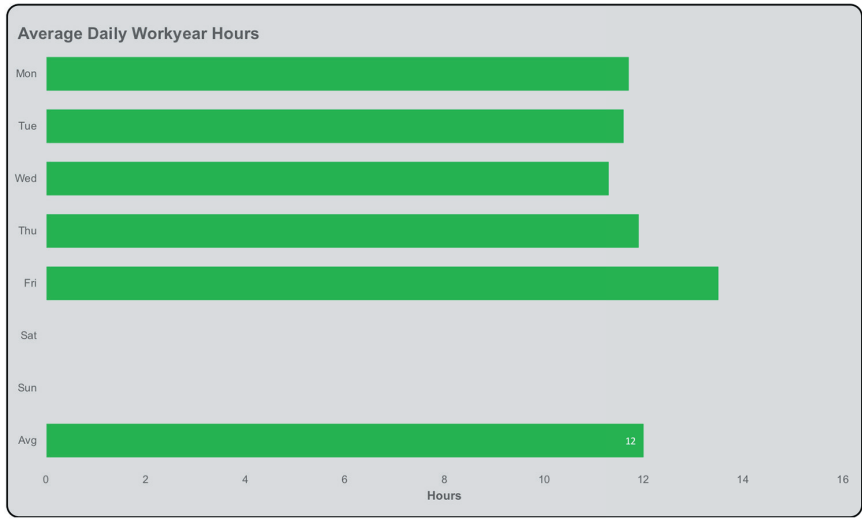


FIGURE 1.2.

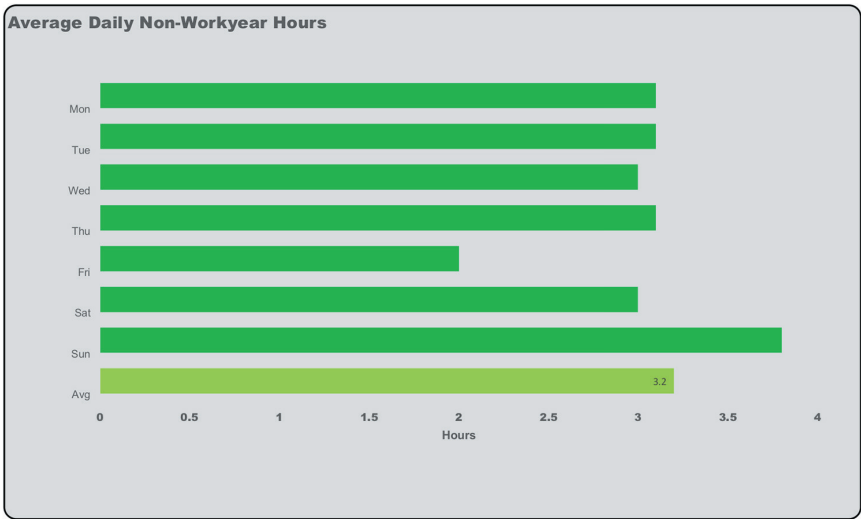


FIGURE 1.3.

so the average daily total hours for a calendar year (8.4) are considerably less than the average daily total hours for my work year (12.0). Note that during my work year, I worked more hours on Fridays (13.5) than any other day of the week. This is not surprising since football games, many basketball games, and dances are typically held on Friday nights.

Figure 1.2, my workyear hours, does not reflect the total hours I worked during a year. A principal often works beyond the days of his workyear calendar. Figure 1.3 illustrates the average total hours I worked per day of the week on those days that were not included in my work year. A combination of the non-workyear hours with the workyear hours results in the total hours for the year (Fig 1.1).

It should not be surprising that I averaged most non-workyear hours (3.8) on Sundays and least non-workyear hours (2.0) on Fridays. On Sundays I was preparing for the upcoming week. On Fridays I was just happy to be at the end of the week.

HOURS BY MONTH OF THE YEAR

All months during a calendar year are not the same. The most obvious difference is between months when school is in session (mid-August to early June) and months when school is not in session (most of June, July, and the first half of August). And even during the school year, significant differences among months exist. December has nearly two weeks of vacation time, November and March or April has one week of vacation time, and January has over one week of vacation time. I wasn't surprised to learn that October and April were the heaviest months

TABLE 1.2. Average Monthly Time Over Three Years

Month	Minutes	Hours per Day	Percent of Year
October	18,630	10.0	10.1%
April	17,725	9.8	9.6%
May	17,135	9.2	9.3%
March	16,948	9.1	9.2%
September	16,922	9.4	9.2%
August	15,717	8.5	8.5%
January	15,698	8.4	8.5%
November	15,672	8.7	8.5%
February	14,810	8.8	8.0%
December	13,960	7.5	7.6%
June	12,558	7.0	6.8%
July	8,635	4.6	4.5%

(the school year always seems like a grind as we move toward the Thanksgiving break), but I was surprised to find how similar many of the months were to one another. Table 1.2 illustrates the average monthly time I worked.

**HOW PRINCIPALS IN PUBLIC AND
PRIVATE SCHOOLS USE THEIR TIME: 2011–12**

In December, 2017, the United States Department of Education published a Statistics in Brief publication that “offers a nationally representative look at how principals spend their time” (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017, p. 2). Data in the brief came from the 2011–2012 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), Public and Private School Principal Data Files, and the Public and Private School Data Files. Principals who participated in the SASS provided information about the percentage of time spent on various tasks by answering the question: “On average through the school year, what percentage of time do you estimate that you spend on the following tasks in this school?”

- a. Internal administrative tasks, including human resource/personal issues, regulation, reports, school budget;
- b. Curriculum and teaching-related tasks, including teaching, lesson preparation, classroom, observations, mentoring teachers;
- c. Student interactions including discipline and academic guidance;
- d. Parent interactions, including formal and informal interactions; and
- e. Other.

One of the questions this study attempts to answer is, “On average, what percentages of time did principals in public schools and in private schools spend on specific tasks?” (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017, p. 2). Data was collected from surveys of approximately 7,500 public school principals and 1,700 private school principals. Averages between public school principals and private school principals were similar. Private school principals spent a little more of their time on administrative tasks and a little less of their time on student interactions. On average, public school principals spent 31 percent of their time on internal administrative tasks, 26 percent of their time on curriculum and teaching-related tasks, 23 percent of their time on student interactions, 13 percent of their time on parent interactions, and 7 percent of their time on other activities (Hoyer & Sparks, 2017, p. 4). Figure 1.4 shows the mean percentage of time principals reported spending on average throughout the school year on five identified categories of tasks.

For comparison, I grouped the 72 categories in my study into the five tasks of this principal study. Since three of my categories (curriculum and instruction, students, and parents) are very similar to three of the categories in the principal study, not surprisingly most of the categories in my study fell into the internal administrative tasks category of the principal study. I grouped 40 of my categories in the internal administrative tasks category, 14 of my categories in the curriculum and teaching-related tasks category, 10 of my categories in the student interactions category, five of my categories in the parent interactions category, and just three of my categories in the other category. Additionally, I reasonably spread out the category “help people/solve problems” across four of the tasks—60% went to

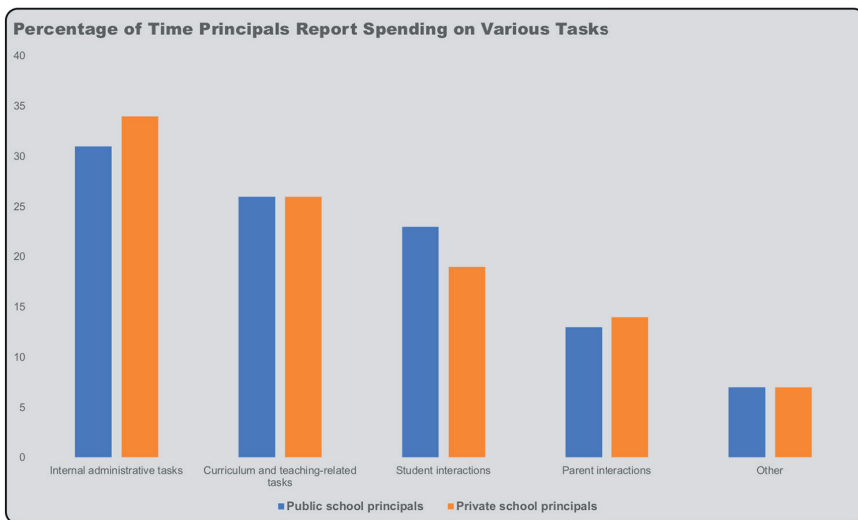


FIGURE 1.4.

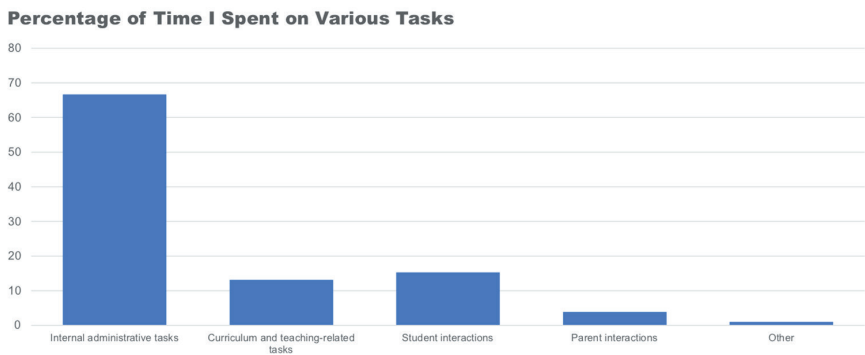


FIGURE 1.5.

Internal Administrative Tasks, 20% went to Curriculum and Teaching; 10% went to Student Interactions, and 10% went to Parent Interactions (see Appendix C). Then I added together the total minutes of the tasks in my study that fell into each of the five respective categories of the Hoyer & Sparks study.

The time I spent on the five tasks of the principal study differed significantly from the results reported in the principal study. I spent about twice as much time on administrative tasks and half as much time on curriculum, students, and parents. Possibly the nature of the two studies accounts for the differences. The principals study asked principals to estimate the time they spent on each of the tasks. My study tracked how I spent my time over a long period of time. I suggest that principals’ perceptions of how they spend their time may vary significantly from how they actually spend their time. We all want to think we spend most of our time dealing with curriculum and teaching and students and parents, but the reality is we spend most of our time with administrative tasks. Figure 1.5 shows my calculation of the percentage of time I spent on the five tasks of the principal study.

CHARACTERISTICS OF PUBLIC ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS IN THE UNITED STATES

In August, 2017, the United States Department of Education published “Characteristics of Public Elementary and Secondary School Principals in the United States: Results from the 2015–16 National Teacher and Principal Survey First Look” (Taie & Goldring, 2017). The 2015–16 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS) is a nationally representative sample survey of public K–12 schools, principals, and teachers in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. The NTPS is a redesign of the SASS, which was conducted on behalf of the National Center for Education Statistics on a four-year cycle, beginning with the 1987–88 school year and ending in the 2011–12 school year. “The purpose of NTPS is to collect

information that can provide a detailed picture of U.S. elementary and secondary schools and their staff. This information is collected through school, principal, and teacher surveys, and information can be linked across all three surveys” (Taie & Goldring, 2017, p. 1). The selected samples included about 8,300 traditional and charter schools and public school principals, and the samples were drawn to support estimates by geography, grade span, and charter school status.

The study reported that during the 2015–16 school year, there were an estimated 90,400 public school principals of K–12 schools in the United States. Among public school principals, 78 percent were non-Hispanic white, 11 percent were non-Hispanic Black or African-American, 8 percent were Hispanic, and 3 percent were another race/ethnicity. Overall, 54 percent were female. Primary school principals were 68% female, middle school principals were 40 percent female, high school principals were 33 percent female, and combined school principals were 42 percent female. A majority of principals (61 percent) hold a master’s degree as their highest degree. Ten percent hold a doctorate degree (Taie & Goldring, 2017, p. 3).

According to this study, public school principals spent an average of 58.6 hours per week on all school-related activities. On average, they spent about 30 percent of their time on internal administrative tasks, 30 percent of their time on curriculum and teaching-related tasks, 23 percent of their time on student interactions, and 14 percent of their time on parent interactions (Taie & Goldring, 2017, p. 3). These results are similar to the previous results from the SASS. Figure 1.6 compares results from the SASS, NTPS, and my study.

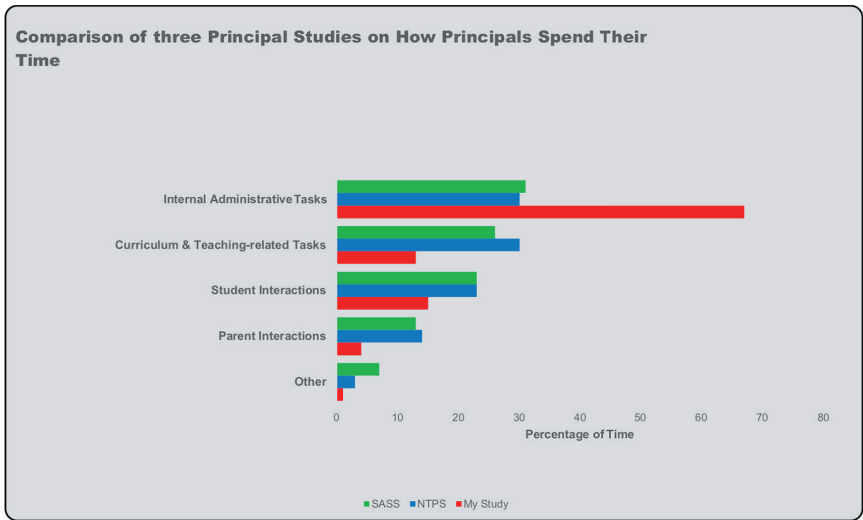


FIGURE 1.6.

The results from my study on how I spent my time differed from the averages reported in these national surveys, but results from my study did align with the national surveys in how much time I spent on school-related activities. According to Taie and Goldring (p. 3), public school principals spent an average of 58.6 hours per week on all school-related activities. According to my study, I averaged 58.8 hours per week. That's an average of just a little over eight hours per day, but it's eight hours per day for every single day of the year! Try to pack all of those hours into a 220-day work year, which is 44 work weeks, and you end up with a little over 60 hours per week.

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CHAPTER 2

STUDENTS

One would think that the principal of a high school spends the lion's share of his time with students, but that may not be the case. I was a principal with a reputation for being a student-centered principal who was “everywhere”—always out and about with the students. Out of the 72 principal tasks I identified and timed across this three-year study, I spent more time with students than with any other task. Yet I was only with students 35% of my time. Much of a principal's work needs be done from his office, and the office is a hidden trap for the unwitting. It is easy for a principal to spend too much time in his office. Throughout my career as a principal, I knew I had to be out and about, but it's easy to get sucked into the office and often difficult to pull oneself out of the office. As a first-year principal, I remember receiving some solid advice from a veteran district administrator, our Assistant Superintendent of Personnel, who had himself spent time as a principal. He asked me how things were going, and I complained that there just didn't seem to be enough hours in the day for me to get everything done that needed to be done. He told me that an administrator was like a juggler simultaneously juggling multiple

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balls. The whole secret behind a successful administrator, he told me, is knowing which balls he can let fall to the ground and which balls he needs to keep in the air. A principal who doesn't spend time in his office is probably dropping balls. But then, so is the principal who doesn't spend time out and about the school.

In the office or out and about—which is the better place for a principal to be? The correct answer is that he needs to be in both places. And the better he can be in both places, preferably at the same time, the more successful he will be.

I am proud of the fact that people saw me as a student-friendly principal. But it seemed that the longer I did my job, the more I found myself spending time in my office. Every year I learned more about the job, and I think that's correlated to spending more time in the office. It's not all just shaking hands and kissing babies—at some point a principal also has to administrate.

A good school, though, is about the kids, and unfortunately for kids, many people who work for the schools lose sight of this basic tenet. When you have an abundance of self-serving people working in schools, before you know it, you have a school that's not about the children, but about comfort, convenience, and opportunity for those who work at the school. It's a shame, but a fact of public school administration, that a school principal must spend much of his time dealing with those who work at the school rather than the students who attend the school.

On one hand, I am gratified to see that over the course of this three-year study, I spent more time on students than on any other single category. I wish it could have been more. On the other hand, I am disheartened that I, a principal known for connecting with students, for being student-friendly, for making students my highest priority, barely spent more than one-third of my time on students. I averaged nearly 1,100 hours per year on students, which over the course of the year averages out to three hours per day. But since most of my student-related hours occurred on workdays and schooldays, on those days I averaged 258 student-related minutes (4.3 hours) per workyear day, and I only averaged 41 student-related minutes on non-workyear days.

I spent more time with large groups of students (over 1000) than with any other size group of students. This would cover the times I spent with students during breaks and lunches, before school and after school, and at football games. I also spent significant time with classroom-sized groups of students (reflecting time I spent in classrooms), one-on-one with students, and alone working on student issues. Figure 2.1 disaggregates the average annual number of hours I spent with students by the number of students in the group with which I was interacting.

During the times when I was with students, I had the greatest amount of time per occurrence when I was with 100–999 students, which reflects the time I spent at athletic and schoolwide events (but not varsity football games). The second greatest amount of time per occurrence was when I was with groups of 5–40 students, which reflects the time I spent in classrooms. The shortest time per occurrence was when I was one-on-one with a student. Figure 2.2 illustrates the amount of time per occurrence with the various groups of students. Like with time

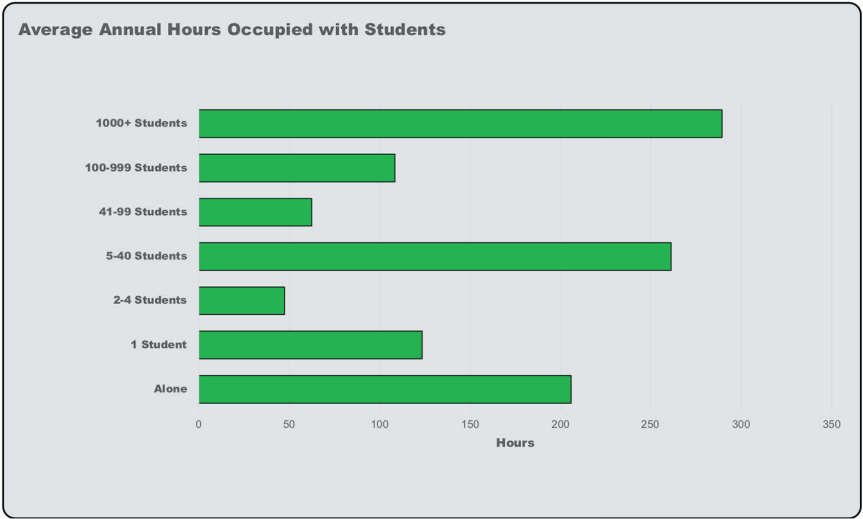


FIGURE 2.1.

spent, I also had more interactions with large groups (1,000 +) than any other size group of students, but the size group that I had the next largest number of interactions with was when I was one-on-one with students. Interactions with individual students were shorter than interactions with more students, but there were more

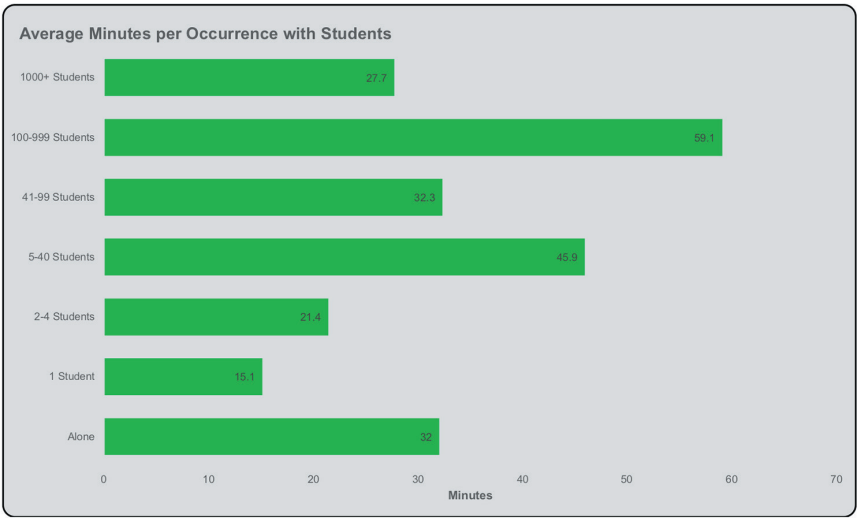


FIGURE 2.2.

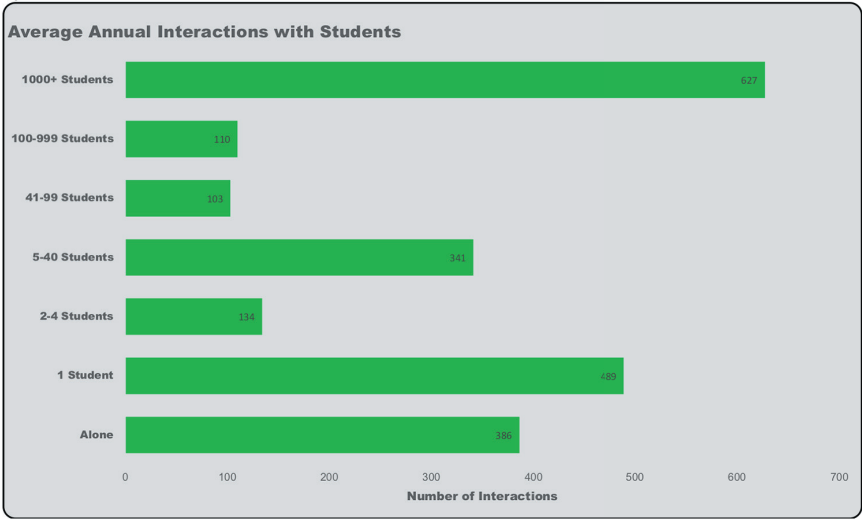


FIGURE 2.3.

of them. Figure 2.3 illustrates the number of interactions I had with the various groups of students. The large number of occurrences when I was alone reflects the amount of time I spent at home working on student-related issues.



CHAPTER 3

CHECKING ON THINGS

THE ROAD TO ADMINISTRATION

I didn't plan on becoming an administrator. I loved teaching. When I was an English teacher, I didn't even like weekends, because weekends were two days a week when I wasn't in the classroom. But once I approached 10 years of teaching, I realized that after 10 years, I would no longer be getting the annual incremental pay increases that were part of the collective bargaining agreement. I only had a Bachelor's Degree, and one needed a Master's Degree to continue up the pay scale. Ten years earlier, after spending nine years in the army, when I was working toward my teaching credential, and while I was still eligible for the G.I. Bill, I made the decision to begin teaching rather than to pursue a Master's Degree. I wasn't anxious to get into a Master's program and attend classes with students 10 years younger than I, and I had been advised to get into teaching before pursuing a Master's, because that way I would immediately begin moving up on the pay

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scale. At the time I received that advice, it made sense to me, so I skipped the Master's program and jumped right into teaching. The years rolled by, my craft as a teacher flourished, and I didn't think much about a Master's degree. I was happy and I didn't think about going back to school—until I approached 10 years in the profession and realized I had hit the ceiling of the pay scale for teachers with only a Bachelor's Degree. At that point, it didn't make sense *not* to pursue a Master's Degree. But I had a wife and four children, I had just switched from teaching special education to English, I was coaching both boys and girls tennis, and I had just accepted the additional duty of WASC Coordinator for our school. How would I ever find time to go back to school?

I soon learned that I wasn't the only teacher with a full plate needing a Master's Degree. Education is big business, and there is no shortage of universities catering Masters' in Education programs for teachers already in the profession. And they make it easy. One year of two five-to-nine pm evenings a week and \$30,000 easily obtainable in student loans was all that was required. It's really a no-brainer. The lifetime dividends far outweigh the costs. I enrolled in Azusa Pacific University's program (the Master's program was held at a local community college), and I was pleasantly surprised when I walked into my first class and found that all the other students were my age!

I had my choice of three paths to choose from for my Master's in Education emphasis: curriculum and instruction, technology, and administration. Curriculum and instruction seemed like it would be too "touchy-feely," I wasn't confident that I had the aptitude for technology, so, by default, not by interest, I ended up pursuing the administration emphasis. I will never forget the discussion in one of my Master's program classes that changed my life. The instructor was a superintendent in a neighboring school district, and sometime during the discussion, I revealed that I didn't intend to pursue a career in school administration. He asked me why, and I told him, "Because I love teaching too much." He asked me what I loved about teaching, and I had to think for several seconds before responding. I said, "Because I know that I'm making a difference in the classroom. I know that I'm having a positive impact on students' lives. That makes teaching very rewarding, and I have no desire to stop teaching." The instructor asked, "Have you ever considered that you can have a greater impact on a greater number of students' lives as an administrator?" Uh—no. But I did after he brought it up. And somewhere, in the course of my Master's program, I decided that perhaps I could have a greater positive influence on a greater number of students as an administrator, and I decided to pursue a career in school administration.

Once I made that decision, I was all in. Going back to school at age 47 had renewed by enthusiasm for learning, and it was an easy decision to go after a doctorate once I earned my Master's. I knew that a doctorate would increase my marketability as an administrator, and I told myself that if I were to become an administrator, I wanted to give myself the best preparation.

But I came across an unexpected problem after acquiring an administrative credential. I couldn't get anyone to hire me. My best chance, I thought, was being hired at my own school. I had worked there for thirteen years, people knew me, people liked me, and conveniently, a perfect opportunity presented itself. The school had three administrators—one principal and two assistant principals. The principal took a job as an assistant superintendent at the county level, one of the assistant principals became a principal at a district middle school, and the other assistant principal resigned. And, to add to the serendipitous opportunity before me, the District was *adding* an assistant principal to its two high schools. This was a complete administrative turnover at my school. The District first hired the principal, and then he was charged with hiring three assistant principals. What an opportunity for me! How could I not end up with one of those jobs? I interviewed for the position, and I remember going home after the interview so full of confidence that I was expecting a telephone call that afternoon—or surely no later than the next day. No phone call. Not that day, not the next day, never. Not only did I not end up with one of those assistant principal positions, I didn't even make the cut! It's typical when interviewing for an administrative position to have two rounds of interviews. The first round narrows the field down to a few, and then the second round determines who is hired. I didn't even make it to the second round of interviews. The three people who were hired were (1) a teacher from our sister high school, (2) a teacher from an elementary school, and (3) a second-year assistant principal from the sister high school. Really?

I was hurt, frustrated, and maybe even angry that I was passed over for this opportunity at my own school. I loved my school, I had dedicated 13 years of my life to it, and I believe I had served it well. It was only a setback such as this that would make me consider applying for a position outside my school and district, and that's what I did. When I found assistant principal opportunities in neighboring school districts, I applied. I applied at any district that I thought would have been a reasonable commute—all hiring districts within 60 miles. I even extended this radius to my alma mater, which was 85 miles away, reasoning that I would make the long commute, and eventually move, just for the opportunity to give back to the town and school that had raised me. In the course of just a few months, I applied for assistant principal positions in eight different school districts. I was invited to interview three times. I never made a cut. Nothing.

My frustration increased, and I arrived at a sobering conclusion. Why would another school district ever pick a teacher with no experience and whom they don't know to be an assistant principal? They wouldn't. Rejected by my own school and school district and unable to impress a different district, I just gave up. I quit looking outside my district and convinced myself that it was okay if I never became an administrator. I loved teaching, I loved my school, and I was okay (and maybe even relieved) with the prospect of teaching for the rest of my life. I still planned on finishing my doctorate in educational leadership, and I enjoyed the thought of being a teacher and being Dr. Hurst in the classroom. Teachers with

doctorates are rare, and I looked forward to taking my place among them. I told myself that I might apply for an assistant principalship in my school the next time a position opened up, but I was in no hurry for the opportunity.

So, I settled into teaching the next year at my school with a new principal and three new assistant principals. I knew the new assistant principal who had been a teacher at our sister high school. We had gone through the Master's program and earned our administrative credentials together, and we had become friends in the process. He called me into his office toward the end of his first semester as our new assistant principal. "I know you're looking for an AP job," he said. "The principal of our continuation school is looking for a TOSA to do AP duties. Why don't give her a call?" I told him that I didn't know much about continuation schools. My first job had been as a temporary teacher at a continuation school, but that had only lasted until the end of the school year, and that had been 13 years ago. He said, "Well, Cindy is the principal, and she's good people. I think you ought to give her a call."

A TOSA is a "teacher on special assignment," and in this case, that meant they were looking for a teacher to do the job of an assistant principal but for teacher pay. It seemed to me like a good way to get my foot in the door to administration, I was still smarting about being passed over for the AP jobs at my school, and it was in my own school district, so I gave Cindy a call. I explained who I was and that I had been referred to her by our assistant principal, and I asked her about the job. She probably thought, "Who is this guy with no experience asking about a job?" She launched into a long spiel that I'm sure was fueled with the thought of scaring me off. "Well, first off I need someone who understands the master schedule and who can help me build a new master schedule to reflect a more challenging and rigorous curriculum that I want to implement. So, I need someone who understands curriculum and instruction, who can build the master schedule for the school, and who can schedule students into the classes. Of course, that means I need someone who understands all of the district's graduation requirements and who can make sure our students complete the graduation requirements in the limited time they are with us. They're going to have to be making up credits they didn't earn in the comprehensive high school, so we have to develop a viable credit recovery program for our students who most likely have challenging home situations and possible behavioral issues. I'm also going to need someone who can help with discipline. And I don't have a counselor, so I'll need someone who is comfortable counseling students, not just on what classes to take, but on the heavy issues that these kids bring to school every day. Discipline and counseling go hand in hand. I'd like to create a positive, non-punitive discipline policy that teaches students proper behavior and acceptance, and counseling will be part of that policy. Student supervision will be a component of the job; I need help monitoring the kids before and after school on the way to and from the school and in the immediate vicinity of the school. Then there's special education. We have our share of special education students, and they all need annual IEPs. We have a

handful of kids on 504's, so we have to have annual 504 meetings for those kids. And just like the comprehensive high schools, we have annual testing to do—the state standardized tests and the high school exit exam. So, I need someone who can run the schoolwide testing for me. Finally, I'd like someone who can coordinate with the local community colleges to see what kind of services and information we can get for our students." She finally paused, waiting for a reaction from me.

I asked her, "Can I be frank with you?" I heard a sharp intake of breath. I think she was expecting me to say something like, "Well, good luck finding that guy," and I could hear the wariness in her voice when she replied, "Please. Go ahead." I surprised her by saying, "I think I'm just the guy you're looking for." Long pause. I think she was intrigued, and she made an appointment for me to stop by her school the next day and talk to her.

I met her at 3:30, after I finished teaching for the day, and we talked until after six. Sometimes you meet someone, and the two of you just click. That's the way it was with me and Cindy. She offered me the TOSA position, and I accepted. I started as her TOSA the following semester, the second semester of the 2001–2002 school year. Just like that, I gave up my teaching position at Elsinore High School, and I gave up my coaching position for both the boys and the girls tennis teams. We thought that I would be a TOSA for that semester, that the TOSA position would turn into an assistant principal position the following year, and I would finally become an assistant principal.

I made a commitment to Cindy, and I dove right in, learning everything I could and trying to be the best TOSA of all time. Within the first month, Cindy proposed that we both spend the Valentine's Day weekend at the annual Love and Logic Conference in Las Vegas. I readily accepted, and that experience changed my life. Love and Logic is a democratic approach to discipline, and after attending the conference, both Cindy and I were sold on the benefits of such an approach. We went back to school and immediately implemented what we had learned at the conference, and I spent the rest of my career as an advocate for a democratic approach to discipline. Spending the weekend at the conference also allowed Cindy and I to bond with one another and see how much we had in common, both professionally and personally.

I believed in Cindy, I trusted Cindy, and I was determined to do the best I could for her. She arrived every morning at 7:00 am. I arrived at 6:00 am to have everything ready for her when she came. She left every afternoon at about 4:00. I stayed until 5:00 to clean up everything for her. When she breezed in at 7:00 every morning, she typically blew right by my open office door, sometimes without even saying good morning. I was all the more motivated to be noticed by her. I was out and about all day long—visiting classrooms, talking with teachers and office staff, interacting with students—being highly visible and letting everyone know that I cared—the hallmarks of my administrative career.

I was out to impress Cindy, and in the process, I left an impression on others at the school. I was selected as the Teacher of the Year for that school that year, the only time I have ever been recognized as a Teacher of the Year. It seems incongruous that I would be the teacher of the year at a school where I had only worked for one semester and where I wasn't even teaching. But a TOSA is a *teacher* on special assignment, and the staff recognized me, and it is one of my most cherished awards.

Cindy was my mentor, and I credit her with giving me the understanding and skills necessary to be a successful school administrator. We both believed I would be Cindy's assistant principal the next year. But it didn't happen. Sometime toward the end of the semester, she came back from the district office and told me that she was not going to get an assistant principal position. Not only that, but she was also losing the TOSA position. I would be going back to the comprehensive high school. She was upset because she wasn't going to have an assistant principal next year, but I like to think that she was upset about losing me. She had also learned that one of the three new assistant principals at my old school (the one who had come from the sister high school) was being demoted back to teacher and being sent back to her old school. The District figured that now that I had administrative experience, I could go back to my old school as the replacement for the demoted assistant principal. This was a win for me. Back to my old high school as an assistant principal, my year-long goal.

But I didn't want to leave Cindy. I knew she needed a math teacher next year, and I was proficient in algebra. Those were the days before "highly qualified" was a big deal. I told Cindy I was pretty good in math, and I asked her if I could stay at her school as a math teacher. "You would do that? You would give up being an assistant principal?" she asked. I told her I would. I told her I liked her school, and I wanted to stick around and continue to help. I think I pleased her. She said she could make it work.

That day I went home happy, but it didn't last. The next morning, I talked to Cindy. "I had a thought last night. If the district is expecting me to go back to Elsinore High School and be an assistant principal, what will they think about me staying here instead?" Cindy considered that for a moment and said, "Let me go find out." Cindy had her own mentor at the district office—the assistant superintendent in charge of curriculum and instruction—and I figured she'd ask the assistant superintendent about me staying at her school.

That afternoon, I went to Cindy's office to check to see what she'd been able to find out. I entered her office, but it was empty. I turned to leave her office and ran into her as she was entering. We were practically squeezed together, face-to-face, in the doorway. She immediately started talking about something or other—I don't remember what—and she prattled on for a while. I politely listened. I was about to scoot away from her, when she froze me in place. "And about that other thing we talked about. . ." I turned to face her again. Looking into my eyes, she said, "Political suicide." She teared up, and I think that caught her by surprise.

But she recovered properly and politely and said, “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going into the bathroom to cry.” She left me standing in the doorway, and my heart swelled.

I did the right thing—the only thing really. I went back to my high school and became an assistant principal. Three years later, the same principal who initially passed me over as an assistant principal was released from his duties and from the school district. I applied for his job, and after I was awarded the position and announced, I ran into Cindy in the parking lot outside the district office. She smiled and congratulated me and hugged me tightly. As she was hugging me, her voice cracked, she began to cry, and she said, “Jon, I am so happy for you. Nobody deserves this more than you.” It’s a moment I will never forget. What a great compliment from my mentor. I will forever love Cindy and forever be grateful for her. She gave me the foundation upon which I built my skills as a school administrator.

PURPOSEFUL ATTENTION

One of the skills I learned from Cindy is the importance of having an awareness of the school environment. As Principal, I needed to know everything going on in the school. I developed a habit of regularly and often checking on things. I learned to check on things even while in the performance of other duties. Every morning, when I arrived at school, I would do a visual check of the school to see if I spotted anything amiss. I did not include noting that in my morning ritual, but other times, during the course of the day, I would walk through the school with no specific goal other than to check things, and those times are included in this study.

Something that is taught in admin classes is MBWA, or Management by Walking (Wandering) Around, which is a style of business management that involves managers wandering around at random, in an unstructured manner, to check on employees, equipment, or the status of ongoing work. I am a proponent of it, and if I could have done it more, I would have. There were times when I left the office with the sole intention to walk about the school. I didn’t do it enough. Too often I would get bogged down with the minutiae of running the school, and I just didn’t seem to have the time to do it. That was probably a weakness on my part.

The times when I was walking about the school in the MBWA mode would fall under this category. This category also falls under a myriad of other activities. If I were supervising lunch or attending a basketball game, I was also checking on things. I was checking on things when I was updating my weekly calendar, helping our student board representative write her Board Report, and even when I attended the Board meetings.

The principal is expected to have his fingertips on the pulse of the school, and for that to happen a principal must always have his eyes and ears open, and he must be aware of the school community’s needs and desires. He can’t be the ostrich with his head in the sand; he needs to be the hawk alertly circling the field. During much of the principal’s day and while performing many of his duties, the principal is “checking things.” I averaged checking on something about once an

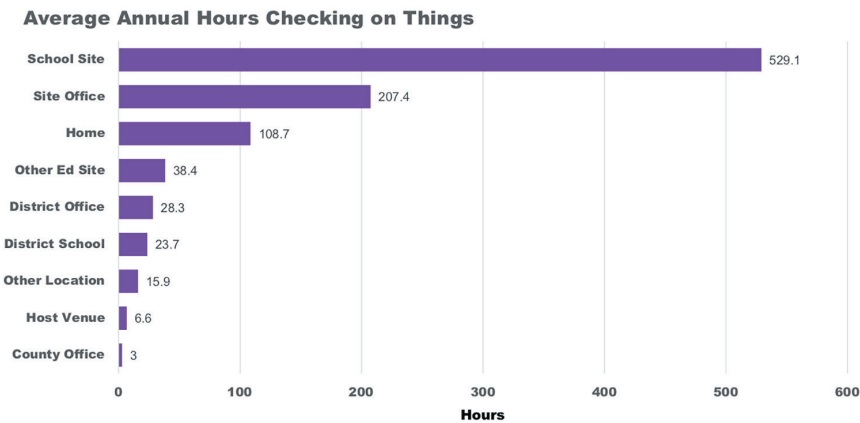


FIGURE 3.1.

hour during my workdays. Spread that out over a calendar year, and I averaged checking on something over five times a day. I spent an average of over two and half hours every day of the year checking on things. Squeeze that into my 220-day workyear, it would amount to nearly four and half hours per day. It took an average of nearly 30 minutes when I checked on things, and that varied depending on where I was. I was out of my office and about the school site when I did most of my checking, but I did a considerable amount of checking while I was in my office and from home. It took the least amount of time to check on things from

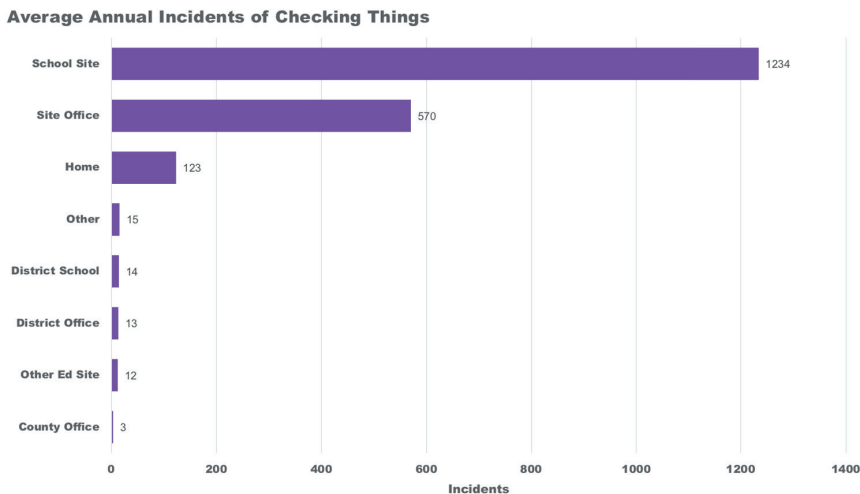


FIGURE 3.2.