

## Chapter 21

# Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place

### CASE 1: SCHOOL TEAM

**Crosscutting Themes:** Parents/Caregivers/Family, Relationships/Trust, Collaboration, Agency/Efficacy.

**Leadership Competencies:** Values Inclusion, Fosters Relationships, Collaboration, Professional Learning, Problem-solving.

I have been a high school administrator for about twelve years now and have changed schools almost every four years. Because I have moved around a lot, I have realized how important it is to create strong relationships with *everyone* in the school—from students to staff to parents.

Forming these bonds can make your life as a principal or a vice principal much easier. I have also learned that each and every school is unique. My last school had many students with special education needs. I was able to build close relationships with my staff fairly easily, and our team became very strong as we supported our students with special education needs. We all had worked hard to build trusting relationships. But it's not always so easy to build relationships with a school team. At my current school, Lincoln High, I have had to put a lot of time and effort into building strong relationships with staff. It has been a bit of a frustrating process to be honest, but I am pushing through it because having a strong team is a crucial part of creating an inclusive environment.

Unlike my last school, the staff at Lincoln are a bit more reluctant to some of my “inclusive” ideas. They have a different vision of what inclusive education for students with special education needs should look like. As a mid-sized high school of approximately 1,700 students there are certainly many students with special education needs. We have a number of congregated



**Figure 21.1** Principal Talking to All Staff. *Source:* <https://www.istockphoto.com>. Credit: M\_a\_y\_a.

classrooms where those students with intensive or developmental needs are taught. We also have a congregated class for students with significant learning disabilities. Those classrooms are in a separate wing of the school.

I would much rather see many of these students integrated into other classrooms as much as possible. I have had push back on this from some of the staff because they view these students as problematic and a distraction to other kids. I realize that it takes trust, strong relationships, and lots of communication in order to support the staff and help them along this journey of inclusive education.

When I first arrived at Lincoln, the school was in a tense situation: a parent had reported to the school superintendent that their child's needs were not being properly accommodated. This situation happened over a year ago, but the school was still dealing with the repercussions. The student in question, Sam, was in grade ten when his parents had involved the superintendent. Sam needed extra support with reading and writing, as he was working at a grade seven level at the time. He also had difficulties concentrating on school work, so his Individual Education Plan included extra support from paraprofessionals, a desk space for increased concentration, and extra breaks throughout the day as needed. Sam's parents felt that his English teacher, Mr. Hagerty, was not giving him enough time to complete his reading and writing assignments. Sometimes he didn't understand how to complete assignments because the



Figure 21.2 Experienced Principal Mentoring a New Principal. Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com>. Credit: gradyreese.

instructions were wordy or used vocabulary that was beyond his comprehension. Sometimes he didn't even start assignments because he assumed he wouldn't finish them.

Sam's parents were worried about their son. They had had a number of conversations with Mr. Hagerty about Sam's progress but nothing seemed to change. The administrative team did not seem to take their concerns seriously. Eventually the parents made a call to the school superintendent.

When I came to the school, everyone was on edge because the school was being watched and monitored by the superintendent in an attempt to ensure that Sam's needs were being met, as well as the other students with specialized needs in regular classrooms. I could understand why many teachers were concerned with my hope to provide more opportunities for the inclusion of students with special education needs.

One day, Sam's new English teacher, Julia Gomez, stopped me in the staff room. She told me that she was feeling completely overwhelmed by having Sam in her class. She knew about the situation with Mr. Hagerty last year and didn't want Sam's parents to call the superintendent on her. She was doubting if she was the right person to teach Sam. I assured her that she was the right person for the job and that I knew she could handle it. I asked her how I could help support her. I understood the stress she was under. Together we discussed her options and settled on her participating in some professional

development workshops at the board office to support students with special education needs. I wanted her to know that I was on her team and that we could get through it together. I offered to help act as a buffer with the relationship with Sam's parents. I decided to organize a team meeting with Julia and the head of the special education department to talk about supports for Sam. I also called Sam's parents to include them in the meeting. It was going to take a team effort to help Sam.

A week after my conversation with Julia, she stopped by my office to chat again. She was at her breaking point. She said that Sam's parents had called her the previous day and had complained about her teaching methods. Julia was feeling scrutinized. And she was continuing to feel very anxious that the parents were going to call the superintendent. The parents had also complained that they weren't being involved in conversations about their son. I told Julia that I *had* reached out to Sam's parents to invite them to a team meeting, but I had never heard back from them. Obviously there had been some miscommunication. Although it was possible that they had left a message on my answering machine and I hadn't seen it—I was a bit behind with answering my phone calls, but I didn't admit that to Julia.

Julia went on to tell me that she didn't think she was receiving enough support. I thought I had handled the situation really well and gave her more than enough support. I admit that it had been an extremely busy time since our initial conversation, but I did all that I could for her. She said she wanted extra support in the classroom for Sam. She wanted one of the paraprofessionals at the school to attend the English class with Sam and assist him. If that wasn't possible, Julia wondered if it was best for Sam to be in the congregated classroom for students with significant learning disabilities for parts of the day where he could get more individualized help with his reading and writing. She ended the conversation by telling me that things needed to change or else she feared that she may need to go off on stress leave. She said her stress was negatively impacting her work and her home life. I felt terrible.

Now as I reflect on the situation and decide what to do, I feel caught between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, I feel very strongly that students with special education needs should be in regular classes with their peers. I'm always telling staff that students should be kept in the regular classroom as much as possible. I didn't want to seem like a hypocrite if Sam is taken out of the English class. On the other hand, I see that Sam may not be getting the individualized support he needs. I also see the stress that Julia is under. I know Sam can be challenging to have in the classroom. And I know that his parents are extremely difficult to work with—they are obviously willing to go to the board level to get their complaints heard. I need to help both Sam and Julia. But how? What do I do?

**Questions To Consider:**

1. What should the principal's next steps be? What questions or concerns do you have about the steps that have been taken thus far?
2. Why is it important to work as a team to help students with special education needs and staff members? What advice would you provide to a principal who is "going at it alone" in working to re-shape the culture of the school?
3. How would you support Sam at school? How would you engage his parents?
4. What are the unique challenges and opportunities that high schools avail for working as a team in supporting students with special education needs?