

DEFYING GRAVITY*

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Abstract

This case study covers a wide variety of challenges facing administrators as they make an effort to improve the learning environments of impoverished communities. It may be used in an introductory course for aspiring school leaders and practitioners in the field of school leadership. This case also presents myriad complex organizational issues that may be used in educational leadership programs.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration

Case Narrative

You have recently accepted a position as a principal in the heart of an urban environment at an elementary school. Central office administrators inform you of the school's challenges over the past 4 years: 1) Drive-by shootings during the school day; 2) Prostitution rings within the community soliciting business around the school's campus; 3) Drug dealers conducting business on each side of the school; 4) The neighborhood "crack house" is located less than 400 feet from the school; 5) On average, only 80% of the students attend school each day; 6) Only 25% of students are meeting or exceeding state test scores in reading or math; 7) Parents report they do not feel welcome in the school; 8) Students identify their school as a "ghetto school"; 9) Teachers report low morale; 10) Community organizations within the school community report a disconnect with the elementary school; 11) Over 50% of the staff and faculty have left within two years; 12) Teachers are hired with no or less than 2 years of experience; 13) Over 75% of the students speak only Spanish at home; and 14) Past principals resigned from their position within 4-6 months of committing to the school.

During the interview, the same central office administrators stress their priorities to significantly raise standardized test scores and to improve student, parent, and faculty morale. After sharing the school's history and priorities, they ask if you are still interested in the position. They also inquire if you "are up for the challenge." Before making your decision, you request to meet with members of school in order to gain an understanding of the challenges presented to you during the interview. They indicate that faculty members want to interview candidates referred by central office administration.

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As you drive up to the school's campus, you notice young men huddled on street corners wearing baby blue jackets and baseball hats cocked to one side. You drive by alleys with graffiti and tagging on garage doors and storefronts. Several windows of homes along the street are boarded up with "no trespassing signs." You reach a stop light, three teenage boys jump out of a non-licensed van with a baseball bat. They run after a young male carrying a gun. Traffic continues to maneuver around the van as the young men chase each other. The young men continue to run around nearby storefronts and alleys.

As you pass the park, you notice elderly men and women with bags of clothing in shopping carts. There are no children outside. Once you arrive at the campus, there are no parking spaces available. You search for a sign indicating the name of the school. You see a sign congratulating graduates from 6 years ago. As you walk closer, you see a small sign above a warped wooden door with drips of paint, glue marks, and cracked dirty glass. The building is surrounded by dirt and variations of weeds growing over 3 feet high. Trash ranging from cigarettes, dirty diapers, tissues, and food wrappers line what seems to be the school yard. A fenced area that may have once housed a flower garden holds trash that blew from across the alley. There is no playground equipment in sight.

The front door is locked. You press a call button. A security officer opens the door holding a walkie-talkie. He greets you and requests your name and purpose. After you explain that you are here for an interview for the principal position, he smiles and introduces himself by name. You shake his hand and begin to ask him about his day. The security officer walks you a short way to the main office. The walls are dirty. There are patches of dry wall missing, dirty windows, and asbestos tiled floor pieces missing throughout the hallway. As you approach the office, the smell of urine grows stronger and stronger. The boy's bathroom doors have been taken off of the hinges. The bathroom and custodian sink are seen from the hall. The main office is crowded with desks, chairs and piles of boxes full of papers and files. A collage of with Civil Rights activists hangs at an angle on the wall. Three small pieces of masking tape hold it in place.

The office personnel seem quiet and timid. You initiate a conversation. Smiles appear and soon a dialogue emerges. A woman from the hallway greets you. She informs you of the meeting in the library. As you walk down the hallway, you notice dirt, spider webs, mouse droppings, damaged locker doors. The classrooms are bare with cracks in the ceiling and paint chips dangling from above. Several classrooms have broken window shades. Several window frames are warped. You can feel warm air from outside seep into the classrooms. Several classrooms do not have chalk boards or wall space for student work. One of the team members explains that her husband came to the school to install bathroom shower boards to create a "white board" for instructional purposes.

When you enter the library, there is barely enough room for the tables and chairs. The library overlooks gravel and weeds on the school grounds. The students do not have a playground. The school is surrounded by residential housing and parking lots.

Located in the heart of a metropolitan area, the Lincoln School District consists of eight elementary schools. Each school has one elementary principal who functions as the administrator. There are 665 students in Lincoln School and 50 employees. The student population is comprised of less than 1% White, 10% Black, and 88% Latino. Over 99% of the school children live in poverty and receive free and reduced meals (Table 1). In regards to the faculty, there are 27 White teachers, 1 Black teacher, and one Latino teacher. Only the Latino teacher speaks Spanish. The support staff is 100% Latino and all of them speak Spanish and English.

Table 1

School Student Demographics

In School	Total Number of Students						Living In Poverty
	Boys	Girls	African American	Latino	Asian	White	
665	326	339	67	596	0	2	658

Lincoln School personnel note several additional challenges that were not identified by the central office administrators: 1) Tension exists between support staff and faculty members; 2) Faculty members refer a disproportionate number of minority students are sent to the office for disciplinary purposes (Table 2); 3) Students do not have access to recreational equipment during the school day; 4) Teachers feel overworked and unappreciated; 5) Teachers are frustrated with the lack of administration communication; 6) Teachers want a new evaluation system and a voice in this process; 7) Parents, community members, students, and support staff feel a disconnect between home and school; and 8) The majority of faculty members express a discomfort with the parents in the community.

Table 2

School Discipline Over The Past Year

Total Number Sent to the Office	Total Number of Students Sent to the Office						
	Boys	Girls	African American	Latino	White	Asian	Living in Poverty
279	226	53	47	231	1	NA	278

Lincoln School is a 100% English immersion school. Central office personnel inform you that English is the only language to be spoken at school. Letters to parents and family members have traditionally been sent home in English. Over 50% of Lincoln School parents immigrated to the United States from Guatemala, Columbia, Brazil, Mexico, and Honduras. Parents note immigrating to the United States in hope of providing their child/children with educational opportunities that were not afforded their native country. Parents work 12-16 hour days to financially support their families. Students take public transportation or walk to school. Those who take public transportation might travel two hours each way to school. Over 80% of parents speak Spanish at home. Parents inform you of their limited educational opportunities in their native countries. Central office provides you with results from parent surveys which illustrate reasons for low parent involvement. Parent note the following: 1) Parents are not allowed in the building without a scheduled appointment; 2) Many parents speak only in their native language; 3) Parents are not asked to volunteer in the school; and 4) Teachers are not visible in the community.

General Areas of Concern

You invite faculty and staff to the first Lincoln School team meeting of the semester. People are surprised when custodians, security officers, secretaries, and teachers are invited to the meeting. You ask the team to identify the strengths within the learning community. The room is silent. You ask them to write down one positive aspect of the school community. After collecting the responses, you ask team members to read them aloud. They share the following perceptions: 1) Feeling rewarded for teaching in a poor community and 2) The joy of watching students learn. After the group shares their perceptions of the community's strengths, you ask them to identify and classify their concerns. Together, they create the following list of concerns (Table 3):

Table 3

Areas of Improvement Identified by the Lincoln School Team

General Area Of Concern	Specific Concerns
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 80% of the kindergarten students have not attended preschool • Over 90% of the families noted that they do not have books readily available at home for their children • Only 20% of students meet or exceed state standards in Reading • Only 25% of students meet or exceed state standards in Math • Central office curriculum coordinators promote ability grouping and tracking • Central office curriculum coordinators implement pull-out programs for students challenged in specific academic areas • Faculty note that professional development seminars are not valued or aligned with school issues • The school has not participated in creating a school improvement plan • The faculty do not vertically or horizontally align curriculum • The faculty do not have opportunities to plan with their colleagues • The faculty want academic freedom to meet and exceed state standards • Faculty members do not observe their colleagues teaching • Faculty members do not understand how social, cultural, economic, and political factors influence curriculum design and instruction • There is limited funding for learning excursions
Student Attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over 70% of the students are tardy every day (1-10 minutes) • Over 30% of these students who are tardy miss over 90 minutes of morning instruction • Over 20% of students leave 60-90 minutes before the end of the school day with family members
Physical Surroundings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers documented classrooms with mice, roaches, rats, and ants • Weeds over three feet high grow along the school's property
Student Enrollment From Year to Year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This school has the highest turnover rate with only 80% of students choosing to return each year
Parent Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historically, only 20 families attend Open House each Fall

The top priority of the school is to create sanitary conditions for the children. You work closely with the custodians and teachers to document the unsanitary conditions within the school. You document the conditions and contact central office personnel. The custodian does not take care of the issues noted by the teachers. You contact exterminators to investigate the unsanitary conditions. The exterminator confirms the conditions noted by the teachers and discovers more issues in the cafeteria. This information is forwarded to central office along with the custodian's decision to not address the issues. During the first month of school as the new principal, you have a surprise visit from inspection board. Representatives issue the school a \$1,000 ticket for unsanitary conditions in the school and cafeteria. The inspector notes issues with rats, mice, roaches, and ants. The inspector also informs you that the school will be closed down in if these conditions are still evident upon his return in two weeks. You contact central office personnel and forward them the information. Central office replaces the custodian and suggests hiring a new head custodian for the school. You have two weeks to create sanitary conditions within and surrounding the school.

While working towards creating a sanitary school environment for the children, central office contacts you. They inform you that you are scheduled to attend a meeting next week to discuss school action plans. You are asked to present a school action plan that identifies annual goals and strategies for meeting these goals by the end of the school year.

Teaching Notes

This case study covers a wide variety of complex organizational issues that can confront aspiring or practicing school leaders. Students will critically examine their own experiences, interactions between scholarship and practice, and focus on fostering the implications of national leadership standards. This case study stimulates dialogue that will enhance the quality of educational leadership through a shared vision of education. The Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards below create a framework for educational leaders who are committed to being moral and social advocates for all children, especially children from marginalized populations. The following questions honor the social, economical, cultural, and political challenges that are central issues for this case study:

Standard 1

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

- What are the core beliefs of the school?
- How would you align the school's priorities with the school's core beliefs?
- What relevant demographic data pertaining to students and their families were used in developing the school's mission and goals?
- What resources are necessary to overcome the learning community's concerns?
- How would the proposed multicultural knowledge initiative impact the district's curriculum?
- What is your definition of a moral and social change agent? How would you respond to the situations presented in this case study?
- What concerns would you address as an administrator at this school? How do your values play a role in how you define and respond to this case study?

Standard 2

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

- To what extent are individuals within the school treated with fairness, dignity, and respect?
- How would you promote professional development that encourages a focus on student learning that is consistent with the vision, mission, and goals of the organization?
- What are the responsibilities and contributions of teachers, students, parents, community members, and school leaders within the school?
- How is diversity considered in developing learning experiences for staff, faculty, and students?
- How will you assess the success of the school?
- How is the school organized and aligned for success?
- How does the curriculum design, implementation, evaluation, and refinement influence student outcomes at the school?

Standard 3

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

- What are the emerging trends within the school community?
- How are the operational procedures designed to manage and maximize opportunities for successful learning?
- What are the organization's strengths? What are the school's potential problems?
- How do the school plan, equipment, and support systems operate to provide a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment?
- How are problems within the learning community framed? How are these problems resolved?

Standard 4

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

- How visible are the school leaders?
- What kind of relationships do school leaders have with community leaders, faculty, parents, staff, and students?
- What community outreach is necessary for the school's success?
- What are community resources available to the school?
- To what extent is diversity recognized and valued by the school leaders, staff, faculty, students, parents, and community members?
- What opportunities are available to develop collaborative skills?

Standard 5

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

- What are the personal and professional values of the school leaders and faculty?
- How do the school leaders demonstrate their values, beliefs, and attitudes?
- How do the school leaders examine and consider how the prevailing values of the diverse school community influence the success of the school?

Standard 6

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

- What are the political, social, cultural, and economic systems and processes influencing the school?
- Ask students to research surrounding school districts undergoing racial, social, economic, and/or political changes. How are learning community responding to the changes?
- What are the global forces affecting the teaching and learning within the school?
- How do ISLCC standards support the school leader's ability to influence the social fabric of society including more racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse students and families?
- When do racial, social, and economic demographic elements influence school policy and decision-making? What do you perceive as the demographic tipping point?
- How would you as an educational leader respond to a school community undergoing increasing numbers of emerging majority members, children living in poverty, and English Language Learners?
- What are the dynamics of policy development and advocacy under the district's democratic political system?
- What is the importance of diversity and equity in a democratic society? How do these elements impact the school?