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ABSTRACT

This speech examines political activities relevant to school administration on local, State, and national levels. Superintendents are (1) cautioned to pay heed to the local political power situation and to approach the problem deliberately, (2) advised to activate their State association of school administrators and acquaint it with State officials whose help may be necessary, and (3) urged to know their representatives in Congress and to contact them only after they themselves have become fully appraised of the situation. (MLF)

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THE SCHOOL MAN AND POWER POLITICS

by

Jack L. Davidson

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THE SCHOOL MAN AND POWER POLITICS

Educational leaders today find themselves in the midst of an era of great change. It is our responsibility to understand and accept this situation. How we deal with this change is indicative of whether we are reactionaries and simply react to changes after they occur, or whether we perform a role of educational leadership and become part of the change process. There is a basic distinction between these two approaches to coping with change and I would like to stress today the leadership concept particularly as it relates to dealing with the emerging picture of power politics. For years we have held tightly to the concept that education and politics do not mix. I submit that this is simply not true today, if in fact it was ever true. Education and politics must mix and those of us in positions of educational leadership must understand how they mix and be participants in the mixing recipe.

Let's examine the true picture today as far as power politics is concerned at the three basic levels of local, state and national political activities. Most practicing superintendents realize that power and politics are often delicately interwoven at the local level. It is not necessary to look much beyond your local board of education to realize that this is true. Most board members are elected and the question of political enterprise enters into those elections. If it is not a question of Republican and Democrat politics, there are always other political factional concerns which must be considered. In this situation, new school board members

often come into office with specific objectives, with axes to grind, people to fire, programs to promote, and changes to make. The superintendent of schools needs to be alert to this and understand what is happening. Local political power groups today must center real attention on the schools since we are now in the center of action where many facets of the community are involved. The schools no longer are involved only in the process of education, but touch the lives and activities of many people, many organizations, and many movements. Desegregation, urban renewal, model cities, the poverty program, employment practices, new industry, and other such items are simply examples of the kind of involvement that influences the educational process and through which the schools affect many other people.

Often within the board itself there are manifest real power struggles. Unfortunately, it is true that many are politically oriented. Any number of matters reflect that political consideration and orientation: the election of a new board chairman, support or opposition to the superintendent of schools, vocational education, athletics and coaches, and specific personnel within the school system. A simple majority vote generally carries most actions of the board. What we need to be aware of is that there are groups constantly at work in the community to change that majority. Seldom is this not true. Does the superintendent ignore this? Does he become involved himself in either entrenching the present board, or using his influence to bring about a change in the majority? There is a fine line between ignoring completely the

existence of politically powerful groups and being actively involved in the process itself. Sometimes board members seeking re-election seek your support. Sometimes this is done quite discreetly and camouflaged well, and other times it is more direct without any veiled attempts at discretion. What does the superintendent do in that circumstance? It is never easy to say no and you seldom feel exactly right in saying yes. The realistic superintendent today realizes that this kind of situation carries many implications and many ramifications and he needs to be prepared to face such a situation with as much foresight and planning as possible.

Most of us as superintendents have been very naive about the role of power and of politics in our local school systems. We must emerge from the darkness of that old philosophy that politics and education do not mix and find a sensible approach to living and operating in the real world. The finesse with which a superintendent deals with local political factions may very well determine his total success or failure. If he ignores the very existence of local power politics, he is lost and he will never really understand the sudden blast of wind that blew him away. If he enters too directly into the process, he loses when the other majority gains power. It is obvious that superintendents are not in a position to bet on elections, or appointments either for that matter. At least don't bet too many chips. You may find yourselves completely out of the game and going home early. There are of

course no hard and fast rules for dealing with this local political situation and no formulas for success. Every community, every school situation presents different problems in this emerging area of concern. Perhaps some suggestions could be made which might be realistic:

1. Don't ignore the local political power situation. The board, the factions, the power structure, the city and county councils, the PTA's, splinter groups, booster clubs, and other organizations deserve your attention and your understanding. It is important to be "in the know" on what is going on.
2. Be sure your approach to this problem is determined deliberately, not by chance. Don't drift into a posture or allow yourself to be pushed into one. Study the situation, look at the balance of power, try to determine the ultimate direction and the possible results and decide what your stance will be, based upon the best observation you can make.
3. Be flexible enough to roll with the punches and the changes. Realize that nothing is forever, that no board or its majority will stay the same forever, and that you need to be in a position to cope realistically with the changing political picture.
4. Above all, do not be so naive as to be shocked at the results of power in politics. Expect it to occur. Accept it as an occupational hazard in the same way that a football coach accepts the need to win some games in order to protect his tenure. Be realistic in your observations and get as much help as possible in making those observations.

The role of power politics at the state level has changed greatly in recent years and will change even more in the future. As negotiations and collective bargaining become more refined, negotiators see the need to head toward where the power resides. In many of our states, the power does reside in the legislature and in other key places in state government. Superintendents are either going to help influence the key educational decisions of the future, or they are going to continue to be shaped by those decisions.

Much of the power at the state level does not reside only in the legislatures. Therefore, superintendents are often in a very difficult position as they attempt to influence those activities within the state which relate to educational progress. This speaks clearly for the need of state associations to be working together for those matters which concern education. Occasionally, though, a superintendent finds himself in a position where he must stand alone. This has happened before and will probably happen again. There have been occasions where high state officials, even governors, have decided that they have a stake in the activities of individual schools and have thrust themselves into the middle of that school situation. In Florida, the Governor decided to oppose the activities of not only the county school system, but also the decisions of the federal courts in the matter of school desegregation. Power was the name of the game, and the exercise of power was the process by which the game was played.

In that situation, the school system had been handed a decision by the federal court which required extensive busing to achieve a racial balance and which required the implementation of that order in early April with only nine weeks remaining in the school term. This was to cause the disruption of thousands of students for the short nine weeks that remained. The board, on the recommendation of the superintendent, appealed the decision all the way to the United States Supreme Court, and was turned down at each step. Following the hearing with the Supreme Court, it seemed that all of the possible legal steps had been taken and it was then the obligation of the school system to follow the interpretation of the law. The Governor saw this differently. He determined that there would be no forced busing in Florida and specifically in that county school system. He then suspended the superintendent and the board and took over himself, physically, as the superintendent to operate the system without the forced busing. This became a perfect example of a conflict of political powers with the superintendent smack dab in the middle. This position between a rock and a hard place was illustrated perfectly when the district attorney told me at 6:45 one morning that he was going to remove the Governor's men from the superintendent's office and re-establish me in that position. He informed me that when I went to the office, I would probably be arrested by the state and local police who were on duty in the Administration Building under direct orders from the Governor. He also informed me that if I

did not return to the office, I would be arrested by the federal marshals for failure to carry out the orders of the Court. When one is about to be arrested in two directions, your choice of arresting officers and places of confinement becomes relatively immaterial. This led to a real confrontation between the U. S. Marshal and the State Police of Florida, which stopped just short of physical conflict. As a matter of fact, the federal marshals withdrew and the federal court Judge ultimately handled the matter by fining the Governor \$10,000 a day until he withdrew from the system and stayed out of it. This was a case of a determined Governor with a variety of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations and an equally determined federal court.

The implications of this action on the local community were many and varied. The community became split on whether the Governor was right in his action, with many people supporting and some people disapproving. More factions arose than had ever existed there before. Some members of the board could not see fit to stand behind the federal court order. In that kind of situation you make some real decisions. Your job may very well be on the line, as it is many times in situations of power politics confrontations. How far do you go in expressing disagreement with your board? How do you decide? Somehow you determine what appears to be the right decision in terms of your own beliefs and the needs of the school system and community and make your stand on that basis. But in the process of making that decision, you must be completely aware of the existence of power from several different sides.

There are many other ways that power politics enters your professional life. It is needless to mention these in detail. Hopefully, your state association is involved actively in the legislative arena. More and more the state influences your programs as the trend toward increased state funding grows. With support comes increased desire to control. That is a political reality. How we help shape that trend and that control is important. Most of us are entirely too naive in the actual workings of practical politics. Part of the training of school superintendents for the future ought to include practical courses in the workings of power politics with input and direct instruction from practicing politicians who know the score and who understand the realities of political activities. Theory won't do it. How things are traded for other things, how support is gained, and how politics works in a real way are important to understand. We really need to learn in this area of political activity. There are probably few suggestions in this area and they may be redundant, but they are at least worth mentioning:

1. Understand the process of power politics from the base of reality, not theory.
2. Be sure your state association of school administrators is involved and striving for a position of importance. This influence must not be left entirely to state teacher associations.
3. Be ready to stand with fellow superintendents if the occasion demands it.

4. Be acquainted with state officials whose help you may need: your state commissioner of education, your representatives in the legislature, and others who are involved in this process.

We are involved in a relatively new game insofar as our participation in the federal arena is concerned. The base for power is much broader here. It is obvious that national and state associations must work closer together. AASA is working directly with other national organizations. The Emergency Committee for Full Funding is a good example of what happens when several organizations work together to present a united front for education at the federal level. Our effort here is total involvement in the planning stage not merely at the time of implementation. School leaders simply must be in a position to help influence new legislation and not remain only on the receiving end of legislation that has been determined by others as being good for education. Those involved directly in federal political activities make some suggestions for us:

1. Know your representatives in Congress.
2. Be sure your state association has a contact person with AASA in its program of federal legislation.
3. Contact your representatives only when you know what you are talking about. Nothing does us a greater disservice than to encourage a Congressman's support for a particular measure when it turns out he knows more about the matter than we do.

4. Make your position as a superintendent and an educational leader felt. Congressmen will listen to superintendents, particularly if they speak as a group.

We should emphasize that shifting gears in the political arena from the theoretical to the practical and the realistic is not a bad shift. Our idealism does not need to suffer in the process. We simply need to understand the existence of political reality and the power that it carries at all levels. Power politics is here to stay. It is part of your life as a superintendent, and mine. We must recognize that fact, study our communities, and try to perceive and understand the existence of those activities. Count your votes, your support, and your opposition. Face reality and disassociate any philosophical or theoretical concepts from how the game is really played. Face the fact that we are generally naive in the jungle of power politics and try to become a realist. The changing times we live in require us to move in this direction.