



Back to Class

Going from Teacher to Director and Back Again

by Vincent M. Duffy

The Plan

For 36 years I worked at the same preschool. I started out as an afternoon assistant and after nine years, I became a co-teacher. In year 17, I became co-director, while still teaching. In year 25, I became the director. And in year 35, I became a teacher again. Now, in year 37, although retired, I still substitute teach. I think that my becoming a teacher after being a director was a successful move. It smoothed the transition between administrations and my own transition into retirement.

When I became the director 17 years earlier, I solved a few problems, made a few changes, and learned more about administration and regulations than I sometimes thought anyone should. I became competent and confident, but I knew my time as an effective director was up when I



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no longer felt excited about figuring out the next schedule, planning the next staff training, or hiring the next substitute. Even more importantly, I felt I wasn't producing creative ideas to get ahead of the next generation of problems. I also realized that what I really wanted to do was go back to the classroom.

The Transition

I worked with our Board of Directors to plan a transition. We decided to hire a new director, and if she agreed, I would work a final year as a teacher, as well as mentor as needed. If the new director did not want the complication, I would retire.

After a search, the Board decided to hire from within. Two current staff members would serve as co-directors and they both wanted me to remain as teacher/mentor. We were all happy with the plan.

Handing Over the Directorship

The transition became official at the end of the school year, and everyone would assume their new positions in September. I worked with both directors throughout July and August, as they learned their new responsibilities. Orientation included such basics as scheduling; introductions (these are our licensors; quality rating specialists; here's so-and-so from the

Directors association); and details (where the sunscreen forms are kept; the steps for background checks and "let's do a practice hiring interview.")

My style had been to be at the heart of things and my desk reflected this. I liked to see everyone who came in or out of the building. I liked being very accessible to the staff. Surrounding my desk were staff tools: the copy machine; a laminator and stacks of colored copy paper; a paper cutter and recycling containers. But over the school break week, that changed.

Both new directors came in and reorganized the administrative and staff areas. My office disappeared. One of the directors already had a separate office, but a second room was painted a soft green and decorated, complete with a nice carpet and comfortable chairs. It was uncluttered, professional, and private. The door could be closed. My space became a staff area — and there was no longer a special place for me. This was a physical sign of my transition.

Letting Go

I remember spending as much time as possible that summer paring down papers, files, and to-do lists. It was

painful. There were so many things I had wanted to accomplish, but either hadn't had the time to do, or hadn't built the support for, or had decided simply weren't such good ideas after all. There was also a lot to be proud of: directing a successful preschool through 17 years of challenges, keeping it strong, and giving hundreds of children and families a great start.

Sometimes emotions surprised me. I felt great relief from a burden. But it was also like a death, in that now I needed to step back and trust that someone else would do my job, as well as or better than I had. Well, maybe not better. I admit to thinking how embarrassing it would be if they did 'my job' too well!

I can even remember the exact moment when I realized the benefits of being a teacher, and not a director. It was at our staff meeting, right before the first day of school in September. The new director handed out the schedules with only a few minor changes. On cue, protests erupted: "This will never work." "Why are my hours being cut?" "I don't understand this."

I sighed, sat back and smiled inside. A happy light glowed within me. I knew that the schedule was perfectly fine. Nobody's hours had been cut. It wasn't too complicated. And best of all — I didn't have to defend or explain any part of it!

Another example soon followed. One teacher had come to me, almost daily, with her list of suggestions, observations, or complaints. When I noticed that she was going to see the new directors, instead of me, I felt left out. I thought: "She isn't complaining to me anymore." Then I smiled: "She isn't *complaining to me* anymore!"

The new directors did a fine job. They carried on the policies that had worked and improved others. They had new

ideas, new energy, and made new decisions. Sometimes I agreed and sometimes I didn't, but I kept my mouth shut, unless asked. One thing I had learned was that it is hard to make decisions, and easy to second guess someone else's. Time would tell what would work and what would not. Making that call was no longer my job.

Predictably, some staff came to me with complaints or asking me to override decisions. So did parents. "This work table is too big." "We shouldn't be getting rid of that big rock on the playground." "The new directors don't appreciate me." "I need a special schedule for my child."

Basically they were saying, "I don't like this decision. I want you to change it." But, interfering would not work for anyone, and undermining the new administration's authority would be the biggest mistake that I could make. They were in charge, not me.

I told both teachers and parents the same thing: "I do not have any control over the new directors. A director has to make decisions. If you feel strongly that they are making a mistake, I'm sure they would listen to you. I am a teacher now."

Becoming a Teacher... Again

My teaching assignment was as part of a team, with two people that I had hired. One was finishing up her internship, after two years at our school. The other had ten years' experience, also at our school. I had imagined that my teaching year would be a victory lap. I, the master teacher, would demonstrate, by example, all the best techniques for my admiring teaching team. At the same time, I would give sage advice to the novice directors. Hah!

The real children in a dynamic classroom are always a delight and a challenge. It is hard work. I am a good teacher, but

my skills were rusty and out of date. Oh yeah, and my team was not there to just admire me. They were both fully skilled, dedicated, creative teachers with their own ideas, eager to build themselves into a great team for a future that wouldn't include me.

Naturally, my teaching team didn't always want to do things the way I suggested. Often their ideas were good, just not done the way that I might have chosen. Some decisions I disagreed with, but I was unable to convince them of my approach. For example, I felt that we needed more time to clean up before lunch, but I didn't prevail.

Though it is humbling to win some and lose some, it is also a sign of healthy teamwork. I had forgotten the stamina it takes to work in a preschool classroom. At night, I would lie down on the living room floor, exhausted. I also, sometimes, felt guilty for how much extra work I had asked my staff to undertake when I had been director. And, I was really enjoying myself — 99% of the time, anyway!

One long-term goal of mine was to get an improved record-keeping system set up. I felt sure that a computerized system would be easy and time-saving, allowing us to see at a glance one child's progress or a whole class's progress. As director, I had worked to institute such a system. Although I had really pushed for it, there had been little buy-in from the staff. Nonetheless, I had purchased a computer program and provided iPads for the classrooms. Although the teachers did try it, none really used it. This was my chance. Now that I was a teacher again, I could show how easy and useful this system would be. (Again, Hah!)

Yes, it would take time to learn the system, but then with just a few clicks — you'd have a child's progress right at your fingertips. One teacher, young, eager and a computer whiz, would help

me. Together, we would show everyone how great this was! We both persevered. We worked on it every day. We worked extra hours every weekend. We tried hard to make it work. But at the end of the year, we both had to admit: It was not feasible. No teacher should have to put in that much extra work! I was reminded of a variation of my previous lesson: it is easy to second guess others and ignore their feedback, but harder to give up your own decision.

Takeaways from the Transition

The transition from director to teacher worked for me and our particular school. Because of my long history with the school, both parents and staff found it reassuring to have me there. It also helped to smooth the administrative transition, which can be rough.

There were no major changes. The same familiar culture remained basically intact. And even if my teaching year wasn't exactly a victory lap, I'm very glad I did it. Would such a transition work for you or your school? Here's what I learned:

For both Incoming and Outgoing Directors:

- Plan and communicate before and during the transition.
- Incorporate more teamwork and egalitarianism, and less authoritarianism into your program.
- Appreciate your teachers and your director. They have different roles in providing the very best for the children. Both perspectives are needed and valuable.
- Learn from each other.
- Be sure that both incoming and outgoing directors recognize that no one can be right all of the time.

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For the Outgoing Director/ New Teacher:

- Offer to help or listen to the new director, but don't worry if she doesn't ask. Don't interfere. Never undermine.
- Focus on your new job, your teaching, your children, your team, and your families. All of that will be difficult enough.
- Invite the new director to mentor you. Ask for her teaching suggestions.
- Enjoy not having to make all those director decisions.
- Don't expect a victory lap!

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