



Shadowing a Student

What It's Really Like to Be a Student in My School

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety,
Planning with Data, Improving Instruction*

You know how our kids say being a teenager is stressful? They aren't kidding.

I spent a day shadowing a sophomore in my high school and what I learned changed my whole perspective as a principal.

It all started in a PTSA meeting. I told the parent group I was going to have a student shadow me as a "Principal for the Day," and one parent told me while that was interesting, it would be even more interesting to spend a day as a student.

She told me she learned from her daughter and her friends that students were experiencing a high amount of anxiety and felt pressured to do well all the time. She explained while she was sure I spent a good part of my day with certain segments of our student population, it might be a different perspective for me to spend a day with a quiet, hardworking student who would otherwise blend in.

I readily accepted the challenge, and I encourage you to do the same.

Principal Christine Bromley shadowed sophomore Isabella Reynaud for a day.

HERE'S HOW IT WORKED:

- First, I made sure the parent was comfortable with my plan and I had her talk to her daughter, letting her know I would also call her in to discuss the idea with her.
- Next, I called in the student (a sophomore) and let her know the "why" behind my plan. I had a conversation with her to gauge how she felt and we decided to move forward with scheduling a date.

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- I cleared my calendar for one whole day (mind you, I kept my 4-6 p.m. meeting as scheduled, as well as my evening supervision).
- I communicated with staff in my weekly newsletter. I also emailed all of her teachers to let them know I would be her complete shadow. I would sit with her, do all of the work she did throughout the day, and adhere to the same expectations they had for all students in their classroom. The one thing I would not do was play her instrument (she had two sections of band in her schedule).
- I reminded the teachers and student a day in advance.

HERE'S WHAT I LEARNED:

Students are compassionate, generous people to spend time with. My student partner and her friend, who spent a good deal of the day with us, were so kind to me it nearly brought tears to my eyes. They let me know what to expect in each class, shared genuine reflections with me, and even brought me a matching t-shirt and homemade gingerbread! It wasn't just those two students, though, as I also witnessed other students checking in with each other and providing encouragement throughout the day.

Paying attention is hard! My day as a student shadow began at 6:30 a.m. with a zero hour jazz band class and went until 2:15 p.m., with only a half hour break for lunch. My classes were taught bell-to-bell and I barely had time to grab a drink from my water bottle, let alone study for one of the two tests we had that day. My student partner also had a presentation to prepare for and she took every moment (as in, those when we were walking between classes) to look over her notes. I took a geometry and chemistry test and in both cases I was nearly the last to finish and my heart was pounding.

Luckily, the teachers were very kind



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to me. By fifth period I could feel my student partner's tension and when she finished her Spanish presentation (and nailed it!) I swear I could feel the stress release in my own shoulders. This all added up to a lot of focus on the part of each student. As a building principal I work every minute of the day, answering questions and considering difficult situations. As a student, I was mentally exhausted. Despite the wonderful people I had around me all day by the end of the day I was so happy to let my guard down and return to business as usual.

Teacher attendance matters. Students know who will be out and they know that expectations are different with guest teachers. I heard from my student partner that I should be aware that one of her classes would be rowdy, because, while it was a “good class,” they were having a hard time maintaining an orderly environment in the absence of their usual teacher. It causes additional stress to students when the environment changes because they rely on knowing the expectations in each unique classroom. For students who need a trauma-informed approach (most students) this can set

off their whole day. It's not only the change in routine that adds stress, though; students also struggle to prepare for exams and to get answers to questions when teachers are out.

Relationships matter, and not just the ones we expect adults to have with students. My student partner relied on her team — and by that I mean her best friend and her classmates. She needed them to get through her day for a number of reasons. She needed connection, moral support, help with a study guide, and advice on what to expect when she got to the class that another student had already attended. It is easy to scoff at students who want schedule changes to have a class or lunch with a friend. What I discovered, though, is that without friends, school is a very lonely place.

We need to ask kids for feedback. At one point in the day I needed a pencil sharpener. We were quietly taking a test and my pencil was quickly dulling. The problem was, where was the pencil sharpener? I thought about asking a neighbor but I didn't want the teacher to think that I was distracting others. I also



REFLECTION:

My goal this year was to help my school focus on learning and to increase expectations system-wide. I had no idea that this would amp up the pressure to a point where students were racing to class (who needs to use a restroom, anyway?) and left without any downtime to study or relax. Even during lunch, the students I spent time with were discussing the tests they needed to take the next day. For a few days following my experience as a student shadow I needed to take time to reflect quietly on how my own focus and drive may have inadvertently caused undue stress in my students. This reflection allowed me to clearly share my experience with my staff. My hope is that my perspective shift will encourage my school community to take a step back and consider how it feels to be a student in our school.

felt uncomfortable raising my hand to ask — I know this sounds strange, but you try it and let me know how it feels.

So, I just did the best I could with a very dull pencil. My point here is, if we don't ask students how it feels to be a student in our school, how will we ever know?

We hit tardies hard this year in my building with the intention of getting kids in class on time. In the five minutes we allow for passing, no one has time to go to the bathroom.

When you get to class, each teacher has different expectations about using

the restroom, along with various ways to sign in and out. The result? I didn't use the bathroom. I also didn't snack or drink anything other than water throughout the day. Taking the time to ask students how we can help make their day run more smoothly, or how we might make it easier for them to focus on learning, might have a dramatic effect on outcomes.

I will forever be indebted to the student who spent her day with me and to the teachers who opened up their classrooms to allow me to get the most authentic experience possible. I encourage you to step out of your comfort zone. Put on some sneakers and get into your classrooms for a whole day. You won't regret it. ■

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