

Do school principals use basic time-management practices designed to help them focus on important tasks? Or do they allow the unrelenting pace of the job dictate how they use their time? A random sample of 400 U. S. principals, representing the membership of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, participated in a study to determine how they managed their time. The participants' years of experience ranged from one year to 41 years; the mean number of years was 15. Eighty-two percent were public school principals.

How Principals

MANAGE

This article reflects study data relating to five work-management styles and suggestions for using time more efficiently. Principals, as do other managers, differ as to how they go about the business of managing and leading schools. They all have the same 24 hours to perform similar tasks, but use them differently, based on their personal preferences. Pass (1992) states, "What works for one person may not work for another. Forcing the use of a system that goes against your [work-management style] or organizational style is a waste of time."

IN BRIEF

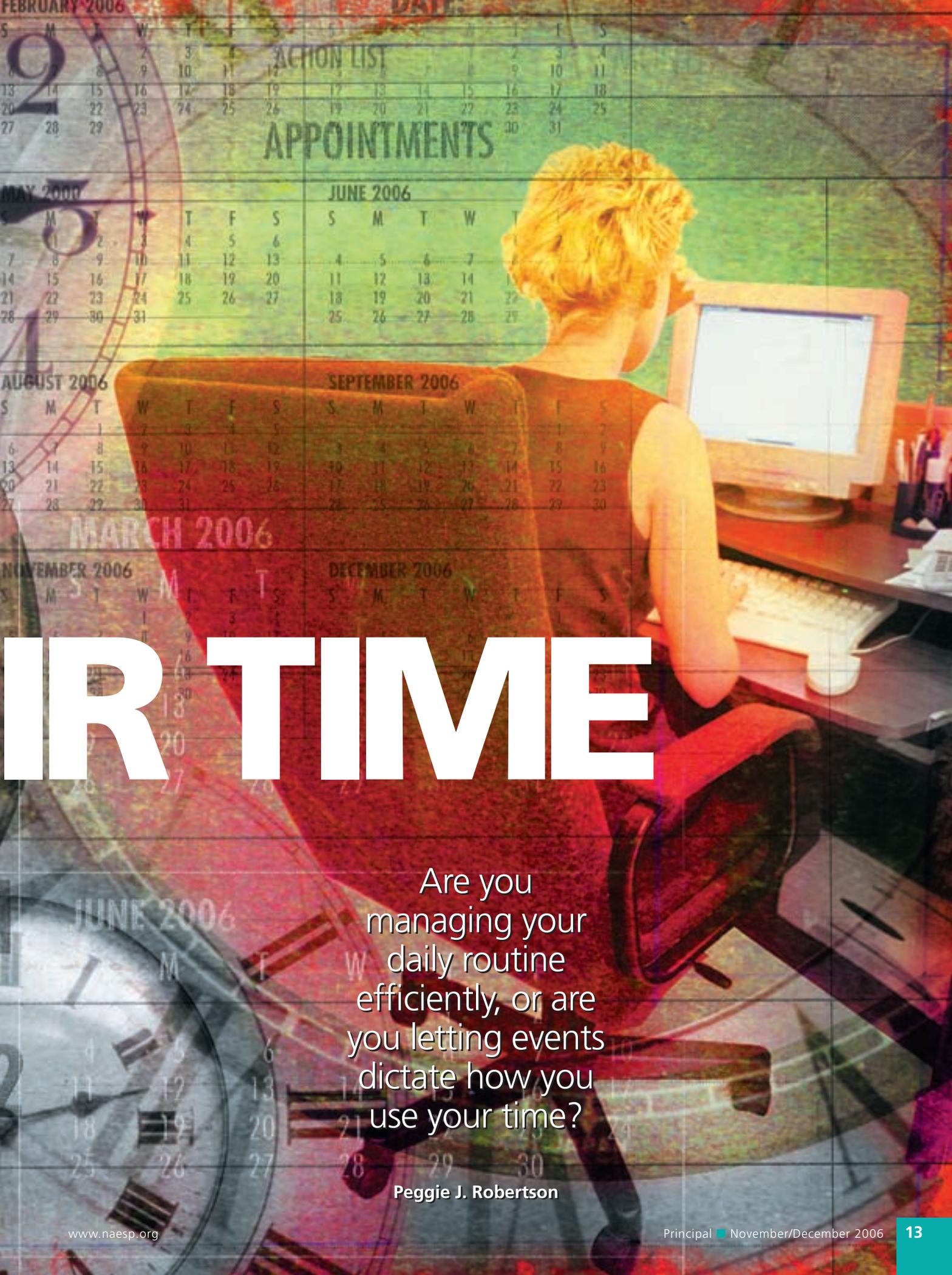
The author cites data from a random sampling of 400 principals to describe five work-management styles—Hoppers, Perfectionist Plus, Allergic to Detail, Fence Sitters, and Cliff Hangers—and how they impact performance. She provides suggested time-management practices in three critical areas: handling interruptions; scheduling contacts; and managing paperwork.

Five Work-Management Styles

Most principals approach time in five ways according to Schlenger and Roesch (1989), who have identified and defined these styles: *Hoppers*; *Perfectionist Plus*; *Allergic to Detail*; *Fence Sitters*; and *Cliff Hangers*.

Hoppers are "types [who] handle several tasks simultaneously as they literally hop from one thing to another" (Schlenger and Roesch 1989). These principals are more likely to talk to people in person or on the telephone rather than write extensive memos. They scan their mail and will often miss important details. These principals often do not complete tasks because of constant interruptions.

Perfectionist Plus types are "those who prefer to take their time keeping track of every little detail" (Schlenger and Roesch 1999). They read their mail thoroughly,



IR TIME

Are you
managing your
daily routine
efficiently, or are
you letting events
dictate how you
use your time?

Peggie J. Robertson

omitting no details, and are more likely to communicate by writing e-mails or memos. However, the pitfall for this type is that in writing and rewriting reports to make them perfect, they often do not complete them on time. Winston (1983) adds, "Another manifestation of perfectionism is the misplaced attempt to do everything perfectly, regardless of its relative importance." Most principals' personal preferences for managing time fall somewhere on the continuum between Hopper and Perfectionist Plus.

Allergic to Detail principals prefer to focus on the big picture by formulating general plans and leaving the details of implementation to subordinates. The secretary or an assistant principal often is "in charge" of gathering data for reports, payroll, and procedures, as well as reading and responding to the principal's e-mail. These principals get major tasks accomplished but avoid analyzing data for budgets or student achievement. They seldom, if ever, write major grant applications that require details.

Fence Sitters have trouble making up their minds when faced with lots of choices. They want to make the best decision possible and, therefore, will often seek information from others, weighing it carefully and listening to both sides of an issue. These principals seldom take risks by creating or initiating new programs, preferring to implement programs that have been tried by others. They often use a dichotomy of ideas that may not reflect a consistent philosophy. They second-guess themselves and frequently miss out on favorable outcomes because they take so long to make decisions.

Cliff Hangers are principals who wait until the last minute and generally need outside pressure to complete tasks. They involve others in their rush to finish reports and meet deadlines, requiring frequent "emergency meetings" with staff, and are often late for scheduled meetings. Cliff Hangers tend to get bored easily and need new challenges to keep them motivated. They frequently work overtime trying to meet deadlines, creating a last-minute commotion that

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is frustrating to those around them.

These five work-management styles are certainly not absolute. Principals may see characteristics of themselves in two or more of these scenarios. In fact, the more flexible principals are, the more work-management styles they will use. However, if they closely examine their individual patterns of managing time, they will discern a personal preference for one style over others.

What's Your Style?

The study found no significant differences in the work-management styles used by males and females, public school and private school principals, or elementary and middle school principals. While principals reported that they were flexible in using all five work-management styles, 61 percent clearly indicated that the Hopper style of managing the job of a school principal was the style most like them. These principals preferred to operate in a more reactionary mode than to follow the step-by-step logical procedures of a Perfectionist Plus. They indicated that they did not intentionally move from task to task, but that the nature of the job required them to often respond to teachers, parents, students, and others, and that they frequently could not complete tasks they had begun.

The study also reviewed time-management practices in the business and medical fields that principals could use in education. The best practices were in six categories: managing meetings; scheduling contacts with customers; managing paperwork; managing delegations; establishing priorities; and handling interruptions. While most principals recognized the value of using best practices for establishing priorities, managing meetings, and delegating

tasks, this article will address the three categories that the study found were lowest in use of effective time-management practices (Robertson 1999).

Handling Interruptions

Sixty-four percent of the principals reported that they were "often to very often" interrupted by walk-ins. The following suggestions will help principals manage these interruptions:

- Handle routine questions by contacting teachers and students during daily walkarounds. Sixty-two percent of the responding principals reported that they toured their buildings more than three times a day, giving teachers regular times to have quick discussions with them. Teachers should not address serious issues at this time, but schedule appointments. Being visible and accessible to students is another benefit of frequently touring the building. It is better that the principal go to the students on a regular basis than have lines of students waiting in the office before and after the school day (Robertson 1999).

- When parents come to school to see the principal, they typically arrive at the beginning of the day, during lunch, or near the end of the day. By anticipating this pattern, a specific amount of time can be allotted for these visits. But parents should be asked to make appointments for serious matters.

- When unannounced visitors, like central office personnel, feel that the principal should be immediately accessible to them, greeting them while standing up tends to keep the visits short (Tanner, Schnittjer, and Atkins 1991).

Scheduling Contacts

In Kmetz and Willower's 1982 study of elementary principals' work behavior, more than 86 percent of their activities occupied more than 70 percent of their time in personal contacts, including face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, and brief visual or verbal interactions while touring the building. Here is how you can save some of that time:

- Have the school secretary screen your telephone calls and retrieve

important information as well as the name and number of the caller. Using electronic messaging, the secretary can type in this information, which you can access later and use when you have time to return the call.

■ Students in today's world often have different surnames than their caretakers. Save time by having the school secretary create a cross-reference directory with both student and parent/guardian's surnames. Before talking to a parent, you should be able to type the parent's name into a computer and the corresponding student's name will automatically appear. This allows you to have the student's file at hand when meeting with the parent.

■ Designate a specific time for return calls at least twice a day. By setting up a block of time for returning calls, the average time for each call can be reduced (Mattauch 1987). "Used properly, the telephone is one of the greatest time savers," according to Tanner, Schnittjer, and Atkins (1991). You also can save time by giving office staff the answers to the most frequently asked questions for certain times of the school year.

■ Use electronic devices to help manage your time. For example, conference calling can be very useful when disabled or working parents are unable to come to the school for meetings. Taking electronic notes of conversations with parents, teachers, and students is another time-saving practice (Robertson 1999).

■ To maintain control of your time within the workday, set general time limits for meetings, telephone conversations, and other contacts—keeping in mind those situations that require an exception.

Managing Paperwork

Even with the unexpected and unplanned events of the day, there are time-consuming administrative tasks. Here are some suggestions for managing paperwork:

■ Schedule unencumbered time during the school day to do deskwork, with no visitors and no phone calls accepted except for emergencies. Or try to schedule interchangeable blocks of time for

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specific important activities (Covey, Merrill, and Merrill 1994). Thirty-four percent of the principals in this study reported that they put aside "less than 15 minutes" daily as a block of time to complete administrative paperwork.

■ The mail drop for the principal should be on the secretary's desk. Winston (1983) reminds principals that one of the major responsibilities of a secretary is to sort mail and prioritize it, putting important mail on top. Setting

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aside a daily block of time to work with the secretary would increase a principal's efficiency (Robertson 1999).

■ Mayer (1995) recommends that secretaries and principals maintain one calendar and use pencils to schedule appointments because many appointments will be rescheduled or postponed. Shared computerized calendars are the most efficient.

■ Maintain a log of all reports turned in by you and your staff, including the date the report was received, the due date, the date it was turned in, to whom, and who completed the report (Robertson 1999).

Despite the controversy about having an open-door policy versus a closed-door policy, a large number of principals could benefit from learning how to be flexible with an open-door policy by implementing some of the above suggestions.

Learning to use some of the suggestions in this article will give the principal

“...a large number of principals could benefit from learning how to be flexible with an open-door policy...”

more control over time. Covey, Merrill, and Merrill (1994) suggest that using time on what is important will allow principals to “build rich relationships, have inner peace, balance, and confidence that [they are] doing what matters most and are doing it well.” ■

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WEB RESOURCES

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<http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/theses/available/etd-042199-205455/unrestricted/TITLE.PDF>

Scholastic Administrator has made available the article “Technology Beats the Clock,” in which educators share techniques for using technology to save time.

<http://content.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=408>

Amazing Time Management Secrets is Bill Allison's daily blog in which he provides amusing and provocative thoughts on managing time. www.amazingtimemanagementsecrets.blogspot.com

A PRINCIPAL'S DAY

It's Never Too Early—or Too Late

It's 7:30 a.m. and I have arrived at school early because I have so much paperwork to do, but several people are waiting for me. First, a second-grade teacher requests a few minutes to discuss student progress. When she leaves, a mother arrives to discuss her concerns about her child, a first-grade student who can't seem to control his impulses despite numerous interventions. My ESL teacher drops by to apprise me of the testing schedule that she has developed. Then my first-grade teachers come in and chat as they look for material in my testing file cabinet.

Today, I have to turn in our state criterion-referenced tests that we have just completed administering to our third through fifth graders. I check each teacher's completed form and find a place or two that need more information. Then it's time to leave for a principals' meeting at the central office.

There are more than 70 of us and we feel a kinship shared by those who know the challenges of the job we hold. A number of central office personnel address our group: The superintendent explains why he has accepted a job in Texas; the facilities folks advise us to check on our summer cleaning crews to make sure the work is getting done; and the curriculum folks delineate several different summer school options.

At 11:30 we are released to return to our schools, and four other principals and I sneak off to lunch and share the joy of a principal who will be marrying one of my teachers on Friday.

By 12:15 I'm back at school, where my secretary is waiting with several "must call" slips. I don't have time to return the calls because I have to get the testing

materials back today. I hop into my car with my secretary and we dash off to deliver the materials.

When we get back, I find more than 25 e-mails requiring action, plus several more "must call" telephone slips. One of the e-mails is from my immediate supervisor, notifying me of due dates for five reports in the next two weeks, as well as testing dates for additional assessments.

It's now 3 o'clock and time to dismiss the students. Following dismissal, bus loading, and car loading, my teachers and I rush to the library for our weekly faculty meeting. I share the long-awaited Organizational Health Inventory and we applaud our rating, the best in the district. We celebrate honors received by two of our teachers, discuss summer school plans, and pass out our "Academy Awards" for teachers.

After the meeting, I drive one of my teachers home because his car has given out. Another principal and I then meet at the YMCA, where we jump around, lift weights, and try to throw off the stress of the day.

As I drive home, I talk via cell phone with my husband (also a school administrator) who has taken our two sons, 13 and 16, to the city museum to interview for summer apprentice positions. I get home to an empty house and spend the next 30 minutes writing my thoughts on my blog (www.drjansblog.blogspot.com) before taking a few scoops of peanut butter for my dinner.

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Westwood Elementary School is an urban school serving 293 Pre-K–5 students on a year-round schedule. It is a Title I school with 90 percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.