

Educational Leaders or Compliant Bureaucrats?

Reflections on 'Leadership' Preparation

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There is a commonly held conception that being able to raise a school's test scores as a principal is the hallmark of effective educational leadership. As a professor involved in the preparation of leaders for democratic schools I strongly contest this notion. Wrenching higher test scores from a group of students and teachers does not constitute educational leadership. Rather, it may constitute nothing more than the successful manipulation of a school's instructional program to comply with the wishes and pressures of educational bureaucrats and political power brokers. Following the dictates of others is hardly leadership; it is compliance and falls far short of the sense of compelling vision that is often articulated as a key characteristic of leadership. The bureaucrats and power brokers who set the agenda for schools typically have their own career aspirations in mind much more than the needs and desires of students or the greater societal good. They want to be able to point to higher numbers—especially for test scores—while students want to make sense of and learn about their world. The global concern of policy makers and others who set the agenda for schools is to prepare students who can “race to the top” and, by implication, vanquish other countries around the globe. Conversely, the global concern of schools should be educating students for peaceful, cooperative, fulfilling, and universally beneficial coexistence with others around the planet.

The impoverished nature of the current vision for education has, unfortunately, made significant headway with current principals. In recent work with principals that included interviews with 40 principals and spanned 10 states (Reitzug, West, & Angel, 2008; Reitzug & West, in press), one characteristic that

was noticeably missing from the narratives of most principals was the presence of a compelling vision for their schools that went beyond simply achieving higher test scores (Reitzug & West, 2009). Thus, perhaps the major priority that should guide the education of leaders for democratic schools is a focus on the development of a compelling moral vision for the schools they lead. This vision should be nested within a broader vision of a harmonious global society and be cognizant of the possibility of schooling in helping create such a society.

Idealistic as a focus on moral vision in educational leadership preparation may sound, it is of prime importance. As I write this, the remnants of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig continue to spew oil unrelentingly into the Gulf of Mexico, decimating the environment for thousands of miles and destroying the livelihood and heritage of countless families who make their living from the waters of the Gulf. This tragedy comes on the heels of a continuing national and global economic disaster that has resulted in hundreds of thousands losing their jobs and/or their homes. Both the Deepwater Horizon tragedy and the economic disaster were perpetuated by the greed-induced actions and decisions of highly educated individuals. These corporate and economic terrorists undoubtedly scored extremely high on the various tests they took during their years of formal education. Indeed, the competitiveness of an achievement-driven educational system may well have fueled their adult desires for more profits and greater power even when pursuing such outcomes meant leaving bodies, spirits, and environments in their wake. Without a system of schooling that is motivated by a vision of a global society concerned with the needs of *all* people and peoples, the needless human suffering created by events like those described here, will be a regular occurrence.

We must, however, as we prepare educational leaders for democratic schools, recognize that the schools those individuals will step into will often be far from democratic. Furthermore, the district, state, and national contexts in which they exist will be filled with pressures that often do little to promote democratic education. Thus, the challenge is to prepare leaders for schools as they are while simultaneously preparing them for schools as they might be. In our interviews with principals (Reitzug, West, & Angel, 2008; Reitzug & West, in press), they often articulated skills and dispositions necessary for survival as a principal in schools as they currently are. These include the following:

- A genuine caring and concern for students, teachers, staff, and parents, and the “people skills” to develop positive and productive relationships with and between these various members of the school community.
- The disposition and skills to engage teachers and staff in the study and discussion of their personal practice and the school’s practice. In the past this has been described as developing norms of collegiality and experimentation (Little, 1982) and as having the school become a center of inquiry and change (Schaefer, 1967; Sirotnik, 1989). This inquiring disposition is at the heart of

what is currently popularly termed *professional learning community*. Future educational leaders, however, should be clear that a school does not “do” professional learning community—as if it’s one more program that can simply be adopted—but rather, that professional learning community is something that develops from ongoing norms of discussion, experimentation, and study. It should also be noted that the development of such norms lead to the natural (as opposed to legislated) involvement of school staff in the decision-making processes of the school, particularly as they pertain to instruction.

- The political disposition and skills that make it possible for the school to effectively work toward achieving its vision. Political disposition here refers both to navigating the web of constraints and pressures that are imposed by the vested interests of outsiders on the school, as well as the proactive seeking and acquisition of financial and human resources for the school that go beyond those that would be typically allocated.
- The ability to align curriculum, teaching, benchmark testing, and re-teaching in a manner that is consistent with mandated standards. This last point is not so much a focus for achieving democratic schooling as it is a survival skill that permits educational leaders to retain their positions. After all, without a base from which to operate, it is difficult to engage in the work of furthering democratic education.

Additionally, we would be naïve to assert that there is no place for skills-based instruction and skill acquisition in the education of students. However, when such linear alignment processes become the dominant focus of instructional leadership work—as it did for many of the principals in our studies—then it is problematic.

In conclusion, to be an educational leader in a school striving to be a democracy, a principal must, in a sense, be a prophet. Brueggeman (1978) has noted that the role of a prophet is to “nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the dominant culture” (p. 13). Most schools currently are not democratic. They neither function as democracies nor do they prepare students for democracy. Principals must remember that they ultimately serve students—not policy makers and bureaucrats. Their leadership role is about establishing a loftier vision and standard than the currently dominant one and working with people to embrace and reach that vision. In order to develop educational leaders for this monumental challenge, we must prepare them for the schools they enter as well as for the schools we hope they leave behind.

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