Leadership Education Priorities in a Democratic Society

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Is there still an effort to include democratic ideals in public education? Some claim that it is no longer a priority, the result of a lack of common definition or perceived benefits. We agree with Pryor's claim that educational leaders must advocate teaching about the history and values of a democratic society and examine the debates in philosophical thought foundational to educational decisions (2008). School leaders should envision learning as more than content specific since one of the primary goals of schooling is to produce effective citizens.

In today's policy driven climate, school leaders must transition to new and more effective approaches to enhancing learning and teaching. Aspiring principals/leaders should recognize by now, as we have in Rhode Island, that underperforming students and schools may result in significant reprisals, including dismissal, if improvement is not specifically quantified in state assessments.

As reforms evolve, research consistently suggests that a key component to effective school change is the democratic process of educating and involving core constituents. However, the tension between collaboration and policy is a reality that often mitigates against a people-centered process. Thus, the leadership base in knowledge, skill sets, practice, and dispositions must target a collective/collaborative effort that recognizes and works through policy demands. This balancing act between constituent involvement on the one hand, and policy expectations on the other, has never been greater. As a result, it has become evident that leadership training must combine creative schemes that are people/constituent inclusive, with an approach that recognizes and balances policy expectations.

School leaders should start with a platform of "leadership" that inspires thought and guides practice. Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) suggest emphasizing function over definition. We ascribe to their position; they posit that there are two main leadership functions: direction and influence. In asking, "where do we want to go", direction implies a dual process of policy and practice, whereas influence suggests a dependence on people to accomplish the former. We believe that social psychology scholars such as Cialdini (2009) offer cognitive skills that provide leaders with an understanding and application of how to influence the thinking of others to guide engagement.

Another leadership priority requires leadership standards to inform practice. Rhode Island leadership standards are framed around the six Interstate School leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 2008) standards. Most reforms are focused on instruction (Standard 2), but in an age of growing accountability, understanding and applying Standard 6 may be the most important since it asks administrators to delve into the world of politics and external policy. We suggest that a thorough understanding of how "direction and influence" are connected to community (Standard 4), ethics (Standard 5), and especially Standard 6 be a standards-related priority emphasizing commitment, consensus, and collaboration.

School leaders also need to understand and respond to change. Anyone involved in school change can attest that the process is never easy, often results in unintended areas, and a majority of time, simply fails. Aspiring leaders in Rhode Island are steeped in the theories of Kotter and Fullan. Kotter's model 8-step model (1995) describes how people approach and relate to change. Fullan's (2001) 3-step model (initiation, implementation, institutionalization) offers a more compact model that emphasizes the initiation phase, the "prior to", as the area most often resulting in failure. In both cases, the impetus is on a people-centered process as a priority. Kotter references "people" in nearly every principle; Fullan claims that failure to plan ahead (i.e., stakeholder buy-in) can predict failure at implementation or institutionalization.

Every leader claims communication as a priority. Communication expert Robert Bolton reveals that while communication is humanity's greatest accomplishment, it is also an area where we are most ineffective. To that end, we suggest Bolton's book *People Skills* (1986) as a primer for understanding communication. His cluster of skills critical to interpersonal relationships offers guidelines that enable practitioners to decide what communication skills to use in any situation. As a follow-up, we strongly recommend *Crucial Conversations* (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2004) as a must read in developing skills when stakes are high. The authors provide specifics that inform leaders with the "how to" in dealing with effective communication.

Individually and by situation, there will always be a plethora of tasks to prioritize. Effective leadership is not in attempting to do it all by oneself—that is impossible. The key, as Leithwood points out, is to design a structure that gives direction and then get others to become involved in a distributed process.

Persuading stakeholders to join in leadership activities is a major challenge for the aspiring/practicing leaders in both learning and process. Equally challenging is persuading external support in that effort.

Most people in America have heard about the Central Falls, Rhode Island crisis: All of the high school teachers were fired as a result of resistance to the turnaround reform model mandated by the department of education. Central Falls is our smallest community. It is also one of our poorest. It was taken over by the State in 1993, yet has continued to underperform on a yearly basis.

Were one to use the prioritized criteria mentioned above, the following questions could be asked related to the CF reform:

- How was leadership functions used to guide developing a solution to the problem?
- What leadership standards were used (or not) in handling the situation prior to the crisis? Were there political agendas that trumped instruction and student learning?
- Were all stakeholders involved in a transparent discussion that would frame an approach to an effective school change?
- How effective was communication prior to and during the crisis?

The answer to these and other questions is not the purview of this essay. In each question, however, the implication is that failure to prioritize a few core components, define the principles that would guide practice, communicate clearly the efforts and effects that would lead to a satisfactory outcome were sorely lacking. The leadership lesson: The State and unions eventually ironed out an agreement that returned the teachers to school, but not the administrators, a heads-up for school leaders if ever there were a question about the need to reflect on the democratic process.

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