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Voices of Women in the Field--External Factors Can Affect Goals

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Voices of Women in the Field

External Factors Can Affect Goals

Nancy Fuller

I prided myself as being one who embraced change. I often became disgusted with my fellow teachers when they dragged their feet and resisted district initiatives. I also believed in setting goals and then managing the tasks that allows one to reach the goals. I thought it was merely a matter of purposeful planning, effort, and time that allowed one to meet goals. However, through a chain of events and life's hard knocks, I discovered that the goal premise did not necessarily work.

During the mid 1980s through 1994, middle school education was my passion. After being a middle school teacher for 13 years and reading the research regarding education for the preadolescent (10-14 year olds), I came to believe that this group of students needed a different type of education than their peers in elementary school and high school.

My second passion was curriculum. I believed that every school system needed to design a seamless set of learner objectives in each subject area with a K-12 delivery system that ensured mastery. I believed that we, as teachers, could no longer teach the topics we loved and then avoid those that were of little or no interest. I believed that 80% of what was taught should be based on curricula rather than random decisions made by each teacher. I believed that what was taught should be based on best practice and the needs of the students in the school system. It should form an abstract spiral that built on foundational skills acquired in the elementary grades, enhanced in middle level, and finally polished in the high school discipline areas.

These beliefs drove my dream—my goal. My goal was to be a middle level principal, one who assured the intellectual, physical, emotional and social needs of the preadolescent were met. Consequently, it seemed natural—logical that my goal should also drive my dissertation. Thus in 1995, I designed my proposal so that I could develop a grounded theory about opening a newly constructed middle school building. I learned a great deal about this concept from principals around the United States who had successfully accomplished this very thing.

About the Author

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In 1997, I completed my doctoral work. However, I live in a small town where my husband has a law practice. I felt I had approximately a 35-40 mile radius in which to find my dream job. Unfortunately, there were only 3 middle schools within my designated boundaries. The middle school dream seemed destined to be put aside for a while.

However, in 1998, standards, locally created assessments, and accountability became the buzzwords in teacher meetings. My district's administrative team felt the district needed someone to guide and coordinate the Nebraska initiative. Thus I became the district's curriculum director.

Curriculum was my second love and the position was a part of the district administrative team. It seemed like the next best thing to the middle school principalship. During the three years I was in this position, I was able to guide our district teachers in developing K-12 curricula and supporting assessments in the core areas. Our district also used data from the assessment to create school improvement goals. It was an exciting time of change – a time of improving instruction for our students.

However, in the 2000-2001 school year, our district was faced with major economic constraints. Cuts had to be made. A curriculum director was not an accreditation necessity. Thus my position was dissolved. I was in limbo for several months. Should I go back to a middle school classroom? Should I try to teach at a neighboring state college? Should I expand my radius so I could find another position in a metropolitan area. Eventually, the middle school principal decided to retire. I applied and was given the position. Wow! How exciting! I now had the opportunity to accomplish my goal.

Unfortunately, my dream was short-lived. Economic conditions in our community continued to plummet. The school board ran a tax-override election. If passed, the board would be able to raise the tax levy above the one set by the State of Nebraska. However, the override was defeated. The board of education decided to dissolve our middle school, move the 7th and 8th graders to the high school building and the 6th graders to the elementary.

Because of this decision, my position, as well as others were cut. I was in limbo again!

At this point, tension was high in the district. I was depressed and disheartened. What had become of our district? I felt like our patrons no longer valued and supported the quality of education that we had provided in the past.

As before, I began to examine my options. Then in April, the high school principal decided to resign. The superintendent asked me to take the principalship of the 7-12 high school. He promised an assistant principal would be hired.

I was not sure I had the skills to do so. I had never taught at the high school level. I knew virtually nothing about athletics and activities. Assisting seniors with graduation requirements, and scholarships, seemed like a daunting task. However, I felt an obligation to the 7th and 8th grade students, so I accepted the position. The assistant principal and I began to design a middle school within a high school.

This is my third year in the high school principalship. It has not been easy merging two staffs with differing beliefs about instructional delivery. It has not been easy to maintain middle level programs with limited personnel and a building that was not designed to accommodate separateness for preadolescents. However, we keep tinkering with schedules, curricula, and instructional delivery methods. We are improving and we are coming together as a staff.

In regard to advice for beginning administrators, I urge you to examine and learn about education as a whole. The political landscape is rocky now. The demands from our public are great! We, as educators, will be required to change. We will need to be flexible, and perhaps more importantly, resilient. However, we can do it. It must be done for the sake of our children.