Seeking Meaningful School Reform: Characteristics of Inspired Schools
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to two-fold: (1) to gain an understanding of how senior school administrators define inspired public schools; and (2) to discern the characteristics of inspired schools to guide meaningful school improvement efforts. Twenty-nine senior leaders—school superintendents and assistant superintendents—from across New England were randomly surveyed and asked to identify qualities of inspired schools and, to the extent possible, to offer examples for closer examination. Eight schools representing different demographics, levels and district sizes were selected from an equal number of independent public school districts for inclusion in this study. Through in-depth interviews eleven characteristics of inspired schools were identified: (1) attention is invested in the developmental needs of all members of the school community; (2) leadership is embraced at all levels; (3) a relational approach to education is supported; (4) an "assets-based approach to student learning is encouraged; (5) traditions that nurture a sense of belonging are deemed important; (6) a unique "sense of place" and mission is common; (7) reliance on an "inner compass" is essential; (8) intentionality in promoting a sense of inclusivity, equity and global citizenship is valued; (9) a high degree of stakeholdership exists; (10 a commitment to community involvement and service is present; and (11) a visible valuing of the integrated arts is fostered. Results suggest that a common set of characteristics about what constitutes an inspired school does exist. School administrators and policy-makers are, then, encouraged to examine and emulate these characteristics when pursuing meaningful local school reform initiatives.

Introduction

Scores of books and journal articles have been written on the need to reform American public education. And perceived weaknesses in the quality of the educational experiences being provided by public schools, frequently highlighted by state and national politicians or aspiring political leaders (Bowman, 2003; Olsen, 2003), have further made the public at-large skeptical that the public education system can fulfill its charge of providing quality programs to all who walk through the doors. The National Research Center located at the University of Chicago, for example, released a study in the mid-90s that concluded, between 1973 and 1990, public confidence in the quality of public education dropped substantially. During the same period American business and industrial sectors expressed an overt interest in the future success of the public education system, reporting that when schools fail to adequately prepare the next generations for skilled jobs, far more unskilled laborers join the workforce ill-equipped to support the American economy (Senge, 2000). Interestingly, while adults generally tend to view the nation's public education system as not up to par, they often hold a different and more favorable view of the quality of their local public school (Schuman, 2004; Sanders, Stewart & Holcomb, 1993).

Despite the indomitable zeal to reform public education broadly, one simple fact remains: No one is quite sure how to make sustainable, measurable, replicable, and

fiscally affordable improvements on a large scale (Sarason, 1990). Thus given the lack of credible evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of contemporary reform mantras—such as voucher programs, school choice initiatives, and charter schools (Schuman, 2004; Gerwetz, 2003; Robelen, 2002)—school leaders remain largely left to their own devices to address the perplexing challenge of improving the schools under their charge. Moreover, what the goal of school improvement should be is another hotly debated topic. While the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 places student performance in the essential areas of mathematics and language arts at the center of this debate, many parents and educators take a far broader view, believing instead that school improvement should take the scope and quality of educational experiences and opportunities across the full spectrum into consideration. And although there is a paucity of consistent research findings that show how school leaders how to go about the arduous task of improving schools regardless of the intended goal or goals of improvement efforts, there is little disagreement between scholars and practitioners on one overarching tenant: School improvement is most likely to be achieved if it arises from within the system rather that originating form a bureaucratic or other external source (Fullen, 2001). It is not surprising, then, that more of the school improvement literature is beginning to rely on case study findings or on small samples of schools that have managed to make meaningful school improvements of one form or another.

Purpose

The present study was initiated with two goals in mind: (1) to gain an understanding of how senior school administrators define inspired schools; and (2) to gain an understanding of the characteristics of inspired schools as a means of offering assistance to educational decision-makers and administrators looking for information to guide their own internal improvement efforts.

The researchers use of the concept of an "inspired" school—literally, a school that breathes life into the members of its community through shared values and intentional practices—follows on the heels of research on "effective schools" (those that produce exemplary student results) and "resilient schools" (those that deliberately teach and encourage traits that give students the ability to thrive despite challenges and adversity in life). Yet effective and resilient schools do not necessarily attend to the "spirit life" or the "whole person" needs of the students or teachers who inhabit them. Many factors, then, argue for the necessity of identifying practices that can inspire a learning community and assist all who are connected with being fully engaged participants.

For students, there are powerful pressures from ever-increasing high stakes testing—assessments that focus rather narrowly on only some of the "intelligences" humans possess. The traditional security nets—family and community—are frayed or non-existent for many. Teachers find themselves under intense public scrutiny, forced, in many ways, away from the very things that drew them to teaching in the first place. The career cycle lengthens, with little upward mobility except for the potential to move into administration. And the growing pool of novice teachers finds itself with little meaningful mentoring and support during the critical first three years on the job. School leaders, on whose desks the "buck stops," exist their school or district within 3.5 to 4

years of their tenure, depending upon urban or rural statistics—sometimes "burned out" and disenchanted with their ability to effect change.

Methodology

To initiate the study, twenty-nine senior school leaders—school superintendents and assistant superintendents from across New England-- were randomly surveyed and asked to identify the qualities of inspired schools and, where possible, to offer the most potent examples of inspired or high functioning schools for closer examination. Nineteen of those senior leaders opted to participate. The researchers chose deliberately to search for examples of "inspired schools" as opposed to simply high performing schools in order to avoid the use of standardized test performance as the only means of selecting model schools to examine. All schools selected did meet basic Adequate Yearly Performance requirements established by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001's parameters. Schools identified by senior school leaders as potent examples of inspired schools were investigated in detail by the researchers. Investigations took the form of detailed interviews with building leadership and faculty at a minimum. In the final analysis eight distinct schools—representing different demographic variables, levels and district sizes-- were selected from an equal number of independent school districts for inclusion in this study.

This study was intended to capture prominent themes and educational practices at the building level that, in the views of senior and building level school administrators, represented model or best educational practices worthy of emulation. As such, the theme-oriented qualitative data analysis techniques delineated by Patton (2002) were rigorously applied to transcripted interviews to reach notable conclusions.

Results

Findings from the present study suggest that inspired schools may have the capacity to better address a number of the contemporary pressures and concerns experienced by students, teachers and administrators by nurturing a collective organizational vision and mission as well as the individuals within their walls. Twelve shared inspired school traits—which both encompass and exceed the characteristics of effective and resilient schools—were identified and include:

1) Attention to the developmental needs of all members of the school community: In addition to being attuned to the developmental needs of their students, inspired schools pay equal attention to those of the adults in their school community. Recognizing that personal and professional worlds are inextricably linked, leaders integrate their knowledge of adult development, career life cycle, human motivation, and meaning making into such activities as supervision, evaluation and professional development.

2) Pervasive leadership: Inspired schools believe in the leadership potential of members—even very young children—and take active steps to teach the skills necessary

to manifest a variety of leadership roles. "Leadership" itself is defined with multiple meanings, transcending the traditional hierarchical model that is so familiar.

3) A relational approach to education: Simply put, human relationships in inspired schools lie at the heart of all educational activities. Teachers and leaders who possess the courage to be human in the face of their students model authenticity in school interactions, resulting in students being taught the skills necessary to successfully engage in the social fabric of school life.

4) A deliberate "assets-based" approach to student learning to promote efficacy and resiliency: Educational planning for all students begins with an inventory of the capacities and the learning profile of the unique individual. The same is applied to the assignment of teachers and staff. By focusing on the competencies that the individual brings to his or her "job," be it leading or learning, inspired schools build upon the strengths rather than attending to "deficiencies."

5) Traditions that nurture a sense of belonging and mark rites of passage. In inspired schools, continuity of customs binds the community together and recognizes students' passage from one "stage" of their schooling to another—particularly important in a society that does little to benchmark the milestones of children and adolescents.

6) A unique "sense of place" and mission: Inspired schools celebrate the cultural, geographical, and historical roots of the community in which they are set. School members know the "lore" that makes the community unique and share a common sense of purpose, as reflected in a "lived" mission that is make manifest on a daily basis.

7) Reliance on an "inner compass:" Educational trends and practices come and go with startling frequency. In inspired schools, individuals are trusted to know "what works" within their community and are encouraged to rely on their own proven practices, even in the face of "fads" that are adopted on a wide scale everywhere.

8) Intentionality in promoting a sense of inclusivity, equity and global citizenship: In inspired schools, leaders know that truly equitable communities do not happen by chance; they must be built into the school's culture through curricular and extra-curricular activities that honor diversity, promote equity, and continuously connect the school with the larger global community.

9) Celebration of large and small "victories:" Members of inspired schools celebrate, and celebrate often: the more traditional holidays, awards, and events, and even the smaller, more intimate victories which often go unnoticed—the tiny steps that individuals take toward claiming their full potential. There is a sense of pride in the school, and participants clearly have fun together.

10) A high degree of stakeholdership in the school: Inspired schools are enriched by the contributions of a large number of stakeholders in the school, including individuals who

do not have children or adolescents enrolled there. These range from community leaders, business organizations, and colleges and universities.

11) A commitment to community involvement and service: Since inspired schools benefit from participation of community stakeholders, they cultivate a culture in which there is a natural tendency among students, even very young children, to expect to "give back" through service projects, which may or may not result in academic credit.

12) A visible valuing of the integrated arts, including the creation and cultivation of an aesthetically pleasing physical environment. Even in the fiscally poorest of inspired schools, every attempt is made to create a beautiful, aesthetically rich environment, demonstrated, among other ways, in the colorful display of children's artwork, the integration of art in the curriculum, traditions such as all-school sing, and a use of all available community resources to bring the arts into children's lives.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While the scope of this study needs to be further expanded to discern whether the views on inspired schools shared by district and building level administrators in New England are consistent with other locales, findings do suggest that a common set of characteristics can be isolated for consideration by school leaders looking to promote meaningful school improvement at the building level. Furthermore, these findings lend support to the belief that schools need not be mechanistically oriented and devoid of the personal realm in order to achieve the distinction of being highly successful in the views of school leaders themselves. School administrators and policy-makers are recognizably under considerable pressure to improve their schools, especially in light of the No Child Left Behind student achievement mandates. Schools that are making the mark, and are still standing out as model institutions, appear to be fully embracing the richness of their learning communities as opposed to downplaying their role. Perhaps the shared traits of the inspired schools investigated in this study will provide further appreciation for the understanding that schools are comprised of people and, although messy and hard to quantify, lasting advancements will most likely be attained by placing those same people at the heart of the educational improvement equation. School leaders and policy-makers, then, would be encouraged to promote the characteristics of inspired schools identified in this study when pursuing meaningful local school reform initiatives.

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