

# Principal or glorified clerk?

*Miro Martin*

**R**ecently, a parent came into my office and asked about one of my degrees hanging on the wall. “What’s that for?” she asked. It reminded me of a Paul Newman movie I saw called *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*. Roy walks into a saloon in the middle of Texas and sees a bible on the bar. “What’s that barble fer?” he asks. The barman replies, “That’s fer the whores to p@\*s on.” This metaphor really captures the response I wanted to give this parent (but didn’t). Just as the bible was out of place and irrelevant in the saloon, my degrees are mostly irrelevant to me in my current role as principal.

When I started out I believed that, by further study, I would improve my knowledge and ability to perform my job, first as a teacher, then as a principal. Unfortunately, the more study and qualifications I have had, the more promotion I have had and the less education I have been doing. Today, I don’t get to do much education at all. Most of my job is taken up with an endless barrage of paperwork and clerical duties. Workplace Health and Safety audits, Regulatory Compliance Schedules, Budgets, School Reviews, annual reports, BER applications and... the never-ending procession of meetings. I used a metaphor many years ago of a farmer who was so obsessed with weighing his pig for the farm show that he never got round to feeding it and it eventually starved to death.

## Skimming off the cream

I believe that the bureaucratic gauntlet principals have to run is bleeding our schools of good teaching and learning talent. In most cases, it’s talented teachers who end up in admin positions. You have to be above average to make the final cut. The cream rises to the top. Attempts have been made to keep talented teachers in the classroom, e.g. the classification of Advanced Skills Teacher or Senior Teacher Level 1 and 2. But the incentives are pathetic. Why would a teacher stay in the classroom for an extra couple of thousand dollars when they can earn over \$100,000 as principal? Anyone who thinks they would do it for altruistic reasons is extremely naïve. This doesn’t happen very often.

We need to change the admin structure of our schools. A competent clerk could do most of my job. The best teachers need to work with other teachers and do education research at the coalface. They are wasted in admin. I would like to be free to work with teachers and really explore great pedagogy, to have discussions about the way children learn and what practices work. I

want to use my talent and passion for teaching to improve the education of the students in my school, not the filing system.

I realise that many larger schools have administrative assistants and bursars, but what about the small and medium size schools? They have the same amount of admin and paperwork. Worse still, what about the many teaching principals in small country schools? A school of 100 students has the same compliances and accountabilities as a school of 500. I know, because I spent seven years as a teaching principal. The teaching principals have the extra responsibility of a class of students.

It seems absurd to groom the most talented of our teachers for mundane desk jobs. It’s like a coach training a tennis player to be a ball boy.

## Stem the paperwork flow

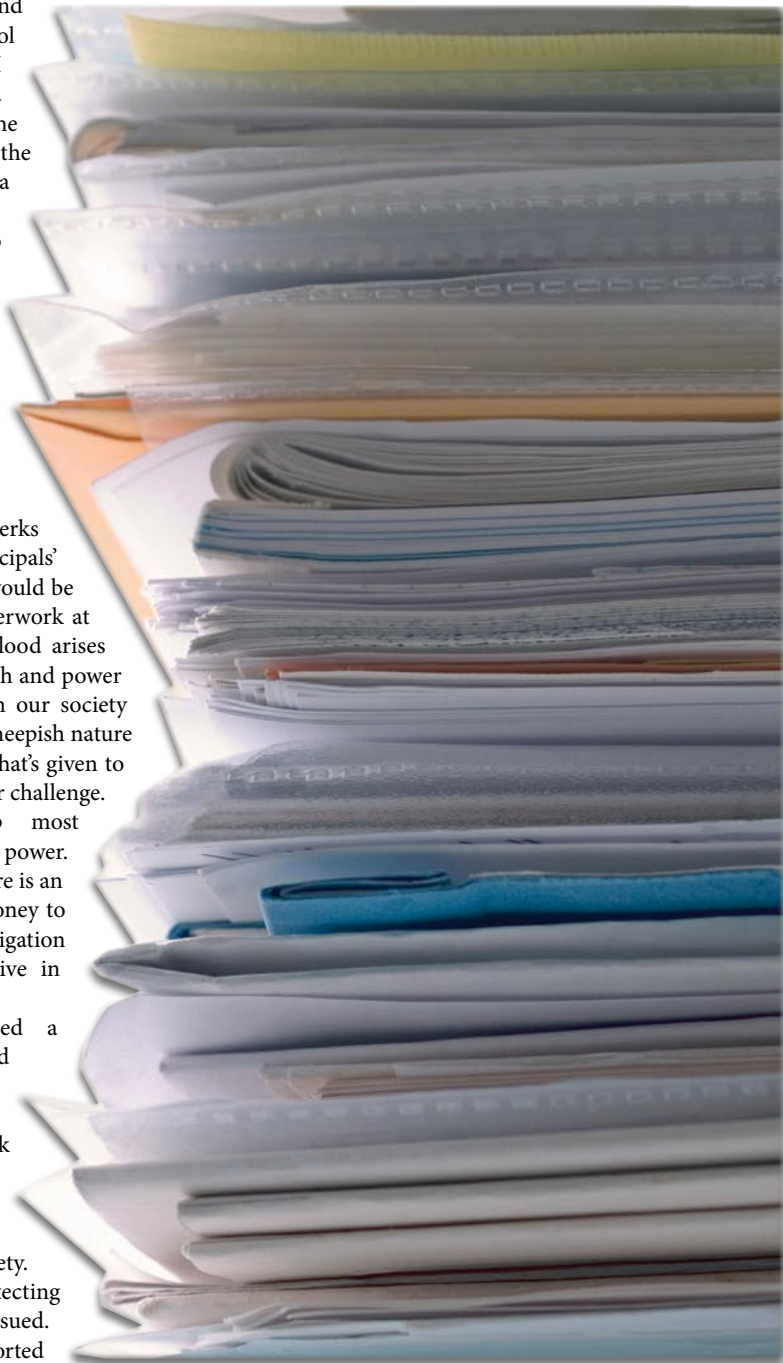
Apart from training clerks to do the bulk of principals’ work, a better solution would be to stem the flow of paperwork at its source. I think the flood arises from the insidious growth and power of the legal fraternity in our society and the corresponding sheepish nature of citizens who accept what’s given to them without question or challenge.

Lawyers make up most political positions of power. They make the laws. There is an enormous amount of money to be made and lost from litigation and ordinary citizens live in fear of it.

I recently completed a Workplace Health and Safety Officer course. I had three manuals for the WHS Act that took up half of the tray on my Toyota Hilux. Very little of this had anything practical to do with safety. It was all about protecting ourselves from being sued. Similarly, I recently reported

an incident to Student Protection. The police were involved. A two-sentence statement by me ended up becoming a four-page transcript with the wording being carefully chosen. Forget about the harm done to the child – it’s all about following the correct procedure and having detailed written records.

I have now been a principal for 16 years and the paperwork has grown bigger and bigger



each year. It's just as bad for teachers. So much of their energy and time is taken up with mindless and irrelevant record keeping and accountability. Too often I hear teachers say, "I have to do..." instead of "I'd like to do..." If we used our brains and unified we could say 'no' and refuse to do the mindless tasks we are asked to perform. The politicians couldn't sack all of us.

### The multitasking principal

My original teacher training seems to have less and less relevance the longer I remain a principal. Apart from the clerical aspects of the job, a great deal of my time is taken up with counselling – students, parents and staff members. Although I have no formal training in this area, these people look to me for advice. Most of my career has been spent in low socio-economic areas and the people I deal with have unique problems and needs. In most cases they don't have access to psychologists or social workers. When you are poor you don't get instant health care of your choosing. You get what's available and usually after a long wait. When you're principal, you're it for these people!

There are many aspects of the job of principal that aren't covered in teacher training or even in leadership training. Up to this year, all Catholic

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principals in Brisbane had to undergo the full seven-day training as Workplace Health and Safety Officers. In many small schools this is still the case. We are all required to be paralegals with our compulsory training in student protection, workplace issues such as bullying and harassment. First aid training is compulsory so we are also paramedics.

I am a registered mediator, a task I have performed many times in my career. We are all responsible for managing large amounts of money so we also need to be accountants. Most principals are also expected to be judges and executioners, being responsible for the discipline of students.

Principals are also head of the complaints department. So much of my time is taken up listening to whinging and whining. I can see why a lot of principals take refuge in their offices and why it is almost impossible to see them, even with appointments. If you are principal of a Catholic school you are also faith leader,

although all Catholic schools have assistants to the principal in religious education. Principals of all schools are responsible for the pastoral care of their staff and students.

I hope I have made the point that being a principal requires a wide range of skills. The clerical side is the least important of all of them yet it takes up the largest amount of time. I suspect that I am not the only principal who feels wasted in the job and would like to spend more energy on what we were trained for – teaching and learning. I guess the obvious question you could ask me is, "why do you keep doing it if you feel this way?" I am optimistic that things will have to change. If you keep pumping air into a balloon it will eventually burst. One day soon, principals will get one form too many, the one that breaks the camel's back and, hopefully, they will dig their heels in and rebel against the bureaucracy. I'm happy to lead the charge. This cream has not yet turned rancid.



Miro Martin is a primary school principal with more than 30 years in education. He is a regular contributor to *Education Today*.



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