

## *Tale #1*

# **Alex's Story**

## ***Told by Franklin Schargel***

*Great deeds are usually wrought at great risks.*  
~ Herodotus

In "Alex's Story," author Franklin Schargel shows how one decision can forever affect a student. We learn about how Alex beat the odds, overcoming drugs and the death of a parent, with the help of a faithful principal. We see a powerful relationship and enactment of a belief that all students can succeed given the right conditions.

### **Before You Begin**

- What student do you consider the greatest success story of your career? Why?
- What is an acceptable risk to take on a student?
- What unanticipated outcome(s) has resulted from a seemingly unimportant decision or comment you have made regarding a student?
- It's all about building relationships with students. How do teachers build relationships with students?

## Alex's Story

Alex had been kicked out after only his first year in high school. He had attended class for only 21 days that year. Worse, he had been arrested five times for dealing drugs.

At the beginning of his 10th grade year, Alex asked to be admitted to a new school. The principal of the new school met with Alex to determine whether or not to admit him. He looked over his academic record. It showed he had received excellent grades during his first 9 years of school. But something had happened to change all that during ninth grade. The principal asked him to explain what had happened.

"My father died last year," Alex said, "and I needed to pay for the funeral. So I started dealing drugs. It was good money, so I kept on doing it. I make more money now dealing drugs than going to school. But I also know what my life expectancy will be."

The principal knew the same statistic. Three years.

The principal asked, "What is it that you want? What is it that you need?"

Alex replied, "I don't want to be a statistic. I don't want to die in 3 years. I want to go back to high school."

The principal could see that Alex was still a bright kid, who wanted to get past dealing drugs. He admitted him to the school.

Alex studied hard and maintained a B average. He impressed everyone in the school with his intelligence, work ethic, and personal charm. He graduated on time and was accepted to a local college on full scholarship. He got a summer job with a local business to help pay for his college expenses.

But Alex's past wouldn't let him go. Frustrated, he told the principal, "Thank you for everything you've done for me, but I can't go to college here. If I stay, I'm afraid I'll get back into trouble. I need a fresh start."

The principal knew the dean of another college in a nearby state. He told her about Alex's history, but he also told her about his intelligence, work ethic, and successful efforts to change his life so far. The dean agreed to interview him. Alex visited the school and had a successful interview. He started college the following fall.

Midway through the fall semester, the principal received a phone call from the dean.

"I need to talk with you about Alex," the dean said. The principal was worried. Had Alex's past caught up with him again?

"Alex has just been elected the freshman representative to the student government," said the dean. His grades are outstanding. I want to know if you have any more Alex's at your school. We want you to send them here."

The principal smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. He called Alex to congratulate him—and also to find out how to meet the dean's request.

"How can we clone you, Alex?" he asked. "What did we do that was right?"

"I'll be happy to tell you," Alex said, "but on one condition." He laughed. "Visit me here and treat me to dinner at the nicest restaurant in town."

The next weekend, the principal drove out to the college and took Alex out to dinner at the nicest restaurant in town. Then Alex gave him the secret of his success. Of *their* success.

He said, "You were the first person who ever *asked* me what I needed instead of *telling* me what I needed to do."

Alex graduated from college and was hired by a major engineering firm in Chicago. Due to his intelligence, work ethic, and personal charm, he was soon promoted. And promoted again. His annual salary was now higher than the principal's ... for the last several years combined!

Years later, the principal was in Chicago and decided to look Alex up and give him a call. Alex was happy to hear from the principal and once again thanked him for helping him get through his troubled years.

"Let's get together while you're here," he suggested. "Sure," the principal replied. "But on one condition. You treat *me* to dinner at the nicest restaurant in town."

## **Time to Reflect**

1. What are the risks—legal, emotional, physical—of investing in such a student?
2. Relationships with students are really an investment in their future. How does one go about building relationships with students?
3. How many “Alexes” can an educator be expected to take on in the course of a career?
4. If Alex wasn’t charming and smart, how would the principal’s initial approach to him be different?
5. If Alex had gone on to become a mechanic, would he still be a success story? Why or why not?
6. If Alex had returned to drug dealing, do you think the principal would have regretted his decision to give him a second chance? Why or why not?
7. Suppose the dean of the other college had said, “No, thanks.” What would the principal then do?
8. List the choices the principal made in the course of this tale and rank them in order of importance.
9. What qualities of a successful administrator did the principal in this tale demonstrate?
10. In addition to the principal, what types of support do students like Alex need from different school personnel such as the school counselor?
11. What is the most important lesson to be learned from this tale?

## **So What—Now What?**

1. One of the strategies for building empathy for an unlovable child is to consider when you yourself have been unlovable. As an adult, when have you acted, or wanted to act, in a hostile or disengaged manner?
2. Alex wanted to stop dealing drugs, making the principal’s job a bit easier. How does one reach the student who isn’t “buying what you’re selling”?
3. How can you create authentic opportunities to find out about students’ lives outside of school? What do you then do with this information?
4. Building relationships with students is one of the cornerstones in a child’s education. Are there programs in the school that could promote building relationships with students?



## Hit the Ground Running: Try This Tomorrow–

1. *Digging Deeper:* Teachers build relationships with students by getting to know them as people. Also by showing a personal interest in students, you encourage them to trust you. The following “Getting to Know You,” activity takes about 10 minutes of class time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Tell me something that few people, if any, know about you.

What is something that you can do better than anyone you know?

What is something you wish you knew how to do?

### Cues:

As the year progresses, ask students to share more information by giving them the opportunity to respond to the same questions. By returning to this activity, teachers show consistently that they are interested in the growth and development of their students. If this activity is used in a homeroom setting, you could follow-up with individual meetings with students.

## Musings

Research shows that principals make hundreds of decisions every day. What is often overlooked, though, is that many of these decisions can be life changing. When a principal is facing a situation dealing with the acceptance or promotion of problematic, low-achieving, disruptive, or misbehaving students, the principal can easily say “no” and will probably not think too much about this issue after the decision has been made. Saying “yes” is more problematic. It means that the story is to be continued and a happy ending is not always guaranteed.

In such cases, it is always easier to say no, because it is likely to mark the end of the story. However, what marks the end of the story for the decision maker can be the beginning of a life story for the recipient of the decision. Because they make so many decisions on a daily basis, principals often don't think about their long-term impact. When they do, they may find it takes immense courage to make a decision that goes against common beliefs because these decisions make them responsible for what happens afterwards.

In decisions that are high stakes—the decisions that have the potential to affect another person's life—there are always questions that are elevated in the mind of the decision maker. Perhaps Alex's principal asked some of these questions:

- Should I accept a student with a criminal history?
- Should I take time to interview the student about the change in his grades?
- Should I give a second chance to a student who had such a high rate of missing classes?

The principal in this *Tale from a Teacher's Heart* was probably asking himself all of these questions and more. He could have simply said no to Alex, and not spent any more time on the issue.

However, this principal decided to give Alex a chance. He found time to meet with him and listen to him. He gave Alex the opportunity to explain the facts and to express his own wishes for the future. The principal had enough courage to go against a commonly held belief about students with criminal histories and low grades. The principal did not give up hope on Alex.

It is likely that this meeting did not take too much time from the principal's busy schedule. However, what this meeting, and the decision following it, did for the student was invaluable: Alex got a second chance, marking the beginning of his successes in high school, college, and beyond. This one decision allowed Alex to finish high school, to go to college, and to start building a future.

Alex beat the odds when the principal stood by his decision to believe in him. The principal went out on a limb and made contact with a college dean; the principal stayed connected with Alex throughout his collegiate career and beyond. The decision the principal made initially, to let Alex in his school, led to other decisions that required action—the enactment of a belief that all students can succeed given the right conditions and support.

Very often the power of one decision is overlooked. In order to minimize the probability of future problems, teachers and principals opt for the more convenient "no" as a way to avoid assuming responsibility, often forgetting about the impact a decision of that magnitude might have. It doesn't mean that teachers and principals should always agree to students' requests. What it does mean is that all students should be treated with respect, should be heard, and should be given a chance to speak for themselves.

Alex was given such treatment and fully benefited from it. There are many more students such as Alex. Our call is to hear the “Alexes” and to make decisions that give them a second chance.

## **In a Nutshell**

- The student’s past should not be crucial in determining the future.
- In a teacher’s or principal’s work, personal judgment should not precede or replace professional judgment.
- Students should not be passive recipients of the principal’s (teacher’s) will; rather, they should be active participants in the process of building their future.
- When in doubt, look beyond the facts. Every behavior has a reason.
- Before saying “no,” the principal (dean, teacher, etc.) should think twice as this decision could mark the student’s life forever.
- Students deserve a second chance to build a future.

## **Quotes From the Heart**

“You were the first person who ever asked me what I needed instead of telling me what I needed to do.”