

## Beyond the Open-Door Policy

**It's Communication 101: Open-door policies are essential to building trust among teachers and students. But some principals aren't waiting to be approached. Find out how No Office Days are getting administrators away from their desks and back into the classroom.**

"When people see you [in a classroom] and they're either surprised to see you or don't recognize you, it means you're not visible enough," says Tom Hoerr, head of New City School in St. Louis, Mo. In his school of 355 K–6 students, Hoerr believes that he's not nearly as accessible as he should be.

Although he always makes time for those who seek him out, he admits that open-door policies are only as good as teachers and students make them. "We should all have an open-door policy," says Hoerr. "However, that requires the other person to initiate coming through the door."

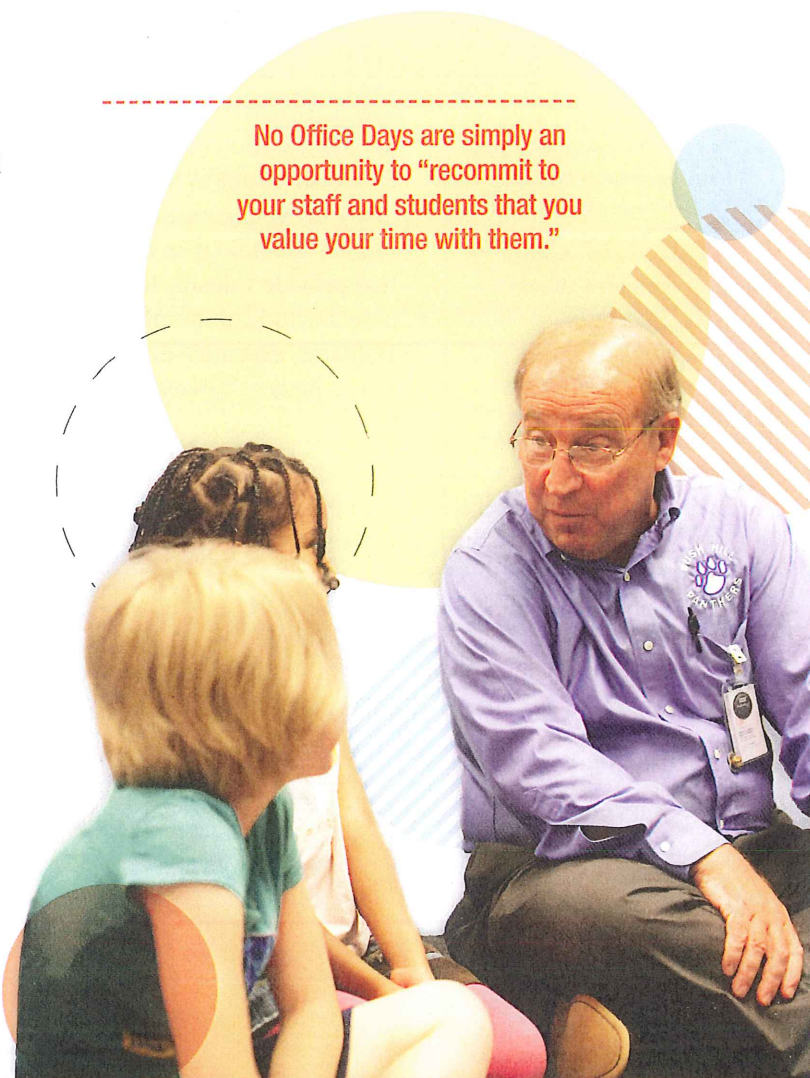
### No Office Days

Because not everyone feels comfortable taking advantage of open-door policies, a number of administrators are being more proactive. In 2010, Canadian school leader David Truss, vice principal of Coquitlam Open Learning and lead administrator of the Inquiry Hub, a technology-driven high school in Vancouver, British Columbia, had an epiphany during a staff meeting. At the time, he was the principal of a K–9 school in China and had been so tied up in administrative duties that his only classroom visits for nearly a month had been for scheduled walkthroughs. He had promised teachers that he would spend the next day visiting classrooms, but last-minute meetings derailed his plan.

He gave it another attempt that Friday and left his laptop at home, breaking ground on his first official "No Office Day."

*continued on page 4 →*

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Inside Update:	Why Every District Needs a Mobile App .....	2
	Big on Ideas and Short on Funds? .....	6
	Our Someday Is Now .....	8

## Beyond the Open-Door Policy

→ continued from page 1

Instead of setting aside an hour or two, he cleared his entire schedule.

Throughout the day, Truss visited classrooms and posted pictures of learning in action to his blog (<http://pairadimes.davidtruss.com>) and on Twitter with the hashtag #noofficeday. He had a few issues that required him to go to the office, but he addressed them quickly at his secretary's desk, and he only checked his e-mail while moving between classrooms.

Spending the day with students "recharged [his] batteries" and inspired Truss to put out a challenge on his blog for other administrators to follow suit. Although some principals were initially concerned that No Office Days could send the wrong message that principals rarely visit classrooms, Truss explained that beyond the hoopla, No Office Days are simply an opportunity to "recommit to your staff and students that you value your time with them." The hashtag—and

concept—soon caught on and a small group of principals began implementing their own No Office Days. Eventually, an International No Office Day gained steam, and the media even picked up on principals' participation.

## Taking Up the Challenge

Inspired by his colleagues, Joe Mazza, principal of Knapp Elementary School in Landsdale, Pa., spends an entire day each month visiting his 27 classrooms. Although he might only get 10 or 15 minutes with each class, he's still able to connect with teachers and students and "get a hold of what's happening in the building."

When he's in classrooms, Mazza spends extra time with students who have been identified as struggling by the student intervention team. "It's about being able to walk around and check in on kids without actually calling them out," he says.

His most profound moments, however, have occurred at the lunch table when students "come out of their academic shells." That's when he learned that one student's journey to school began at 4:45 in the morning.

"You really get to know some things that are going on—and that gives you so much more respect for these kids. If a kid was already up for four hours before they got to school at 8:45, that's intense. No wonder the kid is falling asleep at 11:00 when their lunch might not be scheduled until 1:00." Insights from these interactions help Mazza work with classroom teachers to better meet students' needs.

Just down the road from Landsdale, Rabbi Shmuel Jablon, principal of the Torah Academy of Greater Philadelphia, takes a lighter approach. He routinely sets aside e-mails and phone calls for the chance to play with students during recess, quiz them in the classroom, and participate in



## TIPS FOR A SEAMLESS NO OFFICE DAY

- **Plan ahead.** Block off the entire day from meetings. If that is not possible, block off half a day or even an hour—and keep your commitment.
- **Give your staff advance notice.** Let your teachers know that this is not a formal observation. And ask ahead of time how you can help with lessons.
- **Leave your laptop at home.**
- **Stay present and have fun!** Eat lunch with students, join a game of kickball, and take part in activities. No Office Day is all about letting your guard down.
- **Record the experience.** Take video, tweet updates, and post pictures to your blog or website. But avoid documenting too much. If you're constantly checking your smartphone, you might be missing out on some incredible stuff.
- **Take time to reflect.** What worked? What didn't? What did you gain from the experience? Share your observations with teachers and students.
- **Do it again!** Make No Office Days or even No Office Hours a part of your regular routine. Start simply, with one in the fall and one in the spring.

hands-on learning activities. Jablon and several other principals received flip cameras from the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education to document their No Office Day happenings (visit [www.youtube.com/user/TorahAcademyPhilly](http://www.youtube.com/user/TorahAcademyPhilly) to see his video diary).

What Jablon finds most rewarding about being in the classroom—without an agenda—is how excited students are to “show off their learning” and see their principal so interested in their activities. “My favorite part was when 1st graders cheered, ‘Hurray! It’s No Office Day! Rabbi Jablon is coming!’”

Lyn Hilt, adjunct professor and instructional technology coach for the Eastern Lancaster County School District in Pennsylvania, had been carrying out her own version of No Office Days when she served as an elementary principal for the district. She dedicated a series of full days to classrooms in each grade level and asked teachers beforehand to “put her to work” and find specific activities for her to participate in.

“We have to be there for our students and staff,” writes Hilt on her blog ([www.lynhilt.com](http://www.lynhilt.com)). “We can’t do that from behind a closed office door or even an open office door.”

During her “exhilarating and exhausting” No Office Days, Hilt taught lessons on dinosaur extinction, performed science experiments with root beer floats and hot chocolate, read poetry with kids, helped students grasp math concepts, and glazed pottery in art class.

“Nothing beats the way you feel after you leave a classroom,” adds Hilt. “You know you’ve just spent quality time with your learners and that perspective can make all of the difference.”

## Anticipating Roadblocks

Although the concept is simple, actually executing a No Office Day takes careful planning and discipline, says Mazza. “My staff in the office understands what my focus is on those days. Unless there’s blood and an emergency, you’re not getting me. It’s really refreshing to shut down e-mail and say, ‘Hey, let’s talk!’”

Mazza blocked out a year’s worth of No Office Days before school even started in the fall. He scheduled the days in advance of a conference or meeting that had him out of the building so he could spend quality time with students beforehand.

Still, for Jablon, “the challenge is being able to clear my schedule for a day,” he says.

## MODELING ACTIVE ACCESSIBILITY

Administrators who regularly swap their offices for classrooms are taking a page out of the playbook of leadership best practice. As leadership consultant Colleen Kettenhofen ([www.bouncebackhigher.com](http://www.bouncebackhigher.com)) explains, active leadership accessibility occurs when leaders go out of their way to seek out and engage employees in meaningful conversations about their challenges, needs, and perspectives. Passive leadership accessibility, on the other hand, puts the responsibility on employees to seek out leaders through a typical open-door policy. Although still important, passive accessibility has its flaws. Kettenhofen insists that “most people will not take advantage of an open-door policy, unless it is something incredibly serious.”

Similarly, even in his small school, Hoerr acknowledges that it is difficult to leave the office for an extended period. “As a starting point, if you can’t mark off a day, can you mark off a half hour or an hour?” asks Hoerr. If that seems unmanageable, principals can just make a point to roam the building.

“Part of it is the ability to go out and stand and just be approachable,” says Hoerr. “Principals need to perfect the ability to look as if they’re just hanging around with nothing to do even though they’ve got a million things that they need to do.” **EU**

—SARAH MCKIBBEN

## → MORE ONLINE

What does a No Office Day really look like? Larry Fliegelman, principal of Wolcott Elementary School in Vermont, shares his firsthand account at [www.ascd.org/eu0913office](http://www.ascd.org/eu0913office). Find out how a day of blocks, butterflies, and lively learning renewed his respect for teachers—and drained his energy.

