

I don't think we realize how much in common principals and clergy have in common with each other. We both have jobs that are 24-7. Many times our work calls upon us to comfort the afflicted whether that is a child with two strikes against them because of a troubled family life or a parishioner in the hospital fighting a life threatening disease. Other times we find ourselves afflicting the comfortable because we work with teams and our work demands that we see problems in our organizational culture which resist change when we know change is the only way we can make things better in our schools. Whether it is in God's house or in our schools, the minister, priest, or rabbi as well as the principal struggle to guide institutions knowing full well that leadership requires us to get out in front of the communities we serve and identify the critical values that we stand for with the hope that the people on our team will embrace those values.

At the end of the day, we have one more thing in common that binds us together which is that we both want to know that we made a difference in the lives of those we serve. We want to see that the fruits of our labor ultimately led to growing students who are believers. In the house of worship they believe in God. In the schools, hopefully, students become believers in democracy. They believe in learning. They believe in accepting their responsibilities as citizens of this country. They believe in themselves that they too have a calling to make a difference in the world. Similarly, are we all not trying to mentor the best teachers who will carry out those values into the classrooms? Are we not just as concerned about the teachers we supervise that they believe in the values we speak about at faculty meetings and evaluations?

Because of the bonds we share I served for six years in the San Juan school district in Sacramento, California as chair of the human dignity commission I witnessed with my own eyes the challenge that principals have in inculcating the faculty to deal with "diversity issues." The principals used to tell me that they were tired of being beat over the head with diversity issues that seemed to create more aggravation than progress. One principal in the middle of a dispute that went public with regard to finding a translator for a Korean student who was suspended from school said to me, "Sometimes I feel that I am a battlefield general rather than an educator. It is combat out here!"

So how do we make a difference at least in regard to religion? I admit I don't know enough about this school district to speak with any degree of familiarity about our demographics. But people of all different denominations of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and no religion have children in our schools. They may be the distinct minority and many may be first generation Americans or recent immigrants. They are reticent to speak out and want to fit in. Their parents are not sure about how to express themselves with confidence to school authorities. What can we do to make a difference in promoting acceptance of religious diversity in the schools?

First, network within your community. Learn about the traditions of the students and teachers who attend our school. Find an organization that we can work with that teaches tolerance in the schools. One of the best organizations I see ascending on the horizon is called Not in Our Town.

Second, every spring bring together the calendars of all the major faiths before scheduling events like back to school night and homecoming.

Third, teaching teachers how to have the conversations with students that demonstrates a teacher's respect for their student's religious heritage. This deals with issues about making up exams due to religious holy days as well as other homework assignments and sports activities.

Four, anticipating how the school should be handling December holiday issues in September and not at the beginning of December. There is always the debate about whether there should be any representation of religious traditions in the schools. That question is belongs to another session. Yet if we are going to have holiday parties how can we do that in a way that affirms everyone's traditions and does not leave kids feeling that their religions are weird and thereby ashamed about who they are?

Five, establish a working advisory group of clergy in the area that can be of counsel to the principal. I can hear us saying, 'Please, Rabbi, no more committees!' But I say this is a necessity and will pay dividends if and when the day comes when a conflict arises. A clergy advisory council of diverse religious groups is not only in the school's interest but it is also in our interest as well.

In the Long Range Document of the district I volunteered in, we based our work upon goal three which was the school's duty to create and maintain a psychologically safe school environment. I know that refers to all kinds of issues in addition to religion. We used to address bullying and many other issues, for example, protecting gay and lesbian students. The list never ended.

Surely there are many successful ways to employ to create schools that feel safe to students and faculty. Religion is one of those issues that belong to a much wider spectrum of diversity issues you all deal with each day. But the most important point I would identify is for us to set the example of learning about and showing respect for minority faiths. Even if there are only a few from other religions in our schools, never underestimate the power of our message and presence in setting the tone of the institutions we lead. Demonstrating that tone of acceptance and positive affirmation of the single's kids religion will make all the difference in their lives and teach an important lesson to the student body and to the faculty. That is how we make a difference one person at a time.

Clergy and school principals have a lot in common. Sometimes, we feel like we are herding cats and in other times we are in a rodeo contest. But we cannot lose sight of the fact that religion is one of those intensely personal issues that brings out the passions of all involved. In fact I tell my leadership that for our parishioners their relationship to the synagogue is always personal. Is that any different than what our parents feel about the schools?

In my tradition we have an expression which says, 'one who saves a life is as if he or she saved a world. And one who destroys a life is as if he or she destroyed a world. 'There is wisdom in this ancient proverb

which serves as a reminder that every single person matters as well as the religion they practice. We can make a difference if we never lose that insight. That is how we make a difference each day.