

Reviving E

Would a 1960s-era principal have what it takes to handle the job of today's principal?

By Barbara Markle and Stephanie VanKoevering

The year was 1967. American life was punctuated with reports of war protests and race riots, Sidney Poitier was coming to dinner, and the Beatles were experimenting with more than just their music. And in an elementary school in the Pacific Northwest, an anthropologist and a principal began working together to create a fascinating time capsule for future school leaders.

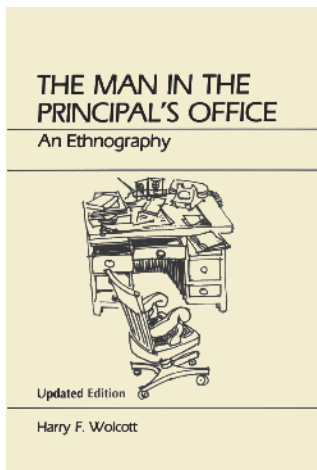
For two years, Edward Bell (a pseudonym) allowed many aspects of his life to be observed and recorded in astonishing detail. The resulting book, *The Man in the Principal's Office* by Harry Wolcott (1973), presents virtually everything there is to know about Bell, from his personal background to his daily routines, the contents of his desk, and the exchanges that occurred during staff, student, and administrator meetings. The opinions of Bell's colleagues, superiors, and subordinates are captured, as if in amber, amid the broader educational context of the late 1960s.

Throughout the book, a clear picture of Bell emerges. He is shown as a serious, committed leader who brings a strong moral purpose to his work. He is a churchgoing man, frugal, gregarious, and very positive. He shows talent for knowing how to balance the wishes and objectives of his staff, district, and community against the needs of the K-6 students who attend his school. He spends a great deal of time in meetings, is relatively innovative within a set of prescribed structures, and stays organized. He is the first to unlock his building's doors in the morning and the last to drive home each night. He knows the inner workings of his school so well that he is even able to train an incoming office secretary in her daily tasks and responsibilities. Like a 19th-century shopkeeper, he is at once identified by — and identified with — the William Howard Taft Elementary School, where he plans to remain until he retires.

But the world of Edward Bell was then a small, highly localized one. There were no high-stakes tests, global comparisons, or government sanctions for low academic achievement.

What would happen if Edward Bell woke up one morning to find that 45 years had fallen away as he slept? Would he have the competencies necessary to be successful in 2013?

Having worked with hundreds of school leaders and other practitioners in the field since 2007, we think we have a good idea what Bell would need to be effective today. Let's take a look.



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Edward Bell



1967

It is crucial to recognize the force that the setting exerts on a principal's behavior. Ed seemed to be moved about through most of his day by little problems brought to him or created for him by others rather than by any grand design of his own of what he wished to accomplish . . . A principal who cannot cope effectively with the range of strangely diversified demands described here would be ill-suited to the principalship (pp. 34, 177).

2013

The principalship still requires adaptability above all else. The complex, responsive nature of school leadership makes it difficult to predict what each day will bring, and successful principals are those who can comfortably adjust when necessary.

This work, however, is more difficult and complex than it appears on the surface. Today's principal must do more than put out fires; he must also anticipate and lead change under the heavy mantle of the shifting metaphorical leadership roles placed upon him by his staff, district, community, and society. The responsibility for a school's success or failure is now attributed in very public (and statutory) ways to the personal success or failure of the principal at its helm.

Ed Bell would be shocked to learn how much more adaptable he'd need to become as a school leader today. In addition to serving as an inspiring agent of change, passionate leader, effective disciplinarian,

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organizational whiz, and compassionate mentor, today's principal is also viewed as a social architect, economic catalyst, servant, and moral agent. At the same time, many Americans expect a school principal to function as the keeper of the flame, protecting our hometown schools and/or children against the tempests of a tumultuous, rapidly changing society.

Even as Ed Bell, newly revived, prepared to consider these broad metaphorical expectations for his work, he'd also have to plan for an even longer and more diverse array of tasks and functions to be carried out on a daily basis. As Beck and Murphy (1993) have noted, a school principal can easily become overwhelmed in the face of all that is required:

Principals driven by the charge to improve the quality of life for all people might conceivably have difficulty knowing how to prioritize time and activities. . . . Perhaps practicing principals and academicians, when confronted with unclear goals and seemingly insoluble problems, turn their attention to that which can be controlled, even if this takes them into the realm of the trivial or unimportant (p. 199).

More and more, the principalship is becoming less of an isolated executive activity and more of a flexible leadership endeavor that draws upon the best skills and assets of an entire school leadership team.

This type of micromanaging behavior can often be seen in low-performing schools where beleaguered principals cling to the handful of activities they still believe they can carry out with complete success. It is conceivable that Edward Bell, upon awakening from his 45-year nap, could make the same mistake. Evidence left in the Bell time capsule, however, indicates that he possesses the specific competencies required to remain both resolute and adaptable. They are:

- A clear sense of his own capabilities and an aptitude for “buffering himself from the conflicting and sometimes antagonistic views” others might hold about him;
- A clear sense of ownership and purpose about his work, coupled with the ability to effectively plan, prioritize, and improve specific initiatives; and
- The willingness to make specific, intentional efforts to cultivate healthy, trusting relationships with staff, which gave him reserves of professional trust and support to fall back on when necessary.

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1967

The way in which principals achieve “autonomy” [within the district] appears to be universally recognized and practiced: keep to a minimum the dissatisfaction that might threaten it. . . . [keep] complaints to a minimum . . . do nothing that is controversial . . . just go ahead with the program without making a huge issue (p. 209).

2013

Keeping complaints to a minimum is one of the chief, universal, and timeless behaviors of bureaucratic leadership. In 1967, Bell worked to shield his staff from outside pressures so the work of instruction could occur without undue interference; this type of effort is still undertaken by many principals today.

In an era of high-stakes accountability, however, the nature and variety of the “complaints” principals must entertain have changed considerably. Ed Bell would likely be flabbergasted to see Taft Elementary School's student assessment results immediately available on the front page of his local newspaper each year, with attendant statutory consequences.

At the same time, Bell might be interested to see that, in many instances, strong student results can offset complaints as a pathway toward day-to-day professional autonomy. Consider, for instance, the case of former D.C. Schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee, who generated a level of opposition (both internal and external) that would have been unthinkable to one for whom complaints were uncomfortable. No matter where one falls in support of or opposition to Rhee, the early results generated under her leadership bought her the time and breathing room — indeed, the professional autonomy — she needed to press forward with several key initiatives.

But there is another noteworthy leadership element embedded in the 1967 approach to avoiding complaints, and that is the implied avoidance of communication. During the two-year period covered in *The Man in the Principal's Office*, Bell introduced several progressive programs and ideas into his school, including some aspects of a sex education curriculum. These changes were made, however, with barely a whisper. The hushed nature of these innovations would be unthinkable in today's era of transparent communications and could have resulted in Bell's dismissal under certain circumstances.

The old aversion to widespread communication also has another unintended consequence, and that is actually less autonomy. Lacking information, the public will ask more and more questions, resulting in additional reporting requirements for schools. Schools then find themselves pushed into a posi-

tion of spending all their time on compliance, rather than focusing on and communicating about performance. Indeed, that is precisely the predicament many schools face today.

Ed Bell is a hard worker who found his way to administration through teaching and who learned on the job.

It may be true that the widespread availability of data and other school information is the most pronounced change Bell would face in 2013. He would need to build his capacities for:

- Leading his staff to understand and use available data to improve instruction;
- Making information available — internally and externally — to staff, students, parents, and the community in ways that engender trust and support for the school and its programs; and
- Becoming bold, nimble, and confident in his leadership decisions, and communicating this confidence broadly.

1967

The case study . . . is particularly notable for its attention to the network of relationships occurring between the principal and his staff, parents, officials of the school system, and the children. In this context, it is clear that the principal's role is that of mediator rather than innovator or commander. [As one teacher said,] "Ed really gets in and works with us . . . we are always evaluating the kinds of things we've done and how we could improve situations for ourselves and for the children both" (pp. viii, 289).

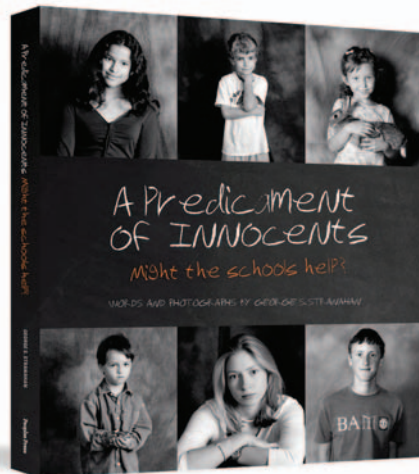
2013

More and more, the principalship is becoming less of an isolated executive activity and more of a flexible leadership endeavor that draws upon the best skills and assets of an entire school leadership team. Back in 1967, Ed Bell was working to develop precisely this type of structure with his staff for the benefit of the students in his school. Given his approach, it appears Bell would have no difficulty adapting to a 21st-century educational leadership model.

Murphy and Louis (1994) capture this change well in their summary of research conducted by Glickman, Allen, and Lunsford:

The principals also indicated that their roles had changed [over time] from being the sole decision maker to an equal participant in the decision-making

process. . . . the notion that the principal was no longer the "fixer" but an "enabler" was a noted difference in the way principals viewed their own roles in the school. . . . [The observation that principals] routinely change positions in the decision-making processes of



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SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO AT BOULDER

*A Predicament
OF INNOCENTS
Might the schools help?*

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORGE S. STRANAHAN

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the school — in one instance at the forefront, at another in the background, and still later on the sideline — brings life to the idea of “leading from the center” (p. 267).

David Hoppey, whose 2006 dissertation sought to revisit *The Man in the Principal's Office* in an era of high-stakes accountability, brings additional insight to the work Bell did four decades ago. Hoppey describes today's principal as “lubricating the human machinery” by caring for and personally investing in staff.

Three separate but overlapping characteristics of [this investment] include . . . (1) buffering teachers and staff from external pressure, (2) nurturing teachers and staff, and (3) promoting teacher growth. The goal and underlying moral purpose of these actions are directly related to improving the lives of teachers and students (p. 98).

The hushed nature of some of Ed Bell's innovations would be unthinkable in today's era of transparent communications.

Our work at Michigan State University has underscored the positive effect of strong leadership teams, particularly in schools facing performance challenges. We have identified the characteristics of high-achieving schools and developed programming that helps set teams on a path toward success. We've also identified the characteristics of effective principals, characteristics we see time and again in *The Man in the Principal's Office*:

- Championing instructional priorities and cultivating relationships that encourage broad staff and student participation in the school's continuous instructional improvement process;
- Investing in professional supports;
- Dedicating staff meeting time and focusing resources on key instructional priorities; and
- Promoting a shared understanding of high-quality instruction.

1967


Often [school administrators], categorically dismiss all their professional training . . . the “conventional wisdom” of the elementary principalship, in contrast to a formal body of knowledge, is carried about in the minds of its successful and experienced practitioners. It is transmitted verbally and, for the most part, informally, to succeeding generations. It is an oral literature (p. 198, 221).

We can see that Edward Bell, waking up 45 years after the study of his work began, would have the essential competencies and approaches required to continue his successful work, even if his school was low-performing when he awoke. In fact, a comparison between Bell's leadership characteristics and the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards shows a man who is well ahead of his time.

But Bell did not deliberately seek, cultivate, or develop these characteristics. Indeed, he is responding to his surroundings and the needs he perceives in the people around him. He is a hard worker who found his way to administration through teaching and who learned on the job. He would consider his growth as a leader to be happenstance rather than a deliberate series of events.

There is much to be learned from Bell's competencies as we seek to develop these same characteristics in other educational leaders working in the field. When it comes to student learning, we can't afford to rely on happenstance or inborn traits. In Michigan State University's Office of K-12 Outreach, we are working with practitioners to cultivate and distill the “oral literature” of Bell — along with many others — into a defined series of competencies and skills that can be taught.

Indeed, this is the fundamental purpose in waking Edward Bell from his four-decade slumber. With the lessons and observations gleaned from his daily life and work all those years ago, we add his insight/wisdom/expertise to the timeless body of research about what constitutes effective teaching, learning, and leadership.

Thank you, Mr. Bell, and good night once more. 

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