Interview with Khorolmaa, School principal, Khairkhandulaan soum, Uvurkhangai aimag

Q: As I know, you became a principal three years ago. You have probably worked as a teacher and manager at this school. What was it like to become a principal after that? How did the "Community School" project influence you?

A: It's been three years. When I became a principal, the project had just started. It was very helpful. I thought how I would be different in managing the school and do something new, and I learned the skills and approaches of managing relationships and how to attract parents. I had worked as a school teacher for 2 years and as a manager for 8 years so I lacked with management knowledge and leadership. As a manager you focus only on the teaching and learning and teacher development. There was a need to take care of multitude of work when I accepted the position. Thus, I learnt important aspects of governance, openness and involvement in school life, quality of teaching, and teacher development. I came up with my own approach and direction based on the specific problems that we identified. This position helps a lot in personal development. When you communicate with different people you find your way of working. This, to me is the positive side of the position. On the other hand, this is something that a real leader should do.

Q: How do you understand the leadership?

A: For me, a leader is someone who can make sacrifice and take risks. In other words when making decisions you foresee all possible risks and make choices. When you make a choice it always has both a positive and a negative side. Letting someone go is also a choice. I thought that this job is for someone who stands by his/her decision. For me the most difficult part is making hard/difficult decisions, like punishing or making decisions about [other] people. Before I viewed differently about leadership. The person who was successful on Olympiad and competitions, talking alone and doing all things by himself/herself seemed a successful one. The one who took the control and spoke alone during the meeting, was viewed as a leader to me. I wanted to be like that. But now my view has changed. I understand that making a positive impact is leadership. I see that ultimate goal of human's life is being peaceful in the work and family and involving others is leadership. Giving these chances is leadership. Previously, during meetings I talked about what I did myself and then asked others ideas or comments but they wouldn't respond. I was talking myself. During meetings the atmosphere always was like that. Now my colleagues ask for a meeting. I receive all the

critiques and suggestions. I am not able to do everything, so I need your help. There are lots of things I can't do. I tell that they're right but we discuss about what we should do to make changes, what we should do together to reach the goal and meet the expectations and how we can collaborate. If something depends on me 100%, I will make a change. During the meeting I stopped talking. The team and colleagues now talk. Now, with community engagement, the people in charge of programs have changed. Whether they're wrong or right, I listen to all that they have to say and respond them. This is a change as I see getting community involved and have them speak. During my time as a training manager, we talked about things we didn't like amongst ourselves but not in the meeting. Only the principal talked and we always thought it was a good thing. Only the principal made the decisions regardless of whether the decision right or wrong, we didn't express our opinion. Way of life was just like that, now everyone is peaceful and involved and freely express what they dislike. In the beginning, I accepted everything they said but now I ask parents for evidence. Our parents often criticize school activities at local meetings, community meetings, and parent meetings. People are accepting it in two ways. First, why only the school is being criticized but other organizations are not. There is a tendency to say if the school is not doing well. I say no, the school management and activities are all going open and transparent. There is nothing to hide. Other organizations are likely to be more open. But it's not open like us. I tell now "You can do monitoring and collect the evidence. Thank you so much parents for your efforts in school activities. But if you present your concerns with facts and evidence, we'll make changes." Hopefully, people will change this way. Knowing the real school environment and the difficulty of budgeting, a lot of changes are happening in the school environment with support of parents. The main point is when evaluated by the ministry or someone else we don't want them to compare our school with other schools. Local Council or Governor regularly carry out inspections and always compare organizations or compare our school with other schools which are located far away like Ulaanbaatar and ask what we did. But our team will be motivated and encouraged if we do what we couldn't do the previous year. They have to keep an eye on what is happening in our own school's community.

Q: What was the change for the teachers? How did the teachers respond?

A: Initially, the teachers were very critical because they did not understand. Many teachers still do not understand yet. We have to work again when new teachers arrive. One of the criticisms is that what parents say is taken up too much. They say that I should be talking about policies, pursuing a project, or seeking investment into the school. Or that you are

running around and getting involved in everything or just sitting in your office reading a book. You don't know what you're doing. Generally, the issue was around the point that parents don't know how we work and they now monitor what we do. But it's changing now. I just wanted to clarify one thing that inspection/monitoring is for work improvement. Tell the parents the truth. You will be accepted. Tell them that this is exactly what it is now and discuss what can be done. Our first-grade teacher was very critical of us. Now she's working very well with parents and teaching parents. Our first graders' parents in are very active. Every child in our first grade in the past two years is doing well. And this year, more changes are coming. There is a positive effect on children by working with the parents and being critical. But the main thing is not to encourage competition as it hurts the children. We're trying to eliminate it. Instead, we are focusing parent monitoring to make sure that every child has potential. Therefore, we plan together with community involvement to make individual plans and activities for involvement of all children and the teacher who is involving each child is considered a good teacher.

Q: Community involvement can take a lot of time, especially when it comes to decision making. Some people criticize that when a lot of people are involved, it takes time to reach consensus and reach common understanding in order to make a decision. What's the disadvantage of community involvement and getting parents involved in school activities? Have you noticed such obstacles that are hindering school activities?

A: It is free when everything is open and transparent. But it is possible to guide and facilitate the process. I do not see any serious disadvantages at the moment because it is very helpful to me. As it is said, two heads are better than one. Something that involved ideas of many people usually works better than that of or by an individual. In the past, when doing something alone was not as successful, but now I tend to support what they come up with. After some time, the results will be achieved. Everyone is happy, enthusiastic and eager to get involved, starting with such a simple thing. The budget for teaching materials is complicated. So, we start discussing that here is how much we received so let's decide how we need to spend it properly. Now they spend it by themselves. Or here's how much we have this month for physical education and competitions, please come up with how you want to spend it. Whenever possible, I support what they come up with and get them involved doing it. The teachers are actively involved in arranging the activities for themselves.

Q: What advice would you give to a school or team who want to become a community school?

A: First, identify the facing issues at school with participation of different stakeholders. When the issues are clearly identified, make plan based on them. If the plan is well developed, the activities will be clear. Second, get the local support and collaborate with other organizations. The initiation should come from the school first. Third, be open to criticism and shift from “me” to “us.” Fourth, think about what positive impact the activity will have on others. Make sure you’re understood well. Even small tasks need to be done clearly and efficiently.