



Leaders Should be Examples of Boundaries and Self-Care

By Educator Barnes – January 4, 2020

Until the 2015-16 school year, I never carried my cell phone with me as an educator. What changed was the role I accepted that school year. It was my first year as a literacy coach. One day principal stopped me and asked, "Barnes, did you receive my message?" I responded, "What message?" My principal had sent me a text message. I unlocked my cabinet, opened my purse, and didn't have a message. I later discovered he texted my landline (yes, I still have one) since I had only given him that number. I only provided the number in case of an

emergency. I didn't expect my principal to text me during the school day. Since I didn't carry a walkie talkie, my principal asked if I would provide my cell number, and I started carrying my cell phone with me. Luckily, my principal did not text me much, only if it was really important. I soon learned how being contacted on my cell phone during the school day can be problematic and how important it is for leaders to set the tone when it comes to boundaries and self-care.

Recently, I had the opportunity of sitting down with a successful former school principal. His school earned an A rating under his leadership. He shared how he was living at the school and the impact on his wife and children. I could relate. Early in my marriage, before I had children, I was living at school, too. I arrived at 7 a.m. and left close to 7 p.m. My husband and I was more like roommates than a married couple. We weren't connecting, and I really didn't have a clue what was going on in his life or how he was feeling. We decided to take off a few days from work to save our marriage. We went to Gatlinburg, TN and renewed our vows on Valentine's Day. We recommitted to each other and agreed upon some changes. We both agreed that we had to make a real effort to come home near our contract time and to leave work at work as much as possible, so we were present with each other at home. When I accepted my first administrator position this school year, I feared I could slip back into old patterns I had escaped as a teacher and as a teacher coach.

What helped me most is being intentional about the leadership opportunity I accepted. I had the opportunity to become an assistant principal at a notable high school in Indianapolis, but I backed out before the recommendation was made to the superintendent because I did want to accept a position if I wasn't confident I could balance home and work. My current position is a middle school academic dean. I coach and evaluate teachers. People forget there are many leadership roles you can take with the administrator's license. You don't only have to go for assistant principal and principal.

What has helped me most is my principal. She sets the tone for boundaries and self-care. She is the first principal I have ever had that arrives at school and leaves according to her contract hours. She is willing to arrive early or leave late if an emergency happens or for a meeting. She maximizes her time during the day, so she can leave and be present at home for her family. I do the same. It is a great myth that a successful principal is one that must burn the midnight oil. I know too many principals that have been depressed, suffered from anxiety, battled addiction, have strained relationships with their children, or have found themselves divorced. How is it okay to help children to have their best lives when your life is in shambles?

Before winter break, my principal encouraged all administrators to put on their vacation auto-responder on their email and not work during break. Hearing her say this weeks in advance, helped me plan out my last couple of weeks before break. I scheduled time to complete the tasks I needed to be done when I return on January 6, 2020. I carried this same message to the teachers I supervise. I gave suggestions on how to get work done before the break. I also informed them in advance that I would not respond to emails during the break. My teachers know I do not have the email app on my phone. If they send me an email, I will not receive any notifications. I also told them if they texted me during the break, I would not respond unless it was an emergency.

I have had principals text my phone throughout the workday and text me after the workday unnecessarily. I don't mind being called by an administrator after work or texted occasionally, but when it is becoming a habit, that's not healthy. My home life needs boundaries from work. The quickest way I have found to stop unwanted text messages is to not respond. I also dislike when school administrators use apps like Remind and communicate with employees throughout the day, after work, and during the breaks. Just because cell phones give you easy access to your employees does not mean you should access them during all hours of the day. Schools functioned before these apps existed; we should keep this in mind. I also apply this principle to work email.

I am the queen of the scheduled email. My teachers know, unless it is urgent, I do not send emails during school breaks, the weekend, or after hours. I send emails at the beginning of the day or at the end of the day. I may write the email during the day, but I schedule it to be sent at an appropriate time. I do not believe it is appropriate to email and text teachers throughout the day. Some teachers get anxious when they see an email and others feel they have to respond immediately and will go back and forth with you while they are supposed to be teaching. Even if my teachers email me during the day, I will reply and schedule the response to be delivered at the end of the day. This way students are gone and the teacher can focus and process the email before responding.

Another way I have seen leaders support self-care is by not making teachers feel guilty about using sick days and personal days. If a teacher tends to consistently have what I call "Monday malady" and the "Friday flu," a conversation does need to be had. If a teacher has a sick child or is sick, there shouldn't be an issue especially if the teacher has sub plans ready to go. All teachers should have emergency sub plans and a couple of colleagues to call to get them out if the teacher is sick on short notice. It is not valiant to come to school sick or to come to

school when you have personal matters you need to address. Life happens, and you can't schedule everything in your life to happen perfectly during a break.

School leaders tell teachers all the time they must model skills for students to learn them. Accordingly, school leaders must do the same. If school leaders want teachers to take better care of themselves and have boundaries to have a better work and life balance, school leaders must model this through their leadership.