

Book-Review
DEALING WITH DIFFICULT TEACHERS
By: Todd Whitaker

AUTHOR: Todd Whitaker is an associate professor at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, Indiana State. He had been a middle and high school principal for eight years in Missouri. Dr. Whitaker wrote in several areas such as principal effectiveness, teacher leadership, and technology. He wrote various presentations related to schools and educational supervisions.

In general, the book contains 19 chapters, organized into seven major parts. Each part stands alone well, and the integration of ideas in the book is understandable. The book as a whole provides a comprehensive overview of an important issue that is, as a principal, how to deal with difficult teachers. What follows is a part-by-part review.

In the first part, (*The principal and the difficult teacher*), Whitaker simply provides a general definition for a difficult teacher by listing 20 attributes by which difficult teachers are recognized, such as being lazy, boring, lecturing, and not liking their job. Also, six indicators are given to the principal to judge whether he/she has difficult teachers or not, as follows: Classroom behavior, staff influence, public perception, resistance to change, dampen enthusiasm and damage climate, and sending students to the office. The author also classifies teachers into three categories: Superstars, backbones, and mediocres. Then he ends this part by addressing the most consistent attributes of an effective principal: (a) a strong instructional leader, and (b) creating a good climate in the school.

The second part is *Motivating difficult teachers*. Mainly, this part focuses on two points: (a) taking an appropriate action when opportunities present themselves to motivate difficult teachers, and (b) when and how to praise difficult teachers.

In the next part, (*Making difficult teachers uncomfortable*), Whitaker strongly insists on the idea of increasing the discomfort of difficult teachers will lead them somehow to change their behavior, and vice versa. He provides various ways to and examples of increasing the discomfort level among difficult teachers.

The fourth part, (*Weakening the influence of difficult teachers*), it is known that a negative person always endeavors to affect a positive one, so they can be equal. In the case of difficult teachers, they try to damage any effective relationship between the principal and his/her staff members. The author addresses that the responsibility of preventing such relationship damage rests on the principal's shoulders. Whitaker suggests some ideas to eliminate this negative behavior such as reducing their followers, breaking their groups, and involving them with effective teachers.

In the following part, (*The role of new faculty*), it is important to improve the school by improving its teachers and employing better ones. That is because teachers represent the school. Therefore, the author talks about how the new teacher can be an effective member in the school. In all possible means, the principal always makes sure that a new teacher becomes an active and

effective member of his/her positive staff. Also, it is fairly important for the new teacher to be involved in informal leadership roles.

In the sixth part, (*Eliminating difficult teachers*), making a dismissal of difficult teachers is not a facile decision at all. Before taking such a decision, principals are seriously required to be careful not to oppress teachers. Teachers, as Whitaker states, are exposed to dismissal if they show incompetence, insubordination, and immorality. He advocates that principals should work hard to remove the negative behavior rather than the teacher by approaching different methods such as increasing workload and transferring.

In the last part, (*General tips and guidelines*), the most important discussed issue in this part is how to stop or even lessen teachers from referring many students for disciplinary reasons. Whitaker says that before sending students to the office, teachers should contact students' parents and try to solve the problem. If this procedure does not work, then the other option is to refer them. Therefore, both principals and teachers will not feel defensive in front of parents. The author concludes this part and his book by providing much guidance and some advise for the principals to use in case all mentioned methods fail. However, it is super-important to approach any situation in an informal manner because it works best, as Whitaker believes.

My Perspective:

This book very beneficial not only for principals but also for teachers who want to change their negative behavior and improve their quality of teaching. For principals, it is very proper to take advantage of the author's fruitful experiences and apply what works in their schools considering difficult teachers. Moreover, for all types of teachers, it is a great opportunity to enhance themselves and improve their behavior to be labeled as superstar teachers.

In fact, it would not be fair if I preferred some ideas and suggestions to others because the book is metaphorically a pearl. Whitaker's book addresses valuable suggestions that can be used as powerful tools to improve schools, teachers, and students. First and foremost, if my ultimate goal, as a principal, was to do what is best for students and the school, I would have to ask myself these questions (Pp. 13-14): What is my true purpose in implementing this rule or policy? Will it actually accomplish this purpose? How will my positive and productive staff feel about this policy? If I am able to be as detached, realistic, and credible as possible when I answer these questions, I would never feel guilty.

In addition, the book provides other great suggestions, which can be applied to any school system, for dealing with difficult staff members as follows: Strategies to help counteract resistant and difficult teachers; improve teachers' cooperation; avoid arguing and struggling with difficult teachers; be respectful to other teachers; create productive and effective changes in the school; give difficult teachers some responsibilities to improve their behavior; involve effective teachers in decision-making; and reduce negative-leaders' influences by weakening their followers.

Finally, I would reiterate the author, as he states on (p. X), "this book is designed for the most frustrating, resistant, and negative staff in the school." However, to achieve what we, the school's administration, are planning, we *MUST* work collectively as hard as we possibly can.