The Carpool Manifesto

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There is a version of school leadership that happens behind closed doors: in budget meetings, strategy sessions, donor visits, enrollment reports, and board presentations. That work matters. I have spent the better part of two decades doing it, and I believe in it.

But there is another kind of school leadership that happens in the parking lot at 7:45 in the morning, with a cup of coffee going cold in your hand and a line of minivans stretching to the road. That work matters too. And in my experience, it may matter more than we think.

This is my case for staying close to the daily life of your school, not as a feel-good exercise or a leadership optic, but as a discipline with real strategic value. It is also an honest confession about the two habits I have maintained throughout nearly every role I have held, from teacher to Director of Admission to Associate Head for Advancement to Interim Head of School.

I always taught a class. And I always worked the carpool line.

The Class I Never Gave Up

I have held close to a dozen administrative titles over the course of my career. Not once, in any of those roles, did I go a full year without teaching at least one class.

I kept teaching for reasons that were partly practical and partly philosophical. On the practical side, standing in a classroom kept me credible with faculty in a way that no amount of good intentions could replicate. Teachers know whether you understand their work. They can tell the difference between a leader who empathizes with the classroom experience and one who actually lives it. Teaching one class does not make you a master teacher, but it does put you in the room, and being in the room matters.

It also kept me current. The landscape of classroom teaching shifts constantly: pedagogical approaches, student attention and engagement, the relentless evolution of technology, the social and emotional weather of adolescence. Administrative distance from that landscape is a real risk. The longer you are away from it, the more your decisions are shaped by the school you remember rather than the school that exists.

But the most valuable thing about teaching, the thing I keep coming back to, is what it does to your *why*. There are days in advancement, in admission, in senior administration, when the work can start to feel abstract. Donor

cultivation. Yield modeling. Budget forecasting. Strategic planning. These are real and necessary, but they can also become untethered from the students they are ultimately meant to serve.

Walking into a classroom every week tethers you back. It is hard to lose sight of the mission when you are standing in front of it.

And if you ever need a reality check (a truly honest, unfiltered read on where things stand), just ask a teenager. They will tell you. They always do.

The Carpool Line

The carpool line is not glamorous. It is cold in January, wet in March, and blinding in May. If you are bald, like me, you will want a hat for the sunny days. You will want a good coat for the cold ones. Bring an extra pair of shoes for the rainy days, and accept, once and for all, that those shoes will get wet anyway.

But show up. Show up every day, or close to it. And here is why.

When a parent pulls onto campus and sees a senior administrator (the Head of School, the Director of Admission, the Director of Philanthropy) standing at the door greeting their child, something happens in them. They feel a sense of safety. They feel seen. They carry that feeling into their day, and it shapes how they think and talk about your school. No marketing campaign produces that. No newsletter accomplishes it. Presence does.

For faculty, the effect is different but equally powerful. Teachers often experience the non-instructional staff of a school (advancement, administration, the head's office) as inhabitants of a different world. That perception is not always wrong. When those leaders appear in the carpool line, day after day, doing the unglamorous work of keeping the morning running, the silo begins to dissolve. It becomes harder to see leadership as disconnected when leadership is literally standing in the rain next to you.

This matters enormously for buy-in. Mission, vision, and values are not posters on a wall. They are patterns of behavior, observable and repeated over time. Servant leadership is not a philosophy you can announce. It is something you have to demonstrate, on ordinary mornings, before anyone is watching.

"Presence builds trust, and when it comes to building trust, there are no shortcuts."

What You Will Learn That You Cannot Learn Any Other Way

Here is what I did not fully anticipate when I started these habits: how much I would learn.

I can point to specific moments (conversations in the carpool line, exchanges after class, a comment dropped casually by a parent handing me their kid's forgotten lunch) that shaped decisions I made as an Admission Director, as an advancement leader, as an Interim Head of School. Information that would never have made it into a formal report or a survey. Concerns that families would never have raised in a scheduled meeting but shared freely with the familiar figure they saw every morning.

Presence builds trust, and trust opens doors. Not immediately. That is the crucial point. You cannot show up for a week and expect people to confide in you. Community trust is not purchased; it is accrued. It requires consistency over time. It requires being there on the ordinary days, the unremarkable days, the days when nothing happens except that you were present and they noticed.

When families and faculty see you often enough, something shifts. They stop performing for you. They stop being guarded. They start treating you the way they treat people they know, which means they start telling you the truth.

Some of the most important intelligence I gathered over the years (about how families were experiencing the school, about what was working and what was not, about where confidence was high and where it was fragile) came from those informal moments. It came not because I was mining for information, but because I was simply there, and people felt comfortable enough to share.

A Note on Time

I anticipate the objection: you are busy. You have a full calendar, an inbox that never empties, and a team that needs your leadership in rooms you are not currently standing in. Teaching a class takes real time. The carpool line takes real time. How does this square?

My answer is that the question frames the tradeoff incorrectly. The question is not whether this time costs you something (it does) but whether it costs you more than it gives you. In my experience, it does not come close.

The relational capital built through daily presence pays compounding returns. The teacher who trusts you because she has seen you in the carpool line for three years will advocate for your initiatives in ways that no memo can produce. The parent who has handed you his child every morning for a decade will give you the benefit of the doubt in a crisis. The student who knows you as a real person, not just a title, will tell you something honest when you need to hear it.

You are not taking time away from your work. You are doing your work in a different room.

Show Up

I do not offer this as a prescription for everyone's schedule or every school's context. I offer it as something I have tried to live, and something I have watched make a difference: for enrollment, for philanthropy, for culture, and for my own sense of purpose in this work.

Buy a warm coat. Bring an extra pair of shoes. Have a hat ready for the sunny days.

But no matter what: show up. Show up consistently. Let your community see you in the parking lot, in the hallway, in the classroom, in the ordinary unremarkable flow of a school day.

It will make you better at every other part of your job. And, I say this with complete sincerity, it will very likely become your favorite part of the day.