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SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

1. WHO GOVERNS THE SCHOOL?

Two years ago when I first took charge of the school in which I am presently working I was faced with a serious problem.

The very first week I was there a few parents came to tell me that they were not happy with two teachers in whose classes their children were. They even asked me to remove these teachers and to replace them by two others whom they suggested by name.

I told them that this was not possible and explained to them that allocation of classes was my prerogative and that I would not allow anybody to encroach upon it. They, in their turn claimed that as parents they had a responsibility to ensure that their children were properly taught. They went away, but I had the feeling that they were not very convinced.

Some time later I received the visit of the president of the Parent Teachers' Association (PTA) who was accompanied by another member of the executive committee of the Association. The president told me that he had received representations from some parents expressing doubts regarding the competence of the two teachers I referred to earlier as well as a third one whom they wanted to be replaced on the ground that he was too harsh with his pupils.

It suddenly dawned upon me that I was confronted with a very serious problem which, if left unchecked, would eventually erode my authority in so far as the administration of the school was concerned.

I requested the president of the PTA to call an urgent meeting of the executive committee for the following week where the problem could be dealt with more fully.

In the meantime I found out from the teachers who had been working in the school long before I arrived, that for years it had been in the habit of many parents to interfere in administrative matters, either directly or through the PTA.

After careful consideration of the situation I thought it wise to meet first with my teachers.

Discussion

How should this principal handle:

1. His staff meeting?
2. His meeting with the PTA?

2. THE POLITICIAN

A school committee member is a well-to-do person who involves himself in active politics. He has relations holding important key posts in the Ministry. Without the knowledge of the headteacher, the committee member reprimands a staff member of the school and writes to one of his Ministry contacts suggesting that the teacher be transferred to another school.

The teacher concerned feels that this is improper and unprofessional. He maintains that only the headteacher who is his immediate official superior should do such things. He therefore approaches the headteacher who then becomes aware of the situation for the first time.

Since an examination class is involved and the examinations are a few short weeks away the headteacher is anxious to avoid the transfer and replacement of the teacher. He realises, however that the school committee member could be difficult to oppose.

Discussion

What strategy should the headteacher employ in order to retain the teacher?

3. RAIN

Once a District Education Officer was on tour, and he was astonished to see one of the teachers at home during school hours.

The District Education Officer angrily questioned the teacher as to why he wasn't at school. The teacher answered that the day was a rainy day, and all classrooms and even the teachers' houses were in poor condition. The teacher also said that the rain chased all children and teachers out of the classrooms.

The DEO called a meeting of the School Committee, and to his surprise he saw the rain pouring into the classrooms.

Discussion

1. Was the teacher right to remain at home because it was raining?
2. What should the headteacher of the school have done about the condition of the classrooms and teachers' houses?
3. Whose responsibility is it to maintain the classrooms and the teachers' quarters?
4. Does the school committee or the community have any responsibility for the maintenance of school buildings?
5. If you were the headteacher of the school what steps would you have taken to prevent this situation arising?
6. If you were the District Education Officer visiting the school what steps would you take to correct the situation?

4. TRAGEDY AND AFTERMATH

One day a headmaster sent a class six boy to post a letter at the post office. On the way back a fast moving truck knocked the boy down and crushed him to death. The father of the child with other connected relatives all rushed to the school to look for the headmaster. The headmaster had fled to the Government Station. The DEO stationed on the same island quickly transferred the headmaster to another school in a different island.

Discussion

1. Do you think that sending a child to post a letter is acceptable in school?
2. Who is to be blamed for this tragic incident?
3. Put yourself in the place of the headmaster; how would you feel about the accident?
4. Do you agree that posting the headmaster to another school is a good solution to the problem? State your reasons.
5. If you were sent to investigate and solve the problem what procedures would you take?

5. THE OUTSIDERS?

It was reported to the District Education Officer that the School Committee at a fairly isolated village was refusing to allow the children of one family to attend school. On making further enquiries he discovered that the family had recently moved to live in the village and were a different religious denomination from the rest of the community. The schools in the area had been constructed by community effort and the Committee had decided that since the parents of the children concerned had not contributed their labour towards the development of the school their children could not attend the school. The parents argued that they had contributed towards the development of the school in their last village. Feelings had already deteriorated to such an extent that the parents of the children had said that they would not contribute to the future development of the school either, and they would seek the help of Government to force the School Committee to permit their children to attend the school.

Discussion

1. Do you think that the decision of the School Committee was a reasonable one under the circumstances?
2. If you were headteacher of the school how would you attempt to resolve the problem?
3. If you were the District Education Officer would you need further information before you visited the school?
4. If you were the District Education Officer what measures would you take to solve the problem at the school?

6. 'LAY IS BEAUTIFUL'

The idea that lay people should play an active part in the governance of schools is commonly held in Third World countries. Many examples could be given of the activities of School Boards that have made major contributions to the welfare and direction of their schools. There could be, however, some doubts in relation to the Board of Governors of Ntali Secondary School.

It would be fair to say that, while this Board is well-intentioned it does not share the objectives and ideals of the principal. In particular it believes in economy and staffs the school on the basis of cheap pay. The result is that a conglomeration of doubtfully qualified people staff the school.

As an inevitable result the educational standards of the school are low, examination results are poor and there is a good deal of unrest amongst the parents because of this.

To add to the principal's anxieties the Board has appointed one of its own members to act as Bursar. He has not been slow to exploit the power of his office and indeed is suspected of conspiring with certain members of staff to weaken the principal's position and so improve his own.

Several former principals have solved their problems by moving to another school but Bennett Kay, the present incumbent, is determined not to be defeated.

Discussion

How might the principal tackle this problem?

7. COMMUNITIES IN CONFLICT

Sigi School serves two separate communities which are constantly opposed to each other. In village politics, religion and social activities they always hold opposing views.

When one party is helping the principal the other group engages in continuous criticism and sometimes bitter opposition. The problem is not helped by the fact that the staff is also divided on racial grounds while the pupils simply reflect the attitudes of their parents.

Mark Solon, although a member of the dominant community, is nevertheless concerned to bring about a reconciliation of interests.

Discussion

What lines of action are open to the principal (both positive and negative)?

8. PICTURE THEATRE

On arrival at his new school a principal found that the behaviour of the children was really bad. A fortnight later, a member of the Management Committee came to his office and requested the principal's assistance in stopping the children from attending picture shows at night.

On investigation the principal found that the complaint was justified. (1) The school children were found in the theatre almost every night of the week. (2) Parents had been supplying money to their children in order to attend night shows.

There was, however, a complication. The theatre owner had for a long time been a generous supporter of the school and there was still an urgent need for funds.

Discussion

1. What are the issues in this case?
2. How should the principal resolve the situation?

9. THE NONCONFORMIST

In order to husband the scarce resources available for Primary Education in the island republic of San Sebastian it is customary to insist that the parents of each village should build and maintain the school.

Because of the growth in numbers in the north of the island the school at Herato needed two extra classrooms. Led by William, the headteacher, the members of staff took part in the building operation together with all but one of the men of the village.

The exception, Hamoto, believing that the Government and not the village people should provide the school rooms declined to help and instead went fishing. This did not prevent him from presenting his second son for enrolment as soon as the new building was ready.

A meeting of the School Committee condemned Hamoto's actions in no uncertain terms. The chairman was deputed to wait on the headteacher and insist that Hamoto's son not be enrolled. He was also instructed to inform the headteacher that, should the boy be enrolled, the other parents would withdraw their support from the school.

William found himself in a dilemma. Ministry regulations obliged him to admit Hamoto's son who had reached the age of 6 years. Ministry regulations also obliged him to take serious note of any decisions of his School Committee. It would reflect badly on his own competence should the parent body carry out its threat.

Discussion

1. What are the issues in this case?
2. What advice would you give to William?

10. A PARENTAL OUTCRY

Fifteen year old May was a pupil at one of the leading secondary schools in Territory 'Y'. One of the literature texts from which Mary was studying in order to prepare for an important examination contained obscene language. Mary's parents discovered the book and complained bitterly to the school and the local Director of Education. Her parents contacted other parents and they in turn complained, and threatened to withdraw their children from school if immediate action was not taken to ban the use of that text and all other texts which contained such obscene language.

The teachers of the particular school openly condemned the stand taken by the parents. They (the teachers) claimed that in everyday life the average fifteen-year-old hears all kinds of words, and in some cases uses them at home as well as on the streets.

The teachers further accused the parents of using even worse words in the presence of their children, and said their complaints were only designed to tarnish the good name of the school. The teachers also claimed that parents were being prejudiced against books produced by authors of the region, and would have never reacted in such a way if the same words were included in texts from the European or North American markets.

The principal of the school supported the view of the teachers and told the parents that they could keep their children home as long as they wished.

The local Education Board met with parents and promised that the books would be banned. The Board did not invite teachers to air their views, but rushed ahead and suspended some whose names were submitted by parents. The principal was never suspended, or even reprimanded.

Discussion

1. Were the parents justified in their approach in handling the situation?
2. Did the teachers deal with the matter in a professional way?
3. Should the principal have taken such a stand?
4. How appropriate was the action taken by the local Education Board?

11. INTERFERENCE

Jonas Fanafi was posted as a principal to a recently built Junior Secondary School and after serving there for a few months found out that the school on the whole was not functioning as smoothly as it should be. This was mainly due to the Management Committee under the leadership of an energetic but stubborn, hot tempered and aggressive School Manager who frequently came and interfered with the internal administration of the school.

1. He attacked and condemned a teacher in the presence of other members of the staff or students.
2. He condemned the untidiness of the classrooms and compound without consulting Jonas or the staff on duty first.
3. He criticised the arrangement of furniture and library book shelves.
4. He unnecessarily cut down school orders even if the allocation from the department was still available e.g. textbooks grant, school furniture grant etc.
5. He employed or sent the typist/clerk paid by the department to go and work somewhere else without informing the principal.
6. He used the school facilities without informing Jonas first.

Jonas had noted that there already were divisions of opinion within the Management Committee. Some fully supported the actions of the School Manager but others were unhappy with the situation.

Since the principal depended on the Management Committee for resources not provided by the Ministry and since Ministry resources were channelled through the Committee he knew that the situation was delicate.

Discussion

What did Jonas do to resolve this problem?

12. A HEADTEACHER RECALLS

During my administration at M _____ School I experienced many problems. The school yard for example was not fenced, and every now and then acts of vandalism were committed either in the school yard or in the classrooms.

The school itself comprised four blocks, the fourth being situated about 200 ft. from the main building close to the (1) main road, (2) a housing estate, and (3) the village playground. As there was no watchman, the school buildings were left at the mercy of the vandals. Very often doors and window panes were broken. Often teachers complained to me that their dusters were lost, teaching aids taken away or torn off, their drawers and cupboards were either forced or searched. It was, consequently, quite impossible for them to keep their belongings and those of the school safely in their respective classrooms. Caretakers also reported that they always came across cigarette ends, damaged chairs and tables. Nonsense and injurious words were written on the blackboards. Such acts, they said, always happened during week ends.

One Monday morning I found the classrooms in a chaotic mess. Some of the teachers told me that it was impossible for me to put an end to these acts of vandalism, as they had existed prior to my attachment there. Nevertheless, I had to do something in order to put an end to those dirty games which penalised both pupils and teachers.

During the morning assembly, I talked to the pupils about those mischievous acts. I held a staff meeting, and requested all teachers to give civic lessons on vandalism, its causes and effects. I also took the opportunity to declare a 'Civics Week'. In the meantime I summoned the parents to an assembly during the same week, and talked to them about the various activities of the school, laying stress on the acts of vandalism committed at school. I also drew their attention to the fact that their wards (the teenagers not attending school) should not be on school premises after school hours, during week ends and school holidays. I pointed out that if they did so, it would be at their own risk. I also explained that a school is an institution of prestige in a village, that government spends a lot of money on every school, and that they should help in the upkeep of the buildings.

For two or three weeks everything went well, but soon the problems cropped up again. Disgusted with the situation I called at the Police Station and made a declaration about the state of affairs at school, and I requested the Police Inspector to help us by sending a patrol during the night and week ends.

The following Monday morning when I came to school, eight to ten parents stood on the school verandah. I thought they had called on me for some minor problem in which some teachers might have been involved. As I was alighting from my car, some pupils told me that "some school children have been arrested". On my way to the office I greeted the parents and asked them about their problems.

"Our children have been arrested since last night, they were in the school doing nothing," they said. They besought me to help for the release of their sons as they had come to see me at the request of the Police Inspector. I bluntly told them that I could not do anything as it entirely depended on the police, and that their children were themselves responsible for their arrest.

Some of the parents started shedding tears. I sympathised with them and told them that I would try to help. So I requested the Senior Teacher to take charge and went to the Police Station where in fact I found the culprits (all teenagers) in the cells. Being aware that their future would be at stake, if they were prosecuted, both the Police Inspector and myself agreed to their release after a severe warning in the presence of their parents.

Those incidents gave me food for thought. It seemed to me that there was a lack of communication between parents and teachers. I decided

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Complete this account.