

Principal's Professional File

My Personal Educational Philosophy

Susan R. Forbes

9/18/02

I believe a child's education should be as individualized and unique as each student. Students come to us with a vast amount of knowledge gained throughout his or her life experiences. I think it is a teacher's job to acknowledge the richness in this- and allow the student to demonstrate their individuality whenever possible. In order to accomplish this- a truly nurturing educator will allow a student many ways to differentiate the lesson and/or curriculum to best suit all needs. Unfortunately- too often this struggle for individuality by a student is seen by administration and teacher's as disrespect and defiance... which is a waste of original potential. I do not believe a student's potential should be evaluated on who best sits in a chair quietly while filling out worksheets.

A valuable education should be active, interactive and exciting. Never should it be reduced to busy work and bubble sheets. Which brings up an additional topic of testing and accountability, In today's society, testing and standards have become political platforms and often control a district's purse strings. This is especially unfortunate in the case of Title I schools. Because of the broad range of cultural and social economics, these schools have a much higher number of academically challenged students. These students come in testing much lower than the national or state average, and often they remain below the norm. However; if a school (and a teacher) do an exceptional job with these challenging students, the kids will show up to school, and often gain more than a year's growth per academic year. Too bad this will never be enough... and these kids will still fall below the expected scores for graduation. This is why I stress the standards in my classroom daily. Although I believe students do learn best by active exploration of curriculum materials in a socially supportive environment- I regularly practice test-taking strategies using standardized materials. In this way I hope to provide not only the best learning opportunities for my students, but also to set them up for success in our "test crazy" society.

" Nothing becomes real until it is experienced. " Keats



Eileen Hughes and
Sue Forbes

Eileen Hughes is Associate Professor of Teaching & Learning, University of Alaska Anchorage. Sue Forbes is School Principal and a former teacher, Anchorage School District.

Keeping Alaskan Tradition Alive

Building Relationships in the Curriculum

"He helps the kids learn about stuff that they don't know about other people. They [the children] wish that their dad would come to school.

So my dad is important."

—Kavik, a kindergarten student

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ith the comment above, Kavik, a 6-year-old student in Ms. Forbes's kindergarten class, is clearly expressing his pride about his father's role in his classroom. His words reflect the importance of building community and school relationships, from the perspective of a young child.

Ms. Forbes's classroom offered university practicum students a place to document children's learning in order to understand the process for planning curriculum. Educators from the much-lauded preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, have inspired teachers in the United States to deepen their understanding of how documentation can be used as an "inquiry process" (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). The practicum students were introduced to elements of the Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998) and were learning to observe, document, interpret, reflect on, and plan subsequent experiences for children. They learned to develop classroom experiences that emerged from the children's interests, questions, and ideas, which is consistent with a "social constructivist" view to education (Rinaldi, 1998).

Ms. Forbes was a university graduate who served as a mentor teacher. The university instructor served as a mentor to both the university students and the classroom teacher. All of the participants (teachers, university students, faculty, and children) were co-learners who reflected on their learning, which was made visible through documentation (Fu, Stremmel, & Hill, 2002). The university instructor, practicum students, and classroom teacher videotaped and photographed children's actions, and collected written observations of the children, as they studied ways to plan curriculum that reflected what they learned from listening to the children (Hughes, 2000, 2002).

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This article reviews varied types of relationships that were formed when a kindergarten class embarked on a study of the Native Alaskan art of carving. The public school kindergarten classroom, located in Anchorage, Alaska, drew from a community with a high population of Hispanic, African American, and Native Alaskan families with different cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. Anchorage is the largest city in Alaska; with approximately 260,000 residents, it is home to half the population of the state. The very diverse population in Anchorage comes from within and outside Alaska. Thus, the importance of building relationships and connections among the people in Alaska is critical.

By sharing experiences and artifacts from home, the children were sharing their "stories." Thus, a group of children from diverse backgrounds were building a classroom community.

Relationship of Community to the Curriculum

Classroom curriculum that can reflect the authentic history, traditions, or interests of the children's community can offer a rich context for instruction. Ms. Forbes was intentional in her efforts to build a classroom community that offered a comfortable context for developing relationships among children of different abilities, cultures, and lifestyles.

Ms. Forbes's curriculum provided opportunities to build upon the children's own ideas or interests that might emerge from their activities during the day. She paid careful attention to including the children's cultures, family traditions, or interests into the classroom curriculum. When Kavik shared an old carving book, explaining that his grandfather and father were Native Alaskan wood carvers and used the book as a resource for their artwork, the book remained in the classroom for several weeks and Ms. Forbes noted the children's attention to the very old and special book. The children discussed pictures in the book, and Ms. Forbes decided to acknowledge their attention through a large-group discussion. She invited the children to talk about any carvings they might find in their homes.

- Brian: When we went to my dad's job, they made snow carvings. It was about eagles, birds, and different things.
- Cory Jo: My dad carves snow.
- Chelsey: My grandpa, when he was still alive . . . when he was 60 years old, he used to carve a lot.

- Ms. Forbes: Do you have those at your house?
- Chelsey: I do, but I don't think my grandma wants me taking them to school, because they are in the china cabinet.
- Ms. Forbes: Perhaps you could take a camera and take a picture of that. . . .

The children, university students, and teachers collected and shared artifacts, books, and newspaper articles about carving. The interest in carving spread among the children as their collections from home were displayed in the classroom. The university students and classroom teacher met to discuss their observations of the children and saw potential for learning in encouraging further the children's interest in the carving experiences. The university students and teacher made a place in the classroom to display the wood carvings as well as an area where the children might experiment with carving tools. The teacher added blocks of wax and plastic tools in the area. The university students wanted to encourage family participation in the curriculum and decided to invite Kavik's father, Mr. Hartly, to share his artwork with the class. The children composed a letter, and the practicum student followed up with a call to the family.

Ms. Forbes looks for ways to include the families into her program, and so she used this opportunity to value the artifacts important to the children's families. She made the cultures and traditions of the children's families visible and recognized their contributions in the classroom curriculum. By sharing experiences and artifacts from home, the children were sharing their

"stories." Thus, a group of children from diverse backgrounds were building a classroom community.

Relationship of Classroom Environment to Curriculum

The collected artifacts, books, and carving materials on display in the classroom offered children the opportunity to continue their explorations, invited further discussion, and united the children over a common project. To assist the children in their own carving, the teacher provided a few bars of soap, plastic knives, and wooden sticks; the children were asked to bring more soap bars. The children sorted the materials and organized the area. Inclusion in the organization of the carving area encouraged the children to claim ownership of their classroom and, thereby, contributed to their continued interest in the emerging project.

The children experimented with the plastic knives and wooden sticks; after a few weeks, a teacher brought in authentic carving tools. The teachers noted that the children's actions with the tools (pounding and drilling holes) were ways of exploring the properties of the wax and soap. They observed that the children generally approached the carving without a plan. The teachers discussed the children's use of the tools and wondered how best to support the children in this new medium. The university students considered their observations of the children's actions as they determined ways to support the learning environment. For example, as the children had experience with the plastic knives, the teachers determined that exposure to the actual tools might be useful. Also, after Mr. Hartly's carving demonstration, the children began using the tools differently.

The area for the carving artifacts and materials became a place where the children could revisit what they

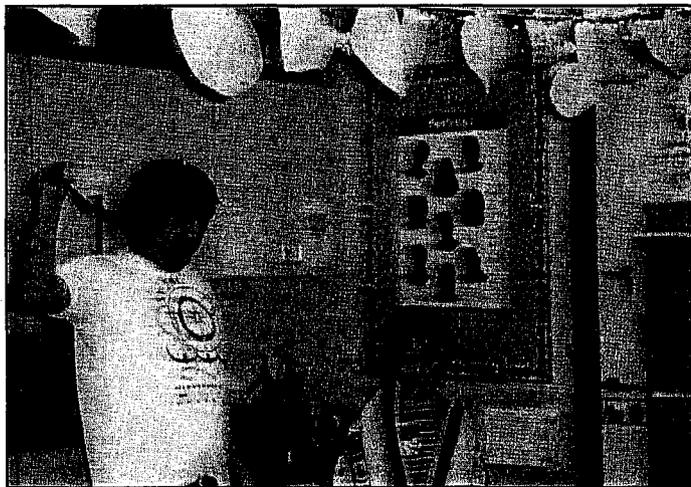


Figure 1. Kavik's father, Mr. Hartly, prepares for his carving demonstration.

had learned about carving, and it encouraged continued attention to the carving project. The teachers noted how experiences with the carving area led the children to design other areas of the room as gathering places for other study topics. The areas became special interest areas with books, materials, and paper for drawing out ideas. Meanwhile, the classroom teacher noted that her preplanned lessons on a "space unit" were not of interest to the children, as they continued to display more interest in the art of carving.

The children used Kavik's carving book as a resource when using the carving tools. The book was very old, and the teacher instructed them to be very careful when handling the book. Thereafter, the book became a valuable and respected item in the classroom.

Thus, the area for displaying artifacts and materials from home became a shared place for the children that linked classroom experiences to home life. The university students and teacher connected the classroom environment (space and materials) to the curriculum, and they intentionally involved the children in the process.

Relationship of Family to Curriculum

Mr. Hartly, Kavik's father, accepted the invitation to come to the classroom and share his knowledge about the art of carving (see Figure 1). He had Kavik wear a wooden mask and sketched a plan of the design he wanted to carve (see Figure 2), explaining the importance of drawing a plan or diagram (see Figure 3). Using a bar of soap and a knife, Mr. Hartly showed the children a few carving techniques (see Figure 4). The children watched with interest and were attentive to each step of the process. Even the school principal attended the presentation, making Mr. Hartley's visit even more special for the class.

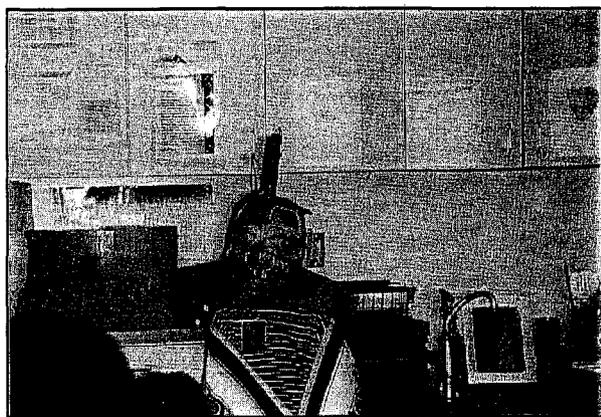


Figure 2. Mr. Hartly fits Kavik with a mask.

Mr. Hartly's classroom presentation was not an isolated "parent visit," because Ms. Forbes continued to revisit the experiences with Mr. Hartly. During the morning circle, for example, Ms. Forbes wrote the children's ideas down as they discussed Mr. Hartly's visit.

Ms. Forbes: So he brought many things. So Kavik brought the idea to the classroom. Now we are investigating. We are trying things out about it. What was of interest to you?

Forrest: About how he . . . drew it . . . then he carved. So he could trace, so he knows how to cut it out. And he is careful with the knife.



Figure 3. Mr. Hartly draws a diagram for planning his carving.

Forrest's observation was important to his classmates, because he recognized the need to plan and to sketch out an idea or diagram before using the tools. The children also noted the way the knife was held and how various marks were used on the soap.

After Mr. Hartly's visit, Ms. Forbes reminded the children that Mr. Hartly used a diagram to plan his carving. The children had been studying design patterns, and the teacher took the opportunity to link her curricular goals to the learning experience offered by Mr. Hartly's demonstration, revisiting how he used the concept of symmetry in his design. She left Mr. Hartly's diagrams displayed in the classroom for the children to examine and to provide suggestions for their own work. She then directed the children to use their journals to draw and write ideas about what they found interesting from Mr. Hartly's visit.

The shared experience of Mr. Hartly's visit was significant in terms of efforts to include families in the curriculum. Kavik noted, "They [the other children] wish that their dad could come to school. . . ." Ms. Forbes recognized an authentic and meaningful way to link her families with her curricular goals.

Relationships Among Children

The practicum students and teachers observed the children as they studied Mr. Hartly's drawings and as the children recorded entries in their journals. The children formed groups to discuss Mr. Hartly's ideas. Curtis had an opportunity to fill in a child who had been absent the day of Mr. Hartly's visit. Pointing to Mr.

Hartly's drawing, he said, "He first did this. He put a cross. Then he put Kavik on here." Curtis referred to the way that Mr. Hartly drew quadrants on the paper to guide his placement of Kavik's mask. Curtis applied the points Ms. Forbes had discussed earlier regarding the use of quadrants as a guide to keep their designs symmetrical. The practicum students and teachers readily noted how the experience with the carving brought the children together. Ms. Forbes's classroom already had a climate that supported children working together; it was evident that they enjoyed collaborating with each other over a common interest or project.

By studying their documentation, the teachers were

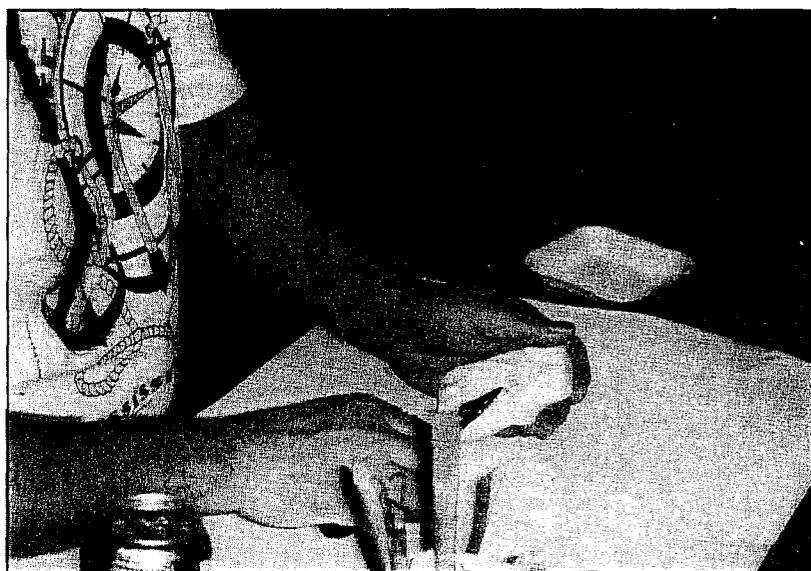


Figure 4. Mr. Hartly demonstrates the use of the knife for carving.

able to identify specific ways the children worked as a team. For example, the practicum students noted how the teaching strategies were transferred to the children and used with each other. When the children had difficulty spelling a word, Ms. Forbes might ask the children to look around the room to find a letter that sounded the same. Note below how the children helped each other spell Kavik's name when writing about Mr. Hartly's visit.

Lawrence, sitting next to Cherish, asks, "How do you spell 'Kavik'?" Cherish, using the strategy she observed from her teacher, responds, "Look around the room for his name." Lawrence searches the room to find something with Kavik's printed name. He goes to a basket containing cards with the

children's name. Cherish watches Lawrence from her chair. She tells him, "Go over there," pointing to the children's cubbies. Lawrence finds Kavik's name and takes his journal over to write "Kavik."

The observation above and those that follow exemplify the ways the teacher and children serve to scaffold learning in the classroom (Berk & Winsler, 1995). In the examples below, children with varying abilities support each other to achieve higher levels of performance through their collaborative activities (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

Three boys are sitting on the floor with a diagram of Mr. Hartly's. Jake, who has been identified with a disability, finds it difficult to use words to communicate and has difficulty in group situations. As Jake draws on his paper, the two other boys watch him work. The two boys exchange ideas through gestures, words, and drawing. At one point, the boys try to support Jake by explaining how to draw one of his lines. The conversation continues, and the boys support Jake.

Curtis: Draw them on right here.
 David: He did a [points to Jake's page]
 Curtis: [Writes on Jake's page]

Jake also saw himself as a mentor to others, as illustrated in the following observation when he used the carving tools.

Meadow: Can I have a turn?
 Teacher: When it is your turn, you can ask him [referring to Jake].
 Meadow: Jake, may I have a turn?
 Jake: I show you. . . Like this . . . [He uses the knife with the wax to demonstrate to Meadow].
 Jake: I show you . . . I show you . . . like that.

The children have learned from their teacher how to support each other; in the second example, they support another child with disabilities. Kelsey had difficulty completing activities in the classroom and often moved from topic to topic. Cherish

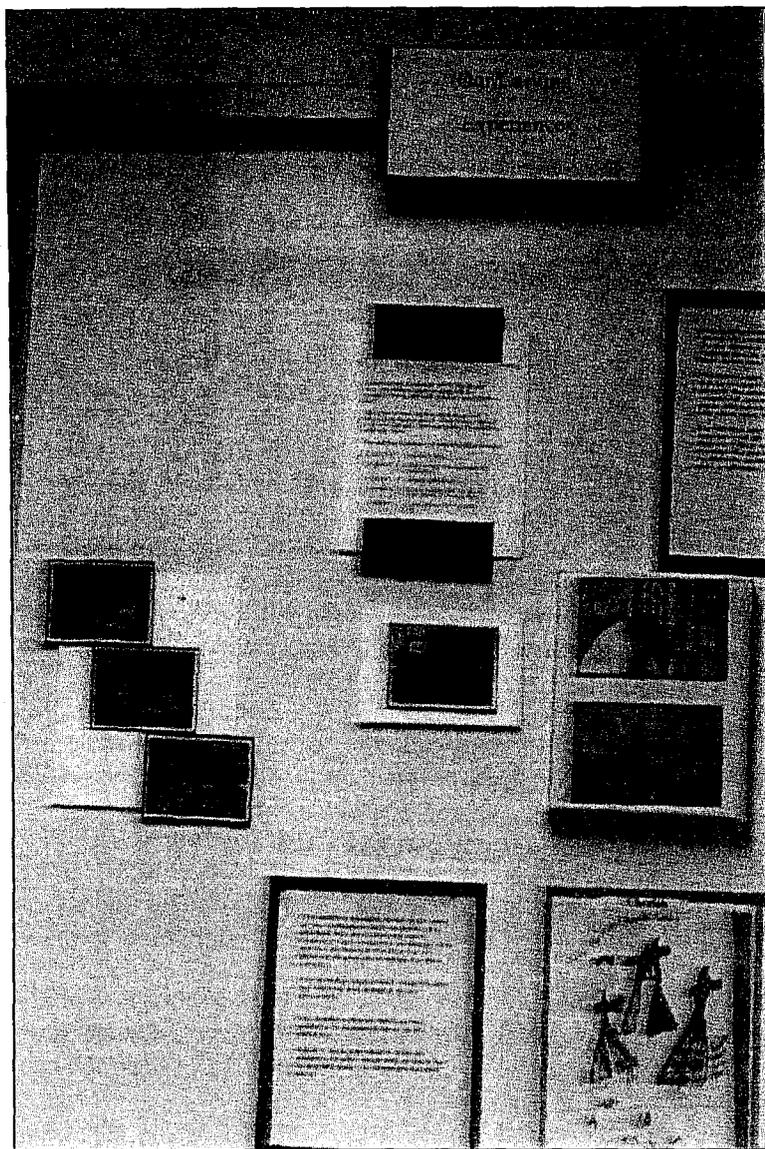


Figure 5. The documentation display outside the classroom for parent night.

(who sat next to Kelsey) was able to help focus Kelsey's attention on her drawing by asking Kelsey about her picture. Kelsey watched Cherish draw and write in her own journal, noting that Cherish knew how to write about her picture. Kelsey exchanged ideas about Cherish's drawing to add to her own journal. In Cherish's drawing, she noted the importance of Mr. Hartly's diagram and the importance of his tools. She explained to Kelsey that her writing at the bottom of her journal page said, "He let us touch the carvings." Kelsey was able to draw lines down the center of her paper, emulating the way that Mr. Hartly made a sketch symmetrical. When asked to explain her drawing, Kelsey noted that she had included a "cross" and explained that her marks said, "It's about Kavik." It is noteworthy in this observation that Ms. Forbes explained the fact that Kelsey's drawing was a cross and required her to cross midline, which was a new skill for her.

Ms. Forbes created a classroom environment that encouraged the children to work together, and she used strategies that invited children with different abilities to support each other in respectful ways. The practicum students and the university instructor built upon the classroom strategies, bringing the children together to discuss photographs or videotapes of their experiences with the carving materials. The continued attention to the children's work and purposeful grouping of children to discuss their ideas extended the interest in the carving experiences and strengthened the relationships among the children.

Relationship of the Carving Experience to Curricular Goals

Ms. Forbes considered ways the carving experiences aligned with the state of Alaska Content and Performance Standards (Alaska State Board of Education, 2000). At least three different content areas were addressed by the experience: math, literacy, and art. For example, when Ms. Forbes reviewed Mr. Hartly's visit with the children, she pointed out how they studied symmetry in design and how Mr. Hartly's diagram demonstrated using that concept. After Mr. Hartly's visit, the children used symmetry as

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they drew plans for their own carvings. The children drew lines on the paper, drawing half of their representations on one side and the other half on the opposite side.

Ms. Forbes used the journal writing time to have the children focus on their observations of Mr. Hartly. When the children were instructed to write about the ideas they got from Mr. Hartly's presentation, Lawrence drew a bear, because Mr. Hartly had discussed how Alaskan animals are often visible in Native carvings. Forrest noted in his journal that the carvings had "scratchings" (referring to the wood markings). The journal writing activity became another way for the children to revisit their experience with Mr. Hartly and a way for them to express their ideas in either written work or in drawings.

The teachers noted that the children now began using library books as resources, studying the books prior to starting their pictures. Thus, Ms. Forbes considered how to optimize the opportunities for teaching literacy and further link her curricular goals to the carving experience.

Unanticipated Outcomes

Through the study of documentation, such as children's work samples and transcripts of dialogue,

the practicum students, university instructor, and classroom teacher were able to identify the following outcomes.

In anticipation of a parent open house, the practicum students and instructor organized and displayed the collected documentation of the carving experience outside the classroom along the hallway wall (see Figure 5). The documentation included a story of the children's experiences, with photographs and written interpretations of the experiences. Explanations of what the children learned from Mr. Hartly were highlighted, as were the ways the children worked together during the experiences. Children's journal pages were included, as were photographs of their carvings. After the display was posted on the wall, Ms. Forbes asked Kavik about the documentation display.

Ms. Forbes: I asked him what he thinks about it. He says it is nice, because [his] dad's picture is up there. I asked, "Why do you think your dad's picture is up there?"

Kavik: Because kids learn lots of things and draw stuff. I think that she hung it up (referring to the university instructor) because my dad is a carver. Because he helps the kids learn about stuff they don't know about other people. They wish that their dad would come to school. So my dad is important.

Ms. Forbes's interview with Kavik encouraged him to reflect on the documentation with her. It allowed Kavik time to share his thoughts about the experience with his father, thus providing an opportunity to recognize and value his father's role in the classroom.

Another unexpected outcome of the experience became clear when revisiting the documentation panel. When the practicum students and university instructor met with the teacher to discuss and review the documentation display, they identified many ways that the typically developing children in the class collaborated with the children with disabilities. Photographs depicted children working together, scaffolding each other. The context and interests of the carving project brought children together naturally and provided the motivation to support one another.

The carving experience highlighted the varied types of relationships that form when conscious efforts are made to value the lives of children outside the context of the classroom and to extend their learning experiences to their homes and community. The children's carving experiences provided an example of the ways that content areas, activities in the curriculum, and connections to the community can be integrated and planned based on observations of children's actions.

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Coming Next Issue

Kibbutz Education



Merging Literacies



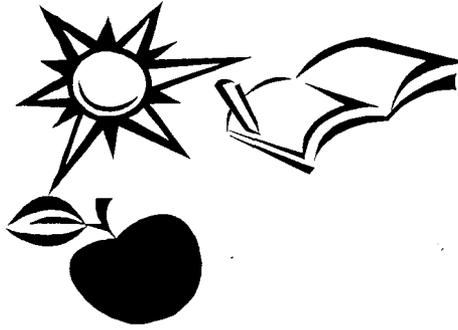
It's Not Easy Being Green:
Adaptation Is Our Theme



Teaching Religious
Diversity Through Children's
Literature



Meeting the Challenge of
High-Stakes Testing



Representation of all teachers - cross district principal's study -

What Do Great Principals Do Differently?

Please take a few minutes to fill out this survey as part of a principal's study group focusing on excellence in school leadership.

Thank you for your assistance in this evaluation process.

1. Please list the top four traits/characteristics you find in a great principal.
a Supportive b. open to new ideas c. NOT a micro-manager
d. No "hidden" agendas
2. Do you think the most important component in a highly successful school is the people or the programs within the educational environment?
People X Programs

Please give an example if you'd like: People inspire change! They also motivate and design learning environments - Programs don't. The best programs are not effective without committed, dedicated people behind them

3. Who is the key variable in the classroom? Teacher - followed closely by parents
In the school? Principal - followed closely by ALL staff and support staff.
4. How does an excellent principal show respect? By making him/herself available. Valuing individuals for the gifts they bring to the job.
5. How can a principal act a filter within the school? Many times the principal is the "first line". They hear, see things that teachers don't always need to be a part of. As the leader, they should be comfortable making decisions and acting on issues without ALWAYS

bringing it to the staff. They should also be comfortable delegating - NOT involving everyone unnecessarily.

6. What is the best way for the principal to assist in training the teachers? Survey - What is needed? What are the teachers interested in learning/improving?
7. How do great principals attract great teachers to their schools? Innovative ideas, positive attitude, willingness to take risks and make changes, obviously has the school's best interest at heart, promotes a warm and inviting environment, strives for excellence in children and teachers.
8. What should great schools be doing? Offering a wide variety of subjects, materials, teaching styles. Preparing ALL children for success now and in the future. Listening to the community it serves and providing activities and experiences to enrich children's lives.
8. How much of this is measured by standardized testing? Not a great deal!
9. Is it more important for a principal to focus on teacher's behavior patterns or beliefs when addressing a problem in the classroom? Both are very important.
10. It is most important for a principal to demonstrate loyalty to whom. Loyalty is very important in the relationship between principal and teacher. There has to be trust.
11. Why would an effective leader base most decisions on a school's best and most effective teachers? I've never thought about this. Does this REALLY happen? Well, I would guess that the most effective teachers are those who are innovative, willing to try new approaches, and those on the "cutting edge" of educational reform
12. Why would a principal be concerned about who was most comfortable and least comfortable with an executive

decision? Does THIS really happen? Who does the decision effect? Who is "on board" and can lead the other staff members to agreement or at least compliance?

13. How can a principal help all teachers be their very best? SUPPORT - but also encourages teachers to stretch and grow. Provide a safe environment for change. Baby steps....

14. How does a great principal demonstrate that they care about their staff? Personable, approachable personality. Acts as part of the team, leads when necessary, but is not a dictator. Makes an effort to get to know the staff. Values everyone as an individual.

14. About students? Personable, approachable. Makes an effort to get to know the children - not just as a disciplinarian! Values children's interests and ideas. Understands the developmental continuum.

15. How does a great principal set expectations and communicate them clearly? Sets goals with the staff. Leads the staff to change. Staff feels valued and has an opportunity to participate in decision-making. Also, principal expresses high expectations for staff and children alike.