BELIEFS AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF EDUCATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS

CONCERNING STUDENT SUCCESS AND EFFECTIVE PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP

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As elsewhere in Canada, the provincial educational system has adopted an accountability framework to improve student success by putting the emphasis on the rendering of accounts and production of a success plan. However, the implementation of school success plans is not always self-evident for socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. This case study highlights the difficulties experienced by a new principal in such a context. It shows the staff's resistance to change when facing the success plan. For teaching purposes, it opens the discussion about the beliefs and responsibilities of all educational stakeholders concerning student success and about effective principal leadership.

Case Narrative

Robert's Mandate as New Principal at Notre Dame High School

Last June, Robert was appointed principal of Notre Dame High School. The school is located in a large city and has 1,200 students and 83 employees. During the selection interview, Robert showed that the past four years as vice-principal at St Joseph's High School had equipped him well for his new responsibilities, despite the socioeconomic differences between the two school environments. He explained how his contribution, together with that of the leadership team, had enabled him to increase the teachers' commitment, the quality of the education, and

student success. Shortly after his nomination, during a meeting with the school board's director, he was told that student success at Notre Dame High School was very low and that his mandate was to significantly improve it.

Notre Dame High School

Notre Dame High School is located in a socioeconomically disadvantaged community and serves children mostly from less educated, lower income families. Several community organizations provide material and psychological support services to families and youth in the neighborhood. Enhanced surveillance is used within the school and in the neighborhood to prevent and counter the drug trafficking, violence, and vandalism of street gangs. However, despite these measures, violent incidents are reported by staff and parents, and teachers often complain about the time spent dealing with bullying and with students who act out in class.

In this province, the school priorities and the development of success plans are framed by the Education Act and subject to accountability mechanisms. According to the Education Act, every school must have an educational project that contains the school's objectives and guidelines, and a success plan to improve student achievement in line with the educational project. Also, according to recent changes made to the Act, the school board and principals must agree every year, within the scope of a management and educational success agreement (MESA), on the measures required to achieve goals and measurable objectives set out in the partnership agreement between the school board and the ministry. In particular, this document must include the monitoring and accountability mechanisms to be put in place by the school.

Robert's Planning of the School Year With His Leadership Team

Back from the summer holidays at the beginning of August, before the return of the school staff, Robert took the time to go through the available documentation associated with issues relating to the functioning of the school. He thoroughly studied the educational project, the success plan, the partnership agreement, the minutes from staff meetings of the past two years, the memos left by the previous principal, and all kinds of available statistics specifically related to student achievement and the school success plan.

In so doing, Robert assessed the full measure of the challenges that awaited him. While last year's objective was to increase from 60% to 70% the success rate in French among eleventh graders, only 57% passed the provincial exam. Furthermore, overall, the results of provincial exams in all subjects were comparable. In addition, the information provided by the school board planning services department showed that, among all the students attending the school over the last 10 years, only 35% received a high school diploma before the age of 17 (the expected age for high school achievement) and only 55% before the age of 20. Also noteworthy, nearly 30% of students who entered Grade 7 dropped out before the end of Grade 11. Finally, the previous year's absenteeism rates were especially high among students in Grades 9 through 11.

With such challenges in mind, Robert worked to plan the school year with the three vice-principals. The welcome speech, to be given at the beginning of the new term, was one of the important topics discussed with the school's leadership team. Straightaway, Robert insisted on putting the focus on his mandate: improving student success. Pointing out that he was in full agreement with the ministry directives with regard to results-based management and the rendering of accounts, he expressed to his leadership team his impression that not enough was being done by the teachers to ensure student success. Remedying the situation required strong

measures from the outset of his mandate. This would give the staff a clear sense of his vision for

the school. Thus, he planned to propose the following:

- to focus all school activities on student success;
- to raise success targets (knowing that high expectations have a positive effect);
- to ensure continuous supervision by the leadership team of teaching and of student support and follow-up;
- to ensure ongoing monitoring of student academic results; and
- to engage the teachers in the process of accountability.

Once these five points were implemented, all the elements needed for the MESA with the school

board would be in place. Of course, Robert explained to his leadership team, this would have to

be presented in a subtle way.

In response, one of the vice-principals mentioned that during the past four years, the

changes with regard to success plans had been introduced gradually by the previous principal.

The emphasis was on collective decision-making with the staff, teamwork, the sharing of

responsibilities, and professional autonomy. Authoritarian interventions were avoided (e.g.,

telling staff what to do). In addition, the other vice-principals were eager to point out that the

school climate was quite positive, that the relationships between the staff were cordial, and that

most teachers showed a real commitment to student success. However, they pointed out high

staff turnover was a factor that should not be ignored. Typically, each year several teachers

requested reassignment to other schools because of the difficulties with classroom management

and the heavy workload caused by students' learning problems.

One after another, the vice-principals tried to convince Robert to be cautious in his

interventions and not exert excessive pressure on the staff, so as to maintain a positive and

collaborative environment. "The relationship between the administration and the union delegate

is good," one said, "and this should not be compromised." Robert responded that he must show leadership, and place more emphasis on the teachers' responsibility for student success. He argued, "we can't pretend that the school is powerless in this matter, and being sure that teachers do everything they can to help students succeed, even if it means changing their teaching practices, is the only way forward."

He went on: "In my view, the effectiveness of a school is determined by student achievement, which is demonstrated by three indicators: successful results in provincial and school board exams, graduation rates, and the school's ranking in the provincial tables of educational achievement. Teachers should pay attention to these facts as they preoccupy parents and the public. While I acknowledge that many students come from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background that negatively affects their academic success, I believe the school can contribute significantly to better their lives and enable them to obtain the qualifications to play a significant role in society."

In the end, Robert created his plan despite the warnings raised by the leadership team. He sent a document to the staff prior to the meeting. The document laid out the objectives of the success plan and the means to achieve them. Essentially, the objectives related to the improvement of student results in the core subjects. The means to achieve them were teacher involvement in student support and follow-up, supervision by the leadership team, monitoring of academic results, and the teachers' commitment to the process of accountability.

The Meeting with the School Staff and the Welcome Speech

Robert began the meeting by welcoming the staff and introducing himself. While talking of his past experience as vice-principal, he highlighted what was done to improve student

achievement in his previous school. He then acknowledged Notre Dame High School's positive

reputation: the staff members were known to be highly committed to their work. He emphasized

that he was happy to be appointed as principal, and proud to join the team.

Robert went on to say that he wanted to continue the work done by the previous

principal and to focus on running the school to promote student success. On that basis, he

targeted one major priority for the current year. He started by presenting tables and charts on

success indicators for school students. He pointed out gaps between student performance at

Notre Dame High School and at other schools in the district and in the province. He then showed

that the school had been unable to reach the previous years' goals, especially in provincial

exams. This, he explained, was his main priority: improved student success based on

performance in the provincial exams. He emphasized the importance of the leadership team and

of the engagement of teachers in order to achieve this end. Acknowledging that this stated

priority was broad, Robert then discussed the document he had sent out prior to the meeting. He

explained: "According to the Education Act, consultation about this should be conducted with

the staff so why not make a decision about it at the end of this meeting?" He ended his speech by

stating his belief that the school could make a real difference and, accordingly, that he would do

his best to make this possible.

Following the presentation, a two-hour discussion ensued among the teachers, with

many negative reactions to Robert's proposal. The teachers argued primarily about the meaning

and measure of student success, the scope of the teachers' responsibility, and the vision of the

administrative team.

The meaning and measure of student success. Some teachers criticized the report presented by the principal on the academic success of students at Notre Dame High School. According to them, it was oversimplifying to make a diagnosis based only on the results of the provincial exams. Others argued that the results of these test were unreliable and hard to compare since the content and the level of difficulty vary significantly from one year to another. It was also mentioned that the students in the previous year were particularly weak in comparison to the following cohort, that they had frequently been taught by substitute teachers, but that the coming school year should be much better. It was also pointed out that, according to the Education Act, the fundamental mission of the school was not only to qualify the students but also to socialize them.

The teachers' responsibility. With regard to the role of the teacher, one mentioned that the requirements of the Education Act, in terms of the success agreement and accountability mechanisms, make the school responsible for failure of the students, as if there were no other factors. She added that the principal's comments conveyed the message that teachers did not do their job well and that this message was particularly frustrating, considering the socioeconomic environment in which they work, where students are known to be less successful.

Indeed, several teachers pointed out that they work very hard to ensure student success but that many Notre Dame students are behind at school because of problems such as learning difficulties in core subjects, and a large number of them are simply not motivated. This explained why many don't acquire the necessary learning to succeed in the provincial tests at the end of the school year.

The vision of the leadership team. Robert's vision and proposal were extensively criticized. It was argued that putting pressure on teachers to ensure academic success would have a negative effect on the quality of the education. Pushed too hard on this issue, some teachers might decide to lower their expectations of the students, to limit the material that they teach, and even try to dissuade the weakest students from sitting the provincial exams.

It was also noted that, in past years, the school committee responsible for the success plan went through an extensive consultation process with the staff, encompassing students' needs, as well as the targets to be set, and the means to ensure that they were met. The union delegate commented, "from this presentation, it seems that the decision has already been made. The consultation will focus on proposals already made by the principal. Does he know the school well enough to understand its needs, and formulate objectives and the necessary means to meet them? What he proposes will be costly in time and energy, while the workload is already too heavy." The Union delegate also mentioned that it would set a dangerous precedent to establish the terms of the consultation at that meeting, arguing that it had not been called for that purpose and did not have an official mandate.

By the end of the meeting, Robert was left feeling puzzled and frustrated. He continued to argue for student success as the priority but added that the leadership team would consider teachers' views on how to make the priority a reality, and that he would consult the teaching staff on specific suggestions for revising the success plan.

Robert's Reflections Following the Meeting

Prior to leaving school at the end of the day, Robert took a few minutes in his office to reflect upon the meeting. He was puzzled by the scale of the opposition among the teachers.

Although he understood the objections, the intensity of the resistance surprised him and he wondered if he should not have taken more seriously the warnings of the vice-principals. He reflected upon the gulf between his beliefs and those of the staff, his determination to impose his vision, and the risk of undermining his leadership. He wondered if his relationship with his colleagues, in particular with the teachers, might be negatively affected.

Teaching Notes

This fictional case study is created from real-life situations that have been documented in various ways, including from school principal interviews and discussions with students. The names given to both schools are arbitrary and do not refer to any existing school.

The case focuses on the welcome speech of a newly appointed high school principal. He tells the staff about the mandate he has been given to improve student success and his strategy for achieving it. He also uses the occasion to affirm his leadership. The case then lays out the reactions to his speech.

In this case study two themes are presented. First, it reveals the stakeholders' divergent conceptions of student success. Second, it challenges our understanding about the way in which a principal may approach his or her role as leader.

The Conception of Student Success and the Conviction That Schools Can Make a Difference

The first theme invites instructors and students to compare different conceptions or convictions with regard to student success. On one hand, the principal's understanding is in line with the Ministry's linkage of academic success with provincial exams. However, objections are

raised by the teachers during the meeting showing that negative effects may result from such a vision and calling for a deeper look at the problem.

On the other hand, the stakeholders seem to have different opinions regarding the school's capacity to make a difference in student success and thus to counter the impact on student of an underprivileged milieu. Robert strongly believes that the school can make a difference and that student academic success can be improved as long as the teachers are willing to change their teaching methods. Even though this puts the onus on the teachers, they are adamant that they already make every effort to support their students and that it would be difficult to do more.

In exploring this theme, instructors should prompt students to highlight the different conceptions and convictions of the stakeholders as they are presented in the case. In this way, the instructor should enable students to identify particular themes for discussion. The approach should also offer students the opportunity to develop their capacity to link theory to practice, and to understand how the conceptions are distinguishable from each other based on different convictions. Moreover, the instructor can emphasize the fact that the source of resistance may come from fundamentally divergent views. As pointed out by Piktin (1972; see MacPherson, 1986),), in order for change to be accepted and supported, the people involved have to believe as much in the premises that justify change, as in the process by which change is brought about.

Secondly, the instructor should ask the students to take account as much of official documents and legal texts, as of their school's policy and direction with regard to their educational system (school boards, districts, provinces, territories). In fact, the conception a school has of student success should not be in opposition to the one expressed officially. It is linked to the school's mission. Taking the provincial Education Act as an example, it states: "In

keeping with the principle of equality of opportunity, the mission of a school is to impart

knowledge to students, foster their social development and give them qualifications, while

enabling them to undertake and achieve success in a course of study" (Art. 36). It also states that

the "school shall pursue its mission within the framework of an educational project implemented

by means of a success plan" (Art.36), and that "the management and educational success

agreement (MESA) shall take into account the institution's success plan" (Art.209.2).

In order to enrich the debate on such divergent conceptions of success, students could

be asked to relate to theoretical and empirical positions found in the literature (Goodman, 2012;

Harris & Herrington, 2006; Ravitch, 2010). These authors debate the effects that different

conceptions may have on success, on how to improve student achievement—particularly of those

with difficulties—and on the impact of high standards and on rigorous implementation of

programs.

The instructor could also introduce several other questions:

- Some teachers felt that the principal's conception was narrow, but, despite what has been said previously, isn't such a point of view realistic in the sense that it aims at focusing the teachers on practices essential to high-quality education?

- Considering that the teachers' practices seemed to be more or less in line with the conceptions of student success put forward by the legal authority to which the school is accountable, to what extent must the principal try to convince his staff to join forces?

- In spite of the narrowness of the conception, can the process be enriched in each institution in line with the school's own educational project, as suggested in the Education Act? If so, is there a risk that focus will be lost?

- Why isn't a results-based management approach enough to motivate the teachers to pursue the same goals and objectives and to share the same vision? Moreover, isn't sharing the same vision of what should be student success and, thus, the school's mission key to accomplishing the mission?

The belief that the school can make a significant difference to student success, which is clearly an issue in this case study, remains controversial (for example, Chugar & Luschei, 2009; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008; Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003). Nevertheless, all things being equal, some schools are more effective than others in helping students to succeed academically. So, how can staff be convinced that higher achievement is feasible, that they bear some responsibility, and that they should find different ways of doing things? Can results-based management help to effect this sort of change?

Conception of the Principal's Role and the Exercise of Leadership

This case study also presents questions regarding the principal's leadership role in societies where performance and school effectiveness are major issues. To this end, it opens up discussion about the principal's strategies when trying to motivate staff to engage in actions directed toward student success. The instructor may use the material to familiarize the students with theoretical models on educational leadership and on how to exercise their role as school principal.

In this case, Robert sees himself as a leader whose role is to guide the actions of the staff toward the school's mission. From this point of view, how can his leadership style be characterized based on the dominant theoretical models? Before answering this important question, a definition of leadership is needed.

According to Bush (2011) the concept of leadership is composed of three main dimensions. First, leadership is a process by which people influence each other that is independent, but not exclusive, of a position of authority. Second, these influential processes are intentional, that is, they are oriented toward goals. Thirdly, they may be initiated as much by

groups as by individuals. This conception of leadership is in concordance with the theoretical model of distributed leadership in which the process of change, although initiated by the principal can be modified by the teachers (Poirel & Yvon, 2012; Spillane & Diamond, 2007).

With regard to the models of instructional leadership or instructional management (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985) and of transformational leadership (Bass & Reggio, 2006; Leithwood & Day, 2007; Lynch, 2012), using the comments made by the vice-principals in the case study, it is also possible to compare the leadership style of Robert to that of the previous principal. In many respects, Robert's leadership appears rational and authoritarian. He tends to act as if he were the only one responsible for the school, not taking into account the opinions of his staff or leadership team, when determining the objectives and strategies for improving student success. His approach fits with the classic model of instructional leadership proposed by Hallinger and Murphy (1985). In contrast, from the remarks of the vice-principals we learned that the previous principal adopted a transformational leadership style since she placed emphasis on the quality of communication between the school staff, the development of trustworthy relationships, teamwork, motivation, commitment, engagement, professional autonomy, and collective decision-making. In this sense, compared to Robert, the previous principal's leadership style appears more democratic and thus less directive. In addition, it seems more centered on the school environment than on student school success.

Several other questions will prompt reflection on the theoretical models of educational leadership and on the duties of the school principal. For instance, how are Robert's comments on the strategies to improve student success integrated with the three dimensions of Hallinger and Murphy's instructional leadership model: defining the school mission, managing the curriculum, and promoting a positive learning environment? As well, to what extent does Robert's

management style correspond to the learning-centered leadership model (Halverson, Grigg,

Prichett, & Thomas, 2007; Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, & Porter, 2007) in which database

indicators are used to measure the progress of student outcomes, to determine teaching

effectiveness, and ensure public accountability?

With regard to the usefulness of educational leadership models for training purposes or

for the work of school principals, Leithwood and Sun (2012) suggest the adoption of specific

models to solve different problems in school management. In light of this, our case study

identifies problems with students (e.g., learning disabilities, violence, dropping out, etc.) or with

human resource management (e.g., staff turnover and burnout). Among the models of leadership

presented, which one would be the best to solve each specific problem? (See the typologies of

Bush, 2011 and Lynch, 2012).

Finally, the resistance expressed by staff in response to the principal's welcome speech

raises the issue of the initiation of change in the school. In order to contribute to the debate

around these issues, Fullan's (2007) writings on the significance of change in education can be

useful. He shows that to initiate change in an educational institution, the principal's interventions

must elicit the commitment and motivation of the staff, in order to "share meanings." Fullan

(2010) argues that the initiators of change have to exert on the stakeholders a positive pressure,

rather than a negative one, to get them to participate in the implementation of the desired

changes. In this sense, he suggests the use of transformational leadership for educational

administrators.

In order to pursue this subject, the instructor could open discussion with students by

posing the following questions: What is the nature of resistance expressed by the teachers against

the principal's proposals? How do the teachers show their resistance? Could the principal have

anticipated the teachers' reactions and been better prepared? In the pursuit of the school success plan, how can the principal exert effective leadership, while taking into account the teachers' resistance?

The teaching notes following the case study, suggested for instructional purposes, are aimed at opening the discussion on the conception of student success, on the school's capacity to make a difference, and on the educational leadership of school principals. However, we believe that this case study will bring about other questions of interest among the instructors and students. Such questions could open the debate on school operations in general, the relationship between school management and teachers, or the way new educational policies are received by the different stakeholders in the school.

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