Principals: The Missing Link **by Don Nesbitt**

About ten years ago, I was privileged to be part of a Young Life group that met to discuss teachers as volunteer leaders. I sat with a group of Area Directors from all over the country that seemed to have question after question regarding how school systems work. They were well trained in YL but felt very lacking when dealing with the educational system. I hope I have a unique perspective that can be of some use to you as you spread the good news.

In 1998, Union Pacific Railroad did a study of the communities as part of a campaign to give back to the railroad towns. As a result of their research, they discovered that the most influential person in a small community was the high school principal. While there was much more to this study, in Young Life we can take away 2 important truths about schools.

1. Young Life staff should have a healthy relationship with the principal of the school you serve.
2. When you walk onto campus are not going to a school, you are going to a community. You are not just doing contact work with young people at the basketball game, you are ministering to the adults also.

Who is the Principal?

The principal is a very busy person.

The principal is responsible and accountable for <u>everything</u> that happens at their school. All things from teacher evaluations to the fullness of the dumpsters.

Most calls received by principals are negative in nature.

If the principal does not know you or Young Life, they are wondering what kind of person you are (vendor or complainer), and they really don't need one more meeting.

The principal is built and trained to think about what is the worst thing that could happen at their school. They think about insurance claims, lawsuits, bad press, injury, how it could turn for the worst in a moment. When you come to a principal with a crazy fun YL request, remember ahead of time how the principal is taught to think.

What are things to talk about when I get a meeting with the principal?

Honor the principal's time. They do not have an hour to spend with you especially in the first meeting. After the first meeting it may change depending on your specific situation. When I became principal I absolutely loved when the YL staff would stop by. They were such a blessing in my day that often I did not want them to leave. They loved me well and I needed that on most days.

Do prepwork. Go the school website and be knowledgeable about the school. Look for ways you may help. Do they have a volunteer handbook? If so, read it.

The meeting is about how you can help without any agenda. They may not believe it at first, but you will win them over time. Do not force any agenda even if you have the legal right. God has commanded us to respect the authorities we are under unless they ask us to do something we cannot do as Christians.

Prepare and deliver a very short speech about Young Life and what your purpose is in the school.

Be honest.

Don't think you are God's gift to the school even though you really are God's gift to the school. Be a humble servant.

Pay close attention to the response remembering much of communication is done with body language.

> *If you are getting cold negative vibes*, end the meeting as soon as politely possible and continue to pray. When you are at events in which the administration is present, say "hello".

Earn the right and win them over with prayer, love and respect. Remember, you are there for them, not just the students. They will either come around in God's time or God will remove them in His time. That's one less thing to worry about.

Common Statements and Questions about schools

What if I cannot get a meeting with principal?

Don't take it personally. Remember all the things mentioned that the principal has on their plate. Earn the right to be heard by praying, loving, respecting, and saying hello when you can. Go ahead and do your thing.

Volunteer at the school

Want to impact the community? Volunteer in a school. Not only do schools need volunteers, but they need great volunteers they can count on. Ones that show up when they say they will, ones that don't gossip, ones that pray for the students and adults, ones that shine with Jesus. If you spent one afternoon or morning at a school, you have just done more quality contact work in that day than you could do in a month of weekly contact work at after school events. How can you afford not to fit this into your busy schedule? You meet students, you meet counselors, teachers, parents, the front office secretary or admin assistant – you get to know how things work at this place God has sent you.

Why is the principal glaring at me when I sit in the student section at games?

It is the principal's job to protect kids and they will be wondering why you are hanging around all the time if you do not have a relationship with the administration. Are you a pedophile, or you can't seem to make any adult friends, so you are trying to befriend my high school kids, or just what is your motivation? You must admit that an adult, going to a school event, sitting in the student section, is a bit of a stretch for someone who does not know you and has not met Jesus yet. They may not understand the mission of going where the kids are… yet. (Keep sitting in the student section, they need you.)

Our Principal is so incredible and so supportive of Young Life!

That is awesome. I see this happen often when YL staff and volunteers have earned the trust and respect of the principal and school community. When you have a principal that is overly supportive be careful and don't put them in a position or situation that is precarious. When something goes south, it is still the principal that will be held responsible and it does not shine a good light on our witness. Know the boundaries of what you can and cannot do on school grounds legally and never ask for more than that. Take care of that principal that sees what God is doing on their campus through YL.

So remember, this mystical creature called, "principal" is the most influential person at the school community you serve. You are on the same team as the principal and school staff. Win them over by doing what you do with kids. Pray, enter into their world, and humbly show up.

Bio info about Don Nesbitt

For the last thirty-two years Don has worked as a high school teacher, assistant principal, principal, district director and recently retired as assistant superintendent of a large school district in Boise, Idaho. He was a YL leader for 18 years, chaired the local and regional committees for several years and loves the ministry of Young Life. Currently he chairs a group of retired educators who support the ministry of Young Life, The Retired Educators Consortium. Don has a beautiful wife, Tammy, of 38 years and two adult children Cody and Molly and a daughter-in-law, Allee.