



DREAM TEAM

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INTRODUCTION



The Challenge, the Way, and the Why

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Halls Creek, Western Australia, 2008

It was a new day for me, the principal of Halls Creek District School.

Some days would start with the piercing shriek of the alarm clock, but usually I was awake long before it rang, my mind already buzzing with a thousand things that had to get done, many of them roll-overs from old to-do lists. Other mornings, the bad dreams would wake me. Many principals have bad dreams. But today, it was the bird—a crow, to be exact, the one with a call that sounded a lot like a sick goat being hurled off a cliff and who liked to set up shop in a tree right next to our bedroom window. I opened one eye, reached for my phone, and glanced at the screen. It was Monday morning, barely light out, and I already had 33 e-mails, 7 texts, and 2 missed calls.

I rolled out of bed, and my running shoes were the first thing that I saw. They were filthy, covered in trash juice, which is a close contender

for the worst-smelling thing on the planet. The local municipality had gone on strike last week, and with our school janitorial staff out sick, I had spent part of my Sunday hauling 50 large trash cans to the dump on the other side of town. It had topped 100 degrees every day for the past fortnight, so by the weekend, the bins were nasty—but not too nasty to keep my deputy from meeting me in the carpark at 8:00 a.m. without me even asking. A hero. After the final bin drop, I thanked him in his love language: a Snickers bar and a can of Red Bull.

Sundays were supposed to be my “revolutionary days,” a chance to get some quiet time to work up new creative curricula or professional development activities for the staff. But between the trash bins, an unfriendly e-mail inbox, and a pile of administrative work I had to get through, this recent Sunday had been a 14-hour slog of reacting, not revolutionizing.

But today was a new day and a new school week, in one of the most remote towns in the world. We were in the Australian outback, red dirt country, 750 miles away from Darwin, the nearest main city. Most of the 1,000 people who lived in Halls Creek were Indigenous, and as small as the town was, it was well known as a center for culture and art. But Halls Creek also had its fair share of problems. An award-winning journalist wrote a major article describing it as “worse than a war zone” due to its levels of poverty, alcohol abuse, and violence. My family was from up this way; both my grandparents and parents had worked for years as missionaries in this part of the country, and my father had been a teacher here. Despite the many challenges Halls Creek faced, I loved it—and I loved the people who called it home.

I dressed quickly, grabbed a Red Bull from the fridge, and with a wide yawn, scooped up the keys to the school bus. Yes, it occasionally fell to me to drive the bus, and I actually kind of liked it. It was a great way to connect with the kids, and blasting some 90s-era INXS over the bus speakers usually did the trick to kick me into gear and ready me for another day as the principal of Halls Creek. But this week, the novelty

was likely to wear off. With our regular guy away, I was on driving duty every morning.

As I turned the corner for the first pickup, I slowed the bus to a crawl to negotiate the scatterings of broken beer bottles that littered the road. There had clearly been some parties the night before—and I knew these parties meant many of my students who lived here wouldn't have been able to fall asleep until the early hours of the morning.

I pulled up to the first house and leaned on the horn, turning down the stereo to listen for signs of life. Other than the goat-killing noise of the crow, which was apparently following me, there was silence. Nothing newsworthy there—the Campbell kids were always slow to rise.

I put the bus in park, jogged up to the front door, and yelled out a cheery “Hey hey hey! Time for school!” I knocked heavily on the thin timber door, mindful not to pick up any splinters from the extra holes that had appeared over the weekend. “Shut the f--k up!” was the cheery greeting I received from the next-door neighbors. Also par for the course at the Campbell house. After a few seconds of waiting, I heard the pitter-patter of bare feet making their way toward me. My first win of the day.

One of my students opened the door, her head not quite through the neck of a stained sweater, a mop of unbrushed hair bleached blonde by the sun bursting out the top. Laughing, I pulled the sweater down and greeted my now-identified grade 6 student with a “Morning, Jess!” She responded with a shy smile and an open-mouthed yawn before stumbling toward the bus, her little brother trailing behind her.

The bus's first run was smaller than usual; I was right about the parties taking a toll. But with 13 kids (by now wide awake) on board, and INXS swapped out for a fun new rap tune from the kids' favorite band, we arrived at the school carpark in style. The kids were all out the door before I had fully opened it, bolting toward the breakfast station. I strolled over as well, tempted by the wafting aroma of bacon-and-egg sandwiches.

“Small run?” asked Alice, a teacher, offering me a roll wrapped in greasy wax paper.

“Afraid so,” I responded. “Looks like the party was a big one last night.”

I declined Alice’s offer of breakfast—had to make sure all the kids were fed first—but she explained, “We have extra from the festival last week, so there is plenty to go around. And you are going to need it this week!” She didn’t have to ask me again.

The second bus run took a little longer, the route a bit farther away. For some of the families out here, education was not the highest priority. I passed my own house on this run, and I grinned widely as I picked up my 5-year-old daughter, Grace, and Maddy, her best mate and the granddaughter of Auntie Lynn, a local elder who had been helping me out ever since I had taken the job the year before.

By 7:45, I was in the building and had a few moments for e-mails. I sat down at my desk and took a quick look down the hallway in front of me. Turning the desk to face outward was one of the first things I did when I moved into that new office—a clear symbol to my team that I was never too busy to chat with them. There had been quite a few offices for me over the last five years, the education minister having made it a habit to overestimate my ability to quickly turn around some of the tougher schools in the state.

The first two e-mails weren’t great.

One was from a pair of teachers who had been away for the weekend. On their way home last night, their car had broken down 200 miles from Halls Creek; the repairs were going to take the whole day. The second e-mail was from a teacher who was taking a sick day and wanting to schedule a meeting with the visiting department psychologist. I didn’t blame her. As a community, everyone was dealing with far more trauma and pain than a little town of this size would usually have to endure. A few suicides in our small community earlier in the year were now dangerously close to becoming a really scary trend.

So that was three teachers absent on this Monday. There were no relief teachers in Halls Creek, so my only option was to cancel the scheduled numeracy and literacy staff development sessions; all of us would be needed in classrooms. I sent the bad news via text message to Kate, a senior teacher, who had probably spent the better part of the weekend preparing for her one-on-ones with staff. Her response was quick and to the point: “SERIOUSLY?” I pressed the call button as soon as I saw it, kicking myself as I waited for Kate to pick up. I should have told her in person, not through a text. She was a brilliant teacher who really cared, and here I was, letting her down.

Classes started at 8:00, the schedule designed to squeeze in as much learning as possible before the heat of the day set in. I put myself in with grade 7, but just after 9:00, one of our newest teachers burst into my class saying she needed help. She was from the city and young, so my initial thought was that there probably wasn’t much happening. Still, I caught the eye of Rose, my ever-capable assistant teacher, and she gave me a nod that said, *I’ve got it. Go.*

Turned out my initial thought was wrong. My walk across the courtyard soon turned into a jog and then into a sprint to break up two high school girls fighting on the pavement. Then there were egos and small wounds to be patched up in the sick bay and a traumatized teacher to calm. *Well, the visiting psychologist will soon have another patient or two,* I thought.

Just as things seemed to be getting under control, another fight broke out, and once again I found myself playing the role of a boxing umpire trying to get between two fighters. This time, though, the fighters weren’t kids but *parents*. Yes, word of the earlier altercation had gotten out, and a couple of moms had come to have some words with us. One of these mothers I knew well—since I was a kid, in fact. She had lost her husband the month before and was taking it really hard. Needing backup, I sent for one of the community grandmothers, volunteering that day in the early childhood center, and she was quickly

on the scene. Her calming effect was the miracle I'd been hoping for. Disaster avoided.

With 20 minutes to go before the morning break, I called my wife, Kathryn. Could she come over to help prepare food for the 90 kids in the school's feeding program? She was there a few minutes later, accompanied by Chef Ebony, our 4-year-old daughter, who messily and enthusiastically smothered jam onto slices of bread. The job got done.

By midday, the temperature was up over 100 degrees. With a new set of behavior issues to deal with, lunch for me was a fourth coffee and a week-old slice of birthday cake from the staff room fridge. I spent the rest of the afternoon immersed in one of my least favorite activities: conference calls with department staff, located anywhere from 300 miles away to more than 1,000.

At 2:45 the bell rang, and I leaned back in my chair, stretched my aching body, and rubbed my face roughly with my hands. My head was a throbbing mess of stress, exhaustion, and caffeine. As my vision came back into focus, I spied a small sticky note stuck to my computer monitor. In capital letters, it ordered me to GET OUT!—a blunt reminder that I needed to be out of the office and present in the learning and lives of my students and staff as often as I could be. I got out. I wasn't doing the afternoon bus run, but I wanted to say goodbye to as many of the kids as I could before they left for the day.

As they raced around the corridors of the school, I high-fived those nearest to me and yelled out to others.

"Awesome day today, Sarah! See you tomorrow!"

"Lucas, say hi to your pop and tell him I will see him at council tomorrow night."

"Maggie, same songs tomorrow morning on the bus! We'll see you early, hey? And make sure your brothers come with you this time."

Jess, my first passenger early that morning, ran up to me. "Hey, Mr. Faulkner, are we doing horse riding tomorrow?" she asked.

I knelt down, grinning from ear to ear. Jess had hardly missed a day since we launched the horse program, and after a weekend of brainstorming, she had decided to name the horse Jessie, after herself. She was crazy about that horse. “Yep, definitely, Jess,” I replied. “Jessie will be pumped to see you.” She raced off down the hallway, running her hands along the artwork that we had painted the term before with the help of some boys who had clocked hours in the juvenile justice system.

I headed down to the basketball court, eager for a few moments with the team. Their bare feet were slapping on the cracked concrete pavement. They were good—much better than me—and I quit after only a few minutes, the sweat already soaking my Halls Creek School T-shirt, the sun still high in the sky and burning hot.

In a day full of disruptions, the e-mails had been piling up in my inbox, and as the school quieted down for the day, I returned to my office to try to make a dent. The first e-mail was from a finance controller at the central office 1,500 miles away, asking me to explain why we had spent our behavior management grants in a way that was “unorthodox.” In a moment of frustration, I deleted the e-mail . . . then immediately regretted it.

The next one was from a teacher whom I had spent the last seven weeks trying to recruit. She was an A-gamer—a passionate, highly skilled educator. We’d worked together two years before, when I held a different job. She was exactly what the Halls Creek team needed. The first lines of her message looked good. She talked about how she had loved working with me (very kind) and how she was honored that I had reached out to her. She recalled a few great moments from our old school. But then a single word in the second paragraph hit me like a ton of bricks: *sorry*. No, she could not accept a position. Her husband had just taken a mining job that the family couldn’t refuse. I groaned quietly to myself, leaning my head against the screen.

In my short career, I’d built a reputation for resilience and getting the job done. A few colleagues at my first Principal’s Association

Conference gave me the nickname “Mr. Fix-It.” I had won a bunch of awards and been profiled often on national TV for the work I was doing in schools. But my place was not at award ceremonies or in front of cameras; my place was here, with the kids of Halls Creek, fixing things.

Today, though, Mr. Fix-It was failing. From the half-empty school buses to disrupted learning, from bloody fights to frustrated staff . . . I just wasn’t in good form. Today, the job felt too big, too tough. I felt useless.

I was only 29 years old. Perhaps I was in over my head. Was it all worth it? Did anyone care? Were we making any difference at all? I thought about heading straight home to see Kathryn and the girls and to spend the rest of the afternoon just trying to be a better dad.

All this was interrupted by a knock on the door. I put on my game face and greeted my visitor. It was Robyn, our attendance officer.

I stood up and sat on the edge of the desk. I forced a smile. Robyn smiled back and her grin was wider than mine and genuine. She was waving a piece of paper in her hand.

“Mr. Faulkner, I’m here to make your day,” Robyn said, bounding over to sit next to me. “I’ve got our official attendance numbers since we started the new 6-in-5 model.”

Our 6-in-5 model was a bold attempt to squeeze six days of learning experiences into five days of school. It was a big swing for us, involving pulling in extracurricular activities beyond regular school subjects and giving students lots of ownership and authorship over what they learned, when they learned, and who was teaching them. The goal was to boost learning, engagement, investment—and yes, attendance.

I am a pretty optimistic person, but right then, I thought about all the empty seats on the morning bus run and prepared myself for underwhelming data. In my career, I had become used to big increases. I used to take great pleasure in drawing graphs with steep upward slopes—something I hadn’t been able to do here.

“We have more students coming to school every day,” Robyn beamed. “Way more, in fact! If you sum it up, more than 100 more students came to school for at least 95 percent of this term. Also—and this is absolutely fricking unheard of—more parents are bringing their children to school, which is why the buses are less full.”

Robyn loved numbers, and she *really* loved these numbers. Her eyes were shining with tears.

I took a few seconds to respond, and the great lump in my throat allowed me only two words: “That’s awesome.” And then, against my wishes, tears came to my eyes as well.

Karen, one of my deputies, poked her head in the office. “You just told him, didn’t you?” she asked, smiling. “It’s amazing, right?”

All Robyn and I could do was sit there and nod, silly grins on our faces.

“I’ve got more news, though,” Karen said, as she too hopped up onto the messy desk, squeezing between Robyn and me. She opened her laptop to a screen of literacy and numeracy test results and proceeded to decipher them for us, comparing the red squares splashed across the screen from last year with the green squares that showed how many kids were now on track. Then she opened an e-mail from the grade 10 teacher, which stated, with a healthy dose of exclamation marks, that *five* senior students were now in a position to take work placements, starting next semester. It was the impromptu meeting that I needed, from two people whose support I really needed.

A few hours later, as the sun began to set, I locked up the school and began the walk home. While there had been many tough days over the past year, I knew deep down that today was the first time I had thought about giving up. The school leader was supposed to be the strong one, showing the way for everyone else. Today, it was my team who had been there to pick *me* up, to get me through, to push our work forward. They were incredible people who gave the job everything they had.