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Congratulations on becoming a new superintendent. As chief executive of your school district, you have a unique and influential voice in education.

I am pleased to present the latest edition of the *New Superintendents Journal*. This publication contains selected articles from our award-winning magazine, *School Administrator*, to help you begin your superintendency.

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Once again, congratulations.

Sincerely,

Daniel A. Domenech
Executive Director
AASA, The School Superintendents Association

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AASA, The School Superintendents Association, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 10,000 educational leaders in the United States and around the world. AASA, The School Superintendents Association, advocates for the highest quality public education for all students, and develops and supports school system leaders. For more information, and to join, visit *www.aasa.org.*

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Co-editors of *The New Superintendents Journal* are James Minichello, AASA director, communications and marketing, and Robert McCord, professor emeritus at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Jay Goldman, editor of AASA's *School Administrator* magazine, edited the original articles when they appeared in the magazine.

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Superintendent | Calhoun City School District, Georgia

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A TRANSITION OF OVERLAPPING SUPERINTENDENTS

A distinctive leadership handoff: The pairing of the incoming and outgoing superintendents together for a year

By Scott LaFee

In the corporate world, the idea of grooming someone for greater office, of providing him or her with time and mentoring to prepare for bigger things to come, is routine, even expected. In public education, it's far less common — and for the toughest job of all, the public school superintendency — it seems to happen hardly at all.

Why? There are obvious reasons. For one thing, circumstances often render impractical a lengthy, overlapping transition between outgoing and incoming superintendents. The departing administrator may be leaving on short notice, or not by choice.

And second, there's the question of who's in charge.

"Only one person can be superintendent," says Tom Scott, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents, which works with the superintendents in 325 school districts. "Anyone else is coming in to play a secondary role, which I think is not what an incoming superintendent wants to be seen doing. You want people to know who you are and the role you will play."

Usually, says Thomas Jacobson, chief executive officer of McPherson & Jacobson, an Omaha, Nebraska-based search firm, the notion of an overlapping transition originates with a forward-thinking school board.

"New superintendents want to come in and take over their responsibilities without interference from any outside sources, including consultants," says Jacobson, who indicated he's seen no more than five overlapping superintendencies in 23 years and 500 searches. "The outgoing superintendent is usually not in favor of an overlapping transition unless there is some type of special remuneration involved. The community and staff oppose the arrangement if it involves paying two superintendents. Boards are usually the ones who bring the idea up because they believe it will assist in providing a seamless transition."

And so, occasionally, a lengthy transition (one that spans a year or more) is put in place. Do they work? School system leaders who have been through the experience of overlapping with their successor or predecessor say yes — with caveats.

School Administrator talked to the players involved in three such superintendent transitions in Minnesota, Washington and Illinois who were recommended by state association leaders and superintendent search consultants.

MARCIA ZIEGLER AND JAMES BEHLE

Before she became superintendent of St. Michael-Albertville Schools in Albertville, Minn., in 2001, Marcia Ziegler was hired for a year to be an assistant administrator to her predecessor, who was planning his retirement.

When Ziegler decided to retire herself nine years later, she became part of reprised history.

"The school board felt that my hiring went so well that they wanted to do that process again," she says.

Things had changed, of course. The school district, located roughly 30 miles northwest of Minneapolis, had doubled in size to 5,600 students, with all of the added complexities, expected and not. No one wanted a rash, rushed hire. As they had done before, the board advertised for an associate superintendent with the stated intention that the successful applicant would assume the top spot when Ziegler retired one year later. Ziegler would be involved in the search for her replacement.

James Behle, a veteran central-office administrator with the Iowa City, Iowa, schools, got the job, appointed by the six-member school board in June 2010.

"I appreciated the transition process for the same reason the board did," explains Behle, who recently started his third year as St. Michael-Albertville's superintendent. "Because I was coming from out of state, it would

allow me time to learn about a different school funding system, state assessment practices, curriculum requirements and state laws and regulations. It would allow me to meet staff and introduce myself to the community without the challenges associated with being a first-year superintendent."

Behle admits he had some concerns at first. He knew Ziegler only from his job interviews. And he recognized it would be at least six months on the job before he would know for certain he actually had the job he wanted. But those worries rapidly disappeared.

Although the suburban district had experienced rapid, dramatic growth, Behle says St. Michael-Albertville proved to be financially sound, well-managed and academically high-performing. The district leadership, he acknowledges, knew what it was doing.

"The board included members who had served 16 years or more, indicating to me that the community was pleased with the decisions that had been made," says Behle, who had spent the previous 31 years of his education career in Iowa. "The board president was clear that the intent was to hire me as superintendent after a period of time learning firsthand about my leadership. I quickly discovered in my conversations with Dr. Ziegler that I could work with her. She outlined a transition plan for both of us that had been approved by the school board. I found a high degree of integrity among the board members and superintendent."

Much of the transition involved Ziegler imparting her years of accrued local knowledge to Behle, who took up the task of incorporating it in formal manuals, handbooks and special projects.

"I worked on updating and reviewing job descriptions, school board policies and administrators' evaluation processes and procedures," Behle says. "I took on many of the responsibilities associated with a human resources director (a position the district lacked at the time), including facilitating negotiations with the support staff unions. Being able to focus on projects without some of the day-to-day interruptions was very beneficial."

As planned, Behle was formally offered the superintendent's job midway through the transition period. Ziegler began transferring responsibilities and authority. By the end of the school, she was acting as Behle's assistant superintendent.

Ziegler now is enjoying the fruits of full retirement. Like Behle, she declares the transition plan to be a success — again.

"Ours worked because neither Dr. Behle nor I had any ego issues. I think the one year was pretty ideal. I think it would be more difficult for staff with a longer time period. Also, I believe having a high quality school board, excellent staff and a progressive community were key."

MONTE BRIDGES AND JOHN P. WELCH

For John P. Welch, the transition to full-time, full-fledged superintendent began with an unusual title: "Successor Superintendent."

"We kind of made up that title," says Welch, chuckling.

Welch was hired to replace Monte Bridges, who had announced plans to retire as head of the K-12 Puget Sound Educational Service District, which provides services to 35 school districts and more than 200 private schools in the Seattle-Tacoma region in Washington state.

"The process started about 2½ years out from my actual retirement," recalls Bridges, who spent 10 years atop the intermediate agency based in Renton, Wash. "When I realized my deputy superintendent would be retiring a year before my intended retirement, I began thinking that perhaps we could devise a great transition if we hired the next superintendent rather than a deputy and worked together for a year."

Bridges proposed the idea to his school board, consisting of nine representatives from across the district. After six months of consideration, they approved the novel idea.

Welch, who had been superintendent of nearby Highline School District for six years, arrived at Puget Sound in September 2011. The plan was to elevate him to superintendent on July 1, 2013. "The time between was considered a bit of a trial period," Welch admits, with the agreement allowing either party to end the experiment at the midpoint.

The transition appeared well-conceived to Welch. Though most day-to-day responsibilities and strategic work initially remained with Bridges, Welch was given opportunities to run several departments and launch a new science, technology, engineering and math network, including development of its five-year business plan.

"Basically, we looked at all of the roles that the superintendent and deputy/successor were providing and began to divide up the work," Bridges says. "The year was split into thirds, with each third representing a successive increase in responsibility for the incoming person. We stayed connected so that we were both responsible as a team for the total body of work. I acted as a lead, a mentor, a partner, a supervisor and confidential colleague. The role I played was the exact role I perceived that I would play."

Welch describes the process using an automobile analogy. From September through December 2011, he was in the backseat watching Bridges drive the vehicle. From January through March, he hopped in the front seat while Bridges continued to handle the wheel. After March, Welch moved to the driver's seat and Bridges rode shotgun until the latter's departure at the end of the school year.

Both men believe there was no ambiguity over who was in charge during the 10 months of overlap.

"There can be only one superintendent of record. Monte was that person. He signed over the superintendent's title. But in terms of making decisions, for all practical purposes, I was completely involved and responsible," says Welch.

Bridges, who now works with doctoral students at the University of Washington, says the transition worked to perfection. Welch credits Bridges.

"This kind of arrangement doesn't work unless you have the right people involved and the right situation," Welch says. "I didn't really know Monte well before I came to Puget Sound, though obviously I got to know him much better. I knew his leadership style though, and that is part of why this worked. Monte was moving on. He wasn't being ousted. He wanted things to go well."

GERALD HILL AND MICHAEL NICHOLSON

While attending the AASA's 2010 national conference in Phoenix, Ariz., Michael Nicholson stopped by the booth of the superintendent search firm Hazard, Young and Attea where William Attea mentioned a leadership succession plan being put in place in a suburban school district just north of Chicago.

At the time, Nicholson was executive director for secondary learning in the Olentangy School District, near Columbus, Ohio. He had higher aspirations.

COMPONENTS OF OVERLAPPING TENURE

Any plan of a school board to overlap the incoming and outgoing superintendents is bound to be complex. Nonetheless, successful succession plans share a handful of basic characteristics or requirements, according to school leaders who have been involved in this distinctive form of leadership transition.

Their suggestions for why and how it can work include:

- **A lack of drama.** The outgoing superintendent is not being forced out, leaving under a cloud or departing on short notice. Usually, it's a planned retirement.
- **Veteran leadership.** Both the board of education and the outgoing superintendent need to be confident and assured, particularly in their shared vision and long-term goals. That comes with experience.
- **Financial wherewithal.** Overlapping transitions often require paying two people for essentially the same job for a defined period.
- **Trust and transparency.** Both must exist in abundance. From the board to the incoming superintendent to the community, everybody must understand and support a well-conceived plan and believe it will be carried out in good faith.
- **Communication.** See trust and transparency. Talk a lot.
- **Effort.** Every transition plan suffers unforeseen glitches and distractions. People must be committed to resolving issues and getting past the rough spots.

The Glenview Pubic School District, with its 5,000 students in K-12, sounded like a logical move.

He interviewed and landed the job, which was accompanied by a two-year overlap with the outgoing superintendent, Jerry Hill. "The idea for the transition came from the board," Nicholson says. "Several cabinet positions were planned for turnover, due to retirements, and the board wanted to bring in a senior leader who could be the bridge and leader moving from old to new."

Glenview's transition plan also was quite detailed, with Nicholson systematically and incrementally introduced to every aspect of the superintendent's job, from instructional leadership and budget development to strategic planning and public relations. It was ideal

on-the-job training for someone who had not worked as a superintendent.

"For the first year," Nicholson says, "I was responsible for mentoring, evaluating and supervising all the principals; developing and implementing district professional development; and coordinating and overseeing the district's instructional coaches. Dr. Hill was mainly responsible for working with the board of education and leading the cabinet."

After being told the school board wanted him to lead the district, Nicholson spent the second year of transition more focused on fleshing out strategies and collaborating with other district administrators.

"The one challenging area involved principals and central-office administrators essentially having two 'bosses,' particularly as we entered my final year," says Hill, who spent eight years as Glenview's superintendent. "Mike and I had to coordinate our thinking and stay on the same wavelength regarding major projects and initiatives. It worked fine with us, but was more difficult for other leaders."

Nicholson, who served 24 months as the superintendent-in-waiting, concedes some transitional bumps were inevitable.

"I'm not sure there is a clear way around the inherent confusion that may exist when there is an intentional overlap between superintendents," says Nicholson, now three months into his second year at Glenview's helm. "A board may need to accept some confusion while the new leader learns the system and the former leader keeps the system going. Perhaps acknowledging this upfront can help mitigate the problem, though I'm not sure the confusion was in the formal command chain as much as in the informal."

NOT EVERYONE'S TASTE

Ultimately, the attraction of overlapping leadership boils down to familiarity and experience.

For veteran superintendents moving to new school districts, the idea likely holds little or no attraction, according to executive search experts such as Jacobson. They know the job and what to expect.

School boards, on the other hand, may have a different perspective. They want to know (as best they can) that their selected candidate can handle the diverse and increasingly complex demands of a modern-day superintendency, that there will be no unpleasant surprises, disappointments or regrets after the hire. Some boards are willing to put in the effort, money and time — to wait and see.

But the wait for the designated successor can be painfully long. William R. Shields served as the heir-apparent to outgoing superintendent Hank Gmitro in Bloomingdale, Ill.'s Consolidated Community School District 93 for 2½ years before assuming the top post. Prior to becoming Gmitro's named successor, Shields had been an assistant superintendent for human resources for three years and had worked in the district for 13 years overall.

"I'm not sure it would work for everyone," says Shields, now in his fifth year as superintendent in Bloomingdale. "I had a great love for the district and was willing to delay becoming a superintendent elsewhere for the opportunity in an organization I love very much. … It takes tremendous trust and patience, but I believe it's paid off."

By the time Shields officially became superintendent on July 1, 2009, he says, "I not only knew every facet of the community, but I also had the experiences of a seasoned superintendent." ■

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IF THE PLAYING FIELD IS TILTED, WHY LEVEL IT?

What the former district leader in Wake County, N.C., knows now about policy conflicts he didn't know then

By Del Burns

Knowing that a majority of citizens opposed a district merger, why would elected officials and school district leaders doggedly pursue the consolidation of the Raleigh City Schools and Wake County Schools in North Carolina? They did just that in 1975, when the Wake County Public School System was created against the will of the people.

"When I became superintendent in 2006, I realized two key things. First, future student assignment plans would become the principal policy tool for leveling the playing field. And second, student assignment for socioeconomic diversity would come into conflict with competing policy goals and tools."

Prior to the merger, which brought together about 50,000 students, a nonbinding public referendum had been defeated by a 2-1 margin.

However, a core group of business and community leaders were successful in convincing the local legislative delegation to introduce a bill in the state legislature enabling the merger. Both boards of education, the board of county commissioners and the state board of education subsequently approved the merger. The reasons cited at the time included greater operational efficiency, better use of existing building capacity, increased educational opportunity for all students and greater racial integration.

AN EYE OPENER

As a beginning teacher in the newly formed district, I did not fully grasp the ramifications of a merger. What I did see, however, was the conflict that followed that decision. During my 30-plus years in the Wake County Public Schools, as I moved from teacher to principal to superintendent, I experienced firsthand the effects of explosive growth, as the district increased by nearly 100,000 students.

Merging districts, rather than reducing political conflict over public education, seemed to amplify it. Property tax increases were used to build more schools and facilities, fueling a growing anti-government sentiment. The district frequently reassigned students to reduce overcrowding, pitting parental choice against efficient facility use.

Meanwhile, color gave way to class, as the goal of greater racial integration transformed into socioeconomic diversity. Population growth increased steadily in the years after the merger, until by the mid-2000s the Wake County system was expanding by 6,000 students each year. In addition to in-migration, essentially two classes of kindergartners were born in the county every day.

I witnessed and experienced the impact of student assignment on students, families, the community, the district and the school board. I also saw that while student assignment plans were developed primarily to address building capacity, socioeconomic diversity began to garner greater attention.

When I became superintendent in 2006, I realized two key things. First, future student assignment plans would become the principal policy tool for leveling the playing field. And second, student assignment for socioeconomic diversity would come into conflict with competing policy goals and tools.

Few district policy decisions can match the emotion, passion, outcry and conflict generated by student assignment. One that comes very close is the decision to group students by ability or performance within the classroom for purposes of instruction. The questions of who goes to school with whom, and why are volatile ones, regardless of whether it is the classroom or the school being considered. Having addressed both of

these issues, the first as principal and the second as superintendent, I recognized immediately this was true. But it took a process of discovery for me to come to understand exactly why.

When controversial policy choices surface, it seems that everyone knows the answer. School board candidates and interest groups advocate for their "right" answer, often declaring the "right" answers of others to be "wrong." When everyone knows the answer and everyone doesn't agree, what does it mean, why does this occur and how should a superintendent respond?

Let's proceed based on author James Thurber's advice that it's better to know some of the questions than all of the answers.

THREE QUESTIONS

I believe every superintendent should ask three related questions when facing controversial policy choices:

No. 1: What are policy choices like these fundamentally about?

For most political philosophers, the key purpose of any legitimate government is to help its citizens create the "good life." The good life is a set of values that can be grouped into four big *public values* that represent the public good in any policy choice:

Liberty includes freedom, choice, opportunity, independence, individuality, privacy, personal responsibility and self-sufficiency.

Equality includes fairness, equity, justice, tolerance, diversity, equal treatment, equal opportunity, equal results and a level playing field.

Community includes safety, security, a sense of belonging to the people and places where we live and work, social and moral order and quality of life.

Prosperity includes productivity, efficiency, growth, development, privatization, return on investment, standard of living, quantity of life and using market rules to make decisions.

These values frame all policy choices. While we agree these are the values of the good life, we disagree vigorously about which value should have priority in any given situation.

No. 2: Why do policy choices like these matter?

Superintendents have an administrative role. But they also have a governance role. The governance role of the board and superintendent is to help create enough liberty, equality, community and prosperity for everyone through public education.

However, without a language and framework to discuss policy choices for leveling the playing field like student assignment, boards and superintendents cannot have the crucial conversations needed to identify the good from among competing "right" answers. Without such a framework, we are as likely to harm a good thing as we are to create a good thing. In a democratic society, how we decide is as important as what we decide.

Making decisions for the public good means more than just choosing sides. As an individual, you may prefer one value to another. As a superintendent, you must recognize that policy choices always involve at least two public values and that no one value is always better than the others. So before your staff, board or community debates solutions, make sure everyone understands which values are involved. Stop and ask, "How does this choice make our community better, and how are we treating those values with which we disagree?"

No. 3: How can superintendents discern the public good from among so many competing "right" answers?

Decisions on behalf of the public good must be technically feasible and psychologically acceptable. In other words, they must meet all applicable legal and administrative requirements. And they must also satisfy public values. Ask your board and staff members, "How much are we willing to give up of one value to get more of another?"

When faced with a difficult policy choice involving competing good things, encourage diverse and broad-based participation. Reach out to the organizations in your community that are most likely to represent the faces not seen and the voices not heard. Use small groups instead of large public hearings to help people discuss what these policy choices mean to them, why they prefer one over another, and learn to recognize the good in each policy choice.

Move from exploration and understanding to planning and action. Be clear about what has been done in the past, what has been useful, what was implemented, what wasn't and why not, how this effort will improve on previous ones, what impact it will have on the community as a whole, and who else needs to be involved.

Model the "arts of liberty" (first raised by political scientist Benjamin R. Barber in a *Harper's Magazine* article in 1993) that help preserve the *publics* in public schools. Help your community understand that rights and responsibility are connected. Parents should expect the district to be accountable to them, but they also must recognize they have a responsibility to the district. Help them understand our diversity is a strength, that we cannot be different all by ourselves and that the power of difference makes us stronger as a community.

Understand that conflict is the essence of democracy and we should acknowledge conflict and seek common ground because we are each a part of a larger community. Understand that democracy, as John Dewey wrote, means "paying attention." and that if we don't listen and ask questions, we cannot find any common ground.

A public values framework is essential for navigating the public policy process when we must address issues like student assignment. Superintendents need a tool to help their boards surface and express the values underlying the inevitable conflict inherent in such policy choices. This is not just desirable, it's necessary. Otherwise, how can a superintendent and school board identify the choices that are good from all those that are right?

WHY LEVELING MATTERS

As Americans, we are caught in an ever-raging conflict between the values of the good life, particularly between equality and justice on one hand and the social and economic preferences of an individualistic society on the other.

One way a democratic society resolves this conflict is through institutions that amplify these values, such as the church, the school and the state. These institutions, including public schools, are likely to be more broad-minded than the communities in which they reside. We place in these institutions our ideals of how the world rightly ought to be. This is why Wake County leaders approved a merger of schools almost 40 years ago, even though a majority of citizens opposed it. And it is why the U.S. Supreme Court issued its historic *Brown* decision.

Public schools matter in the quest to level the playing field precisely because they are public and therefore serve as repositories for our ideals. Yet the pull of choice and individual freedom is so strong that the quest for equality and diversity feels like a push to many Americans.

The governance challenge for school boards and administrators is to make it possible for citizens to feel the pull of diversity rather than the push. In doing this, superintendents play an important leadership role in helping transform everyday self-interest into French historian Alexis de Tocqueville's notion of "self-interest, properly understood."

If our democratic experiment is to survive, it will be because we teach our children, along with reading and math, that one of the moral obligations of living in a free society is willingly curbing our individual self-interest in order that we may aspire to and attain the virtues and ideals of a democratic society that make personal freedom possible in the first place. ■

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Contributing to this article was Phil Boyle, president of Leading and Governing Associates in Carrboro, N.C. Burns and Boyle are authors of Preserving the Public in Public Schools (R&L Education, 2011).

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BOARD-SAVVY SUPERINTENDENTS

Challenging assumptions through productivity management

By Donald R. McAdams

Few can doubt that significant improvements in public education productivity are needed. Performance standards and accountability requirements are rising, yet resources continue to be scarce. School districts are going to have to do more, sometimes with less.

What is productivity? Simply, productivity is output divided by input. For school districts, the desired output is an on-time graduate, who is college or workplace ready. The inputs include the student and all resources used to educate the student. Indeed, schools have no control over their inputs — educators must teach all children regardless of ability, interest or economic background. But other labor-intensive services with similar limitations have made significant improvements in productivity. And school districts are under increasing pressure to do the same.

"Performance standards and accountability requirements are rising, yet resources continue to be scarce."

APPLYING METRICS

On the business side, all school districts need to do is apply the experience of other business sectors. Metrics can be established by clearly identifying outputs for every business function and dividing these outputs by inputs, usually costs. After metrics come targets, then process improvements to achieve those targets. With the guidance and support of the Council of the Great City Schools, this already has been done by the nation's best-managed urban districts.

Productivity management of education's core function, teaching and learning, is more difficult, but the foundational requirements are the same: clear goals and performance metrics; performance accountability; comprehensive and transparent financial information linking costs to outputs; deregulation; and innovation.

Some of these foundational requirements are shared state responsibilities, specifically deregulation. Superintendents and boards should work together to encourage their state policymakers to reduce state mandates and give school districts more control over their work, but redesigning the core business of education to improve productivity can only be done by the educators doing the work.

With clear output metrics in mind, deep knowledge of linked inputs and the financial tools to link expenditures directly to outputs, productivity management can begin. The focus always is on process. The key insight of productivity management is that all work is a process with inputs and outputs, and that productivity improvement is process control to reduce variability and process innovation to reduce the cost of inputs, all the while increasing output quality and quantity.

KEY QUESTIONS

Five key and interrelated leverage points improve productivity in education's core business, teaching and learning. The questions for educators are:

- How should students be grouped for instructional purposes, and how frequently should groups be reconfigured?
- How much time should be scheduled for instruction, and how often should time requirements change?
- How much work should be assigned to individual students, and what specific work should be done in class, outside of class and online?
- How should technology be used?
- How should teachers be chosen, trained, grouped and deployed?

BOARD AT THE HELM

Today, the century-old factory model for organizing schools still prevails. But it need not. Opportunities for innovation and productivity improvement are abundant. The current system is built on the assumption that time is the constant, quality is the variable and grade levels, classes and teachers assigned to classes are the only way schools can be organized.

Strong superintendents working collaboratively with informed and courageous boards can begin to challenge these assumptions. Together they can establish clear goals and performance metrics, create a strong culture of district accountability and put into place comprehensive and transparent financial systems that link costs to outputs. Then, small teams of educators can begin the work of innovation by functional units and programs, using the standard productivity management tools of outcome measures, data gathering, process analysis and process redesign.

Board-savvy superintendents know this work would be impossible without their board leading the way with resolutions and enabling policies and accepting responsibility for parent and public education. Accordingly, they begin by educating their boards on productivity management and proceed by thoroughly explaining the risks and rewards at every step of the way. And they never forget that big changes require supermajorities. ■

"Together [superintendents] can establish clear goals and performance metrics,create a strong culture of district accountability and put into place comprehensive and transparent financial systems that link costs to outputs."

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RE-IMAGINING THE CENTRAL-OFFICE ROLE

How do you find the 'sweet spot' for working with school staffs on improving their instructional practices?

By Trent E. Kaufman, Emily Dolci Grimm and David S. Doty

Sitting at the meeting table with seven central-office leaders, Susan paused in mid-sentence. "As we discuss the current improvement efforts in schools across the district, I see a fundamental challenge," she stated. "We have been primarily focusing on providing resources for schools, right? Over the past few years we have delivered professional development opportunities and curricular materials, and scheduled common planning time to facilitate teacher collaboration. At some schools, we are seeing strong results. However, other schools seem almost buried under the weight of improvement initiatives; instead of thriving, they stall out."

"It is common for school districts to struggle with finding the 'sweet spot' of the central office's role."

As the school district's director of professional development, Susan was sincerely invested in this issue. "So it occurs to me that instead of discussing the allocation of additional resources, perhaps we need to open a much bigger conversation about our role in supporting schools," she added.

Having a bird's-eye vantage point makes it easy to see what needs to be done on the ground. However, seeing the need doesn't mean you know exactly how to address it. As district leaders consider their role in school improvement, they often have more clarity about the practices they want schools to adopt than they have about how to support adoption of those practices, resulting in fragmented implementation and minimal achievement gains.

This challenge is not a new one. It is common for school districts to struggle with finding the "sweet spot" of the central office's role. While one can highlight many examples of individual schools that have made sustained gains in student achievement, it is more difficult to point to examples of systemic, districtwide improvement.

CUSTOMARY ROUTES

In partnering with school districts to overcome this challenge, we have seen central offices use one of two traditional approaches to ignite school improvement.

In a site-based management district, the central office acts primarily as a resource provider. Schools are given the autonomy to use these resources to meet their buildings' needs. Not surprisingly, results of this approach vary widely because the schools most in need of supports often are the least likely to use resources for needed change. When this occurs, disparities in performance increase across the district.

The second approach to school improvement can be equally problematic. In the top-down model, central-office teams mandate initiatives and common practices and demand compliance across all schools. When imposed rigidly, this one-size-fits-all approach does not provide the necessary elasticity for educators to address building-specific problems and needs. Furthermore, it undermines school ownership of changes — which is essential if improvements are to be embedded and sustained in daily practice.

These approaches and their shortcomings are evidence of the need to more critically examine and define the central office's role in school improvement. What can central-office personnel do to most effectively promote improvement in teaching and learning at all district schools? How can improvement efforts leverage the expertise of both those within schools and at the central office?

We have explored these questions with several school districts undergoing systemic change and have learned some applicable lessons. Focusing on data-driven instruction, each of these districts has discovered that central-office teams can effectively drive improvement across all schools.

INQUIRY-BASED EFFORTS

After conducting comprehensive research, central-office leaders in the Denver Public Schools discovered large gaps in the capacity of schools and departments to effectively use data to improve teaching and learning. Therefore, they embarked on a serious effort to create a districtwide vision for inquiry-based improvement.

First, the district, with more than 84,000 students, spent considerable time and effort identifying and adopting a data-driven inquiry cycle, a step-by-step process for using data. Second, Denver began to provide information about the inquiry cycle to schools and departments across the district through dedicated websites, professional development and employee affinity groups.

Establishing this vision for data use is essential because an inquiry cycle provides a process for schools to examine data, to focus on identified needs, to examine those needs to understand their root causes and to create (and monitor the progress of) an action plan in response. The resulting instructional changes in each building then speak to the unique school context (and the learning needs of its students and faculty), avoiding the shortcomings of the one-size-fits all approach to improvement.

BUILDING INQUIRY SKILLS

Selecting and adopting an inquiry cycle is necessary but insufficient for districtwide school improvement. Attention also must be given to building the capacity of school staff so they can implement the cycle with expertise, ensuring the inquiry cycle guides the identification of specific learning needs and relevant instructional improvements.

The Chandler Unified School District, a 41,000-student district in the suburbs of Phoenix, Ariz., has invested heavily in professional development over the past three years to help educators become proficient at using data to guide their practice.

In particular, Chandler is ensuring each school not only understands the process, but also has the capacity to implement each critical element of the inquiry cycle:

- Focus on the core, the intersection of content, the teacher and the student;
- Target narrow, concrete problems and solutions that address a root cause;
- Expand the definition of data to include student work and instructional practice;
- Use protocols and norms to guide data analysis and meetings;
- Involve the whole staff in decision making; and
- Monitor progress continually.

Building these skills among teachers and principals requires sustained training that's differentiated based on school needs and progress. Such efforts pay great dividends because when schools know they are being supported in the hard work of implementation, they are much more likely to own the work, engage in the process with fidelity and leverage district support effectively.

COACHING AND FEEDBACK

A third component of central-office leadership that leads to systemic school improvement is regular, meaningful coaching. No one would hand a paintbrush to a novice artist and expect him or her to create a masterpiece. Likewise, district leaders can't simply identify an inquiry cycle, even in tandem with stellar professional development, and expect meaningful implementation immediately.

Outstanding performance with school improvement tools comes only with mentoring and honest feedback.

Mentoring and coaching can take many forms and often need both internal (central office) and external (outside provider) support to ensure the right candor and tone. We have partnered with achievement and data coaches in the Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation, a 22,000-student district in southern Indiana, to provide individual team coaching sessions to all 37 schools four times annually. These coaching sessions, which focus on each school's improvement plan, are specifically designed to give school teams honest, robust feedback on everything from evidence-based instructional strategies to implementation challenges related to their plan.

Most importantly, these sessions provide the foundation for follow-up project management sessions with the superintendent, where the principal explains the school's improvement efforts and the progress (or lack thereof) being made. The Evansville-Vanderburgh superintendent, David Smith, and his senior staff use these sessions not

only for accountability but also to understand the supports and resources schools may need to succeed. In doing so, the central office is better equipped to allocate resources to areas of greatest need.

TARGETING RESOURCES

Finally, when central-office leaders ground their vision for improvement in data-driven inquiry, they reverse the way the district identifies and allocates resources. This is particularly true when district leaders provide targeted support, rather than punishment, for schools that struggle to meet established district achievement goals.

The 33,000-student Canyons School District in Sandy, Utah, illustrates how data-driven inquiry appropriately flips the discussion from strict accountability to need-based support. In 2008, the superintendent and school board collaboratively adopted non-negotiable achievement goals based on college readiness benchmarks. The district office also implemented curriculum-based measures to help K-8 schools gather formative data and adopted, in a collaborative process with schools, standards-based report cards so all teachers were working toward grade-level proficiency.

After two years of employing these tools and strategies, the data demonstrated a discouraging lack of improvement in one middle school, especially in math and science. Based on summative data, as well as formative data gathered by teachers, district leaders partnered with the principal to develop a unique curricular approach to STEM courses, with an emphasis on 1:1 technology, which the board enthusiastically funded upon seeing the need.

When the central-office support comes in response to the needs a school identifies through inquiry, the relationship between district administration and school-based staff improves markedly and raises the likelihood of producing real achievement gains. Schools notice when district resources speak directly to their highest needs, making site-based leaders more likely to leverage those resources effectively.

A STARTING POINT

While the practices we've described are straightforward in theory, their adoption will require focused and deliberate attention. Changing practices, particularly those embedded in years or decades of interactions, challenges teams at any level of an organization.

Begin with choosing an inquiry cycle. A data-driven inquiry cycle creates the foundation for all of these practices. However, adopting a cycle is just the first step on the path. Think through the process regularly. Effective implementation will impact the daily work of the central office.

Conversations about central-office improvement often focus on roles and departments, but our experience has demonstrated the importance of parallel attention to the central-office teams' daily practices and processes. Failing to do so may result in changes in structures without corresponding fundamental shifts in the way the central office supports school improvement efforts at scale. ■

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RECULTURING THE CENTRAL OFFICE

How Washington's Highline district is transforming central administration's role in supporting its 37 school to improve instruction

By Susan Enfield and Alan Spicciati

Most of us remember the classic Charlie Brown cartoons where adults are simply invisible figures who provide nothing more than background noise. For many of us who began our teaching careers more than a decade ago, this might be an apt analogy for how we viewed the superintendent and central office from our vantage point in schools.

Who they were did not matter because whatever they did seemed so far removed from our classrooms. But times have changed and so, too, has the mission and focus of the central office.

Ask most central-office administrators today what their core mission is and they likely will cite improving teaching and learning in schools. Teachers expect their superintendents to make decisions that support the work they do with students. Families expect their school district leaders, along with building principals and teachers, to ensure their children receive the highest quality instruction possible.

> *"…the central office adds value not merely through 'service with a smile' … but also through a more active role in strengthening school leadership."*

These expectations, combined with increasing accountability demands at the federal and state levels, have resulted in central offices transitioning from being bureaucratic and compliance-focused to being mission-driven and results-focused.

In Highline Public Schools, we have embraced this change and are restructuring and reculturing our organization so that all central-office staff see themselves in service to schools. As a result, we have reallocated resources, redefined the role of the principal and engaged our community in developing a plan that delivers on our promise of knowing every student by name, strength and need.

SETTING THE STAGE

Highline is a highly diverse system 15 miles south of Seattle serving almost 19,000 students, 72 percent of whom qualify for free and reduced priced meals. We believe our students' potential is greater than whatever challenges they face. Together as a staff and community, we spent most of last year developing an ambitious, no excuses strategic plan that reflects our belief in our students' abilities.

What makes this plan so significant is not simply the bold 95 percent achievement and graduation rate targets we have set, but rather the shift it requires in the role of the central office. To achieve our ambitious, newly adopted goals, we had to rethink not only what we did but how we did it — and we knew we couldn't do it alone. Fortunately, we didn't have to.

Highline has a long history of partnering with the University of Washington's College of Education, and professors Meredith Honig and Michael Copland have been the leading experts on the role of the central office in school improvement. Their 2010 study of three school districts nationwide revealed how superintendents and their leadership teams transformed "the central office into a support system to help all schools improve the quality of teaching and learning."

As former teachers and now central-office leaders, we found this research has resonated with us since its publication. Now it serves as a guide for transforming our own work and, in doing so, our school system.

And with Honig's help, our first step was to become clear as a leadership team how the central office can work together to strengthen instruction. Early in our discussions, two strong beliefs took hold.

First and most important, we agreed that the central office adds value not merely through "service with a

smile" or even through efficiency — though both are obviously important — but also through a more active role in strengthening school leadership. Gone are the days of central-office bureaucracy, and so too is the "let a thousand flowers bloom" philosophy of decentralization. The central office now must play a pivotal role in ensuring a strong system of schools, and embracing this shift prepared us for the strategic work of transformation.

A THEORY OF ACTION

Any systemic improvement effort rests on a theory of action. Based on the research and our own experiences, our theory of action is this: If central-office staff put the conditions in place for principals to be effective instructional leaders and building managers, then principals in turn can put the conditions in place for teachers to be effective in meeting the needs of each learner so all students are known by name, strength and need and graduate prepared to choose their future.

Naming the primary responsibility of the central office as supporting principals helped us focus on two fronts — growing principal instructional leadership capacity and removing barriers that keep principals from focusing on instruction. This became the core of our transformation work and provided us with a focus for developing a plan to create a high-functioning, pro-active system of support services to schools.

We started small by providing all central-office staff members with the superintendent's expectations for the central office. These "quick win" practices were intended to support principals and build central-office credibility while the deeper, more powerful central-office reforms were being developed. Examples include responding to principal requests within 24 hours and adopting a stance of "working toward yes." These may seem obvious, but a single, lengthy e-mail chain of central-office staff raising bureaucratic hurdles can quickly erode principals' trust.

Another expectation core to the entire philosophy of central-office transformation was providing a rationale with all communication. We learned early on that the old, bureaucratic model of the central office is *telling,* while the new, capacity-building approach is *teaching.* This shift in mindset turns every meeting and every memo into an opportunity to develop a clearer organizational focus on how everything we do is in service of supporting student achievement.

DEFINING PRINCIPALS' ROLES

Supporting principals as instructional leaders demands talented central-office leaders whose foremost responsibility is doing just that. Traditionally, the role of principal supervisor has offered principals autonomy within broad oversight. Models such as the area superintendent role emphasize supervision of a wide array of functions, from budget compliance to parent complaints. While the best area superintendents develop their principals' leadership skills, few have the time or expertise to develop their principals' ability to help teachers improve their instructional practice.

In Highline, we have renamed our principal supervisors as instructional leadership executive directors, or ILEDs. This role is as important as any in the success of our transformation, and we have reorganized our central office to maximize their time spent developing and supporting principals.

We started by prioritizing resources to hire four ILEDs this year, compared to only two or three in prior years. This provides each with a manageable, and many would say enviable, assignment of working with only nine principals each.

Additionally, ILEDs have no other major duties, and their committee roles are kept to a minimum, allowing them to spend at least three days a week in their schools, meeting with principals and visiting classrooms.

The primary responsibility of the instructional leadership executive director is to build our principals' capacity as instructional leaders both in and outside the classroom to improve student learning and achievement. They do this by:

- Working one-on-one with principals as partners to develop and accelerate their instructional leadership capacity through differentiated support;
- Developing principal professional learning networks focused on principals learning and sharing instructional leadership practices;
- Providing and brokering professional development for principals based on both individual and collective learning needs;
- Providing and brokering support for principals in accessing services from instruction and operational central-office departments;

- Working with principals to understand and use various forms of data to improve teaching and learning; and
- Modeling effective leadership practices that lead to improved instruction.

Building instructional expertise in principals requires us to do the same with our ILEDs. Just as our principals need intentional support and professional development so, too, do our ILEDs if we expect them to ensure the quality of leadership and instruction in the schools they supervise.

To provide this level of tailored support, we are using our partnership with the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership. Our ILEDs receive one-on-one coaching and engage in monthly professional development sessions with the university center training personnel and other central-office staff. This ongoing investment in our ILEDs is not a nice option — it is an essential.

BEYOND COMPLIANCE

Redefining the role of those who support principals forms the cornerstone of central-office transformation, but it quickly becomes apparent that ILEDs and principals will only succeed if the rest of central office transforms its role as well. It is impossible for principals and their supervisors to change without other district functions changing and adapting.

The research on central-office transformation challenges all central-office departments, from human resources to finance to teaching and learning, to adopt a case management approach to supporting schools. (Notably, we relied on "Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement," a 2010 report by Meredith Honig and Michael Copland.) This means that rather than central-office staff focusing on simply completing tasks traditionally associated with their jobs, they instead begin learning what it is schools need from them. In doing so, they also begin to see themselves as an integral part of the mission of the system — improving teaching and learning across all schools.

We still have significant work to do in making the shift from being a central office committed to continuous improvement rather than focused on compliance. Yet this shift is absolutely essential if we are to become a system that truly serves all students. To do this, however, requires us to not only fight the age-old stereotypes of the traditional central office, but also challenge the byzantine set of state and federal policies that were designed for another era but still govern us today. We must define our new reality by redefining our own roles as central-office leaders. Our students are counting on us. ■

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

"Don't Cut Out the Center: The Centrality of the Central Office in Teaching and Learning Improvement" by Michael A. Copland and Meredith I. Honig, *Education Week,* Nov. 10, 2010

"District Central Office Leadership as Teaching: How Central Office Administrators Support Principals' Development as Instructional Leaders" by Meredith I. Honig, *Educational Administration Quarterly,* Oct. 28, 2012

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STARTING STRONG

Before Day 1 of his new superintendency, the author launched a systematic plan for listening to a wide array of perspectives while infusing a new spirit of community engagement

By Joshua P. Starr

A leadership transition can be an exciting time, full of hope and possibilities. But it also can be a period of nervousness and disruption. These feelings often are amplified when a new superintendent is hired because there is so much passion attached to education and so many constituencies to serve.

For parents, nothing is more important than the education of their children, and they want to make sure a new leader is going to attend to the needs of their kids. Teachers and school-based staff, for the most part, are passionate and mission driven, so they want to know where the new leader will take the organization. Principals and central-office administrators want to hear about new programs or practices that are coming and worry the new superintendent is going to come to town and start "cleaning house."

And then there are the school board members, employee associations, local and state political leaders, the business community, nonprofit organizations and others, all of whom have specific interests they want to promote.

EXECUTING A TRANSITION

With all of these competing demands waiting for the attention of a new superintendent, it's important to draw up and execute a transition and entry plan before your first day. While each superintendent faces a different set of circumstances when starting a new job, the need for an entry plan is universal, regardless of the size or location of your school district.

In April 2011, I was hired as the superintendent of the 151,000-student Montgomery County Public Schools, the nation's 17th largest school district, located just outside Washington, D.C. I was coming from the Stamford, Conn., Public Schools, a district that, similarly, was racially, ethnically and socioeconomically diverse but had about one-tenth the students. I was not taking over a school district in crisis. Montgomery County had a well-earned reputation as one of the nation's best school systems, and my predecessor, Jerry Weast, had led the district for 12 years, an exceptionally long tenure for a large district superintendent.

The size and the success of MCPS, as well as the stability of its leadership, made the need for a robust, transparent entry plan even greater. I spent my first year getting to know the district and the community and allowing parents, staff, students and community members to get to know me. Using a mix of traditional and nontraditional engagement methods, these entry activities fostered honest conversations that set the stage for the decisions I am making today.

The goals for my entry plan were simple — meet with and listen to as many people with as many different perspectives as possible, show the community that I was a capable leader who could take our system to the next level of success and foster a new spirit of community engagement and support for our schools.

KNOWING THE DISTRICT

Even before my first day on the job, I asked a team of insiders and outsiders to spend some intensive time reviewing the major components of MCPS, specifically around teaching and learning, operations and culture/context. The theory of action was simple: If this team did its work well, I would begin the school year with a solid understanding of the district's strengths and challenges. The transition team consisted of current and former employees, superintendents from other districts, leaders of educational organizations and others. Some of the external team members were people I had worked with in the past and who knew me well and would tell me what I needed to hear.

The transition team met for three months and reviewed a large amount of data; met with employees, parents, local governmental leaders and community representatives; and studied the work of MCPS in the context

of current research and best practices. The group produced a detailed report (*www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/transitionplan*), identifying strengths and challenges, as well as specific short-term and long-term goals in each area.

The report, which was publicly disseminated, provided a strong foundation for the rest of my entry activities at MCPS. It also sent a strong message that, while I respected the work MCPS had done in the past, I was interested in areas for improvement.

Of course, the best way to learn about your district is to spend time in the schools, watching teaching and learning take place and talking to staff and students. This has to be more than a token classroom appearance and a few words at a staff meeting. You have to spend significant time observing instruction and listening to what teachers, principals and support staff are telling you about their school and their district.

In the end, much of what I learned from the transition team report was reinforced during my school visits and other entry activities, creating a strong foundation for me to consider thoughtful changes that would improve what was an already successful district.

LISTENING AND LEARNING

The first year of a superintendent's tenure is a time for listening. There are a lot of issues and ideas that parents, staff, students and community and political leaders want to share with you. For that reason, many of your entry plan activities must be an opportunity for constituents to talk and for you to listen. This includes one-on-one meetings, small gatherings and large community events.

In the fall of my first school year in Montgomery County, I hosted 17 "listen and learn" sessions — 10 for the community at large and seven for staff. The events were well attended, attracting an average of 120 people to each community meeting and 80 to each staff meeting.

I spent a few minutes at each event sharing my background and initial observations about MCPS with the audience based on the transition report and what I was learning in travels across the district. And then I spent the rest of the time listening.

Many issues that were raised were in the transition team report — the imperative to narrow the achievement gap and improve interventions; concerns about the social and emotional well-being of children; the need for more professional development around the curriculum; and worries about budget cuts and class sizes. If I was asked a question, I did my best to answer it, but I made it clear my goal was to listen.

To be as transparent as possible, we taped and posted many of these sessions on the website for those who could not attend, and we produced the "Listen and Learn Report," (*www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/superintendent/listen/*) which highlighted the broad issues raised at each event. The input I received at these listen and learn events was integral in the development of my first budget and my strategic priorities going forward.

SHARING STRENGTHS

One key to a successful entry plan is making sure you "play to your strengths." While I am comfortable delivering a speech or doing a traditional Q&A, I really enjoy forums that foster conversations. Therefore, it was important for my entry plan to include opportunities for me to engage staff and community members in an ongoing discussion about education.

I held three Superintendent's Book Club events during my first year. Each centered on a recently published work with a strong educational theme, including *Mindset* by Carol Dweck, *Drive* by Daniel Pink and *The Global Achievement Gap* by Tony Wagner. More than 300 people participated in the book clubs as part of the live studio audience, and hundreds of others watched the events live online and on TV, sending in questions by e-mail or social media. The events not only engaged staff, students and parents in a conversation about education, but they also enabled me to share my beliefs and values in a way that I was very comfortable.

In addition, I held several student town halls in our high schools. We held each event during lunch and streamed it over the Internet and broadcast it on our television station so that students across the district could watch. We even invited students to submit questions by e-mail or social media and answered them on the air. Not only did I learn a great deal from the students, but I also was able to dispel some misconceptions from time to time about the school district. The events went so well at the high school level that we added middle schools in my second year. *(Continued on page 24)*

A SUPERINTENDENT'S TWITTER CONNECTIONS

Joshua Starr, superintendent in Montgomery County, Md., uses Twitter to engage his staff, students and community. As of late September, his account (@mcpssuper) had 6,379 followers. Below are selected tweet (and retweets) from the first two days of school.

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 26 Aug
Making the final checks before hitting the road #mcpsfirstday pic.twitter.com/UWvz7VqUdT

MCPS @MCPS 26 Aug
Dr. Starr at Richard Montgomery HS doing back-to-school interviews with local media #mcpsfirstday @mcpssuper pic.twitter.com/U2vGkbAPDj

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 26 Aug
Now off to get my kids ready for their 1st day.

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 26 Aug
I don't know which I enjoyed more this morning: watching my youngest go to kindergarten or my 5th grader perform his safety patrol duties

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 26 Aug
Now at the brand new Weller Road ES for our press conference #mcpsfirstday

Craig Rice @RicePolitics 26 Aug
@mcpssuper talking about academic performance of our MCPS students and this new 2013-2014 school year. pic.twitter.com/bUkmCtt7cB

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 26 Aug
Weller Road ES 1st graders talking about this summer #mcpsfirstday pic.twitter.com/KB5mYaetHL

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 26 Aug
Check out the green roof at Weller Road ES. #mcpsfirstday *https://vine.co/v/himaBLzvWaY*

Senator Ben Cardin @SenatorCardin 26 Aug
Ben- Heres to a great yr @mcpssuper & @MCPS. Thanks to all the parents, teachers, admins & community partners dedicated to quality education

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 26 Aug
Health and wellness center at Northwood HS provides primary care to many, many students and about 100 families @Farzad_ONC #mcpsfirstday

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 26 Aug
What would happen if we asked our students to Vine their first day (or week) of school? #mcpsfirstday

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 26 Aug
Gr8 first day in MCPS. Thanks to all who made it happen for or kids: support professionals, teachers, leaders and families. #mcpsfirstday

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 27 Aug
New Gaithersburg High building reflects growth in Montgomery *http://wapo.st/17fG2VX* via @washingtonpost

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 27 Aug
Day 2 of new school year. Work hard, have fun. Looking forward to visiting 4 more schools today.

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 27 Aug
My job as a leader: I'm here to help you do your best work. MCPS, let's send that message to employees students and families.

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 27 Aug
MCPS: let's spend time during 1st weeks of school getting to know each other and our students. It's an investment with huge returns.

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 27 Aug
Essential question in Mr. Kramer's foundations of tech class @ Rockville HS: what's the relationship between tech and innovation?

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 27 Aug
Fruit and veggies for our kids at burnt mills ES #mcpsfirstday pic.twitter.com/Tx3hPlvxK3

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 27 Aug
Shady Grove MS did 50 home visits over the summer to make connections with kids and families.

Joshua Starr @mcpssuper 27 Aug
Why Steve Ballmer Failed *http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/currency/2013/08/why-steve-ballmer-failed.html?mbid=social_retweet* … via @NewYorker. What's the relationship between stack ranking and current #edreform trends?

(Continued from page 22)

Twitter is an outstanding engagement tool that allowed me to share items of interest with thousands of people at one time. If I saw instruction in a classroom that I thought was really powerful, I'd snap a picture or take a video and tweet it. If I read an article that raised interesting points or captured an important issue, I'd send it out to my followers. I'd also use Twitter as a way to let people know what I was doing each day, whether it was school visits, a sit-down with a state or county leader or a visit to a local community organization.

Through my Twitter feed, my followers — many of them parents and staff members — were able to learn a little bit about me and what I value in education. Many of our principals, teachers and staff now have joined Twitter, creating a lively ongoing conversation about MCPS and education, in general.

A VANGUARD POSITION

As I begin my third year, we have truly begun the work of improving an already excellent school district. This includes the adoption of a new strategic planning framework (*www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/framework/*) aligned to the skills and knowledge our students will need in the 21st century — academic excellence, creative problem solving and social and emotional learning, which means attending to the hope, engagement and well-being of kids. I believe our new framework will once again put Montgomery County in the vanguard of national education because of our strong focus on skills beyond academic.

We've had strong community support for the framework and other initiatives, and I know that is, in great part, due to the work we did during my first year to engage and listen to our students, staff and community members. We will continue to employ many of the same strategies used in my entry work to communicate with our stakeholders. Together, we will build a strong future for our students and be a national model for preparing kids to be successful beyond graduation. ■

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Joshua Starr recommends every new superintendent — and his/her leadership team — read William Bridges' *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change*. "This book does an excellent job of helping the reader understand the dynamics of change and how to manage it positively," Starr says. "I asked all of my senior staff to read it and we referred to it often throughout that first year."

Other resources for newcomers:

- The "Transition Team Report," completed in September 2011 at the outset of the superintendent's first year, can be found at *www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/departments/superintendent/transitionalplan/SuperintendentsTransitionTeamReport.pdf*.
- The "Listen and Learn Report," based on the superintendent's public sessions with stakeholders in the community and district staff, can be found at *www.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/uploadedFiles/departments/superintendent/listen/ListenandLearn-Report.pdf*.
- The *New Superintendents Journal*, published by AASA each fall, includes articles written by recognized national experts on topics identified by new superintendents as areas where they need help. The 2013-14 electronic edition can be found at *www.aasa.org/uploadedFiles/Publications/NSEJ-2013-2014.pdf*.

A FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

Managing the aftermath of a crisis in what the author calls a 'new normal' for school communities

By Michael F. Regan

In the wake of the tragic occurrence at Sandy Hook School in Newtown, Conn., the attention of school districts across the country has been unavoidably redirected from the usual business of education to that of school safety.

School leaders have participated in state and national school safety forums. Many have joined forces with their professional associations, stakeholder groups and lawmakers to advocate for safer school legislation.

No one can argue these broad-scale activities are unimportant. But prevention never delivers a guarantee and often leads to a false sense of security. As public schools regain their footing in what has been so aptly described as the "new normal," school leaders must take advantage of the valuable lessons of the past that when crisis occurs, schools must be ready to respond.

My first involvement in a major crisis occurred 20 years ago when a student was murdered at the doorstep of New Britain High School, where I worked as a school psychologist, during bus arrival time. Since then, I've responded to a multitude of crises, most recently the shooting in nearby Newtown. Collectively, these experiences are constant reminders that before tragedy strikes, the 3 P's — plan, prepare and practice — become the foundation for our words and actions in the aftermath of a crisis.

PLAN

Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything." Plans are static and lack the flexibility necessary to manage the enormous complexities and unpredictable nature inherent to a crisis. I have seen a good many plans rendered useless because they fell short in anticipating the scope of a particular event.

Planning, on the other hand, is a dynamic process in which both short- and long-term strategy can be adjusted in response to any contingency. Remember that the goal of a response effort is to mitigate damage, regain control and re-establish security as quickly as possible. Command structure, assignment of responsibilities and communications are three priorities of planning.

Organizing an effective response begins with identifying the incident commander and determining how authority is to be delegated. A lack of coherency within the command structure confounds an already complicated situation at a time when leadership is needed most. Remember that during the critical initial hours following a crisis, time is of the essence and there is no point arguing over who's in charge. I've witnessed the divisiveness of power plays firsthand. Not only do they add to already heightened stress levels, they also lead to mistakes that can be difficult if not impossible to correct.

Assigning responsibilities within the chain of command requires considerable thought to the professional and personal attributes of the individuals involved. Delegate responsibility carefully! Not everyone will respond as expected during a crisis, and it's important to identify underlying issues that can weaken or break the chain before a crisis occurs, not after.

It is also important to plan for alternates. The first victims at Sandy Hook, the principal and school psychologist, were central to that school's crisis team. Cross-training staff and assigning responsibility by teams rather than to a single individual builds in backup systems should key members be unable to assist. Also, don't forget that staffing changes affect the command structure. Introducing new team members requires not only initial orientation for them but reorientation for current members as well.

Communication is integral to the overall effectiveness of a crisis response. It's easiest to think of communications in two ways — internal and external.

Managing internal communication depends on having a reliable primary system with a secondary backup to disseminate critical updates as a crisis event unfolds. I learned the hard way about the value of reliable communications during a statewide disaster drill when

our team's primary communication system failed. No secondary backup existed, so communication was ruptured.

External communication is all about the message and needs to be handled delicately. There is an undeniable need to keep the community informed as a situation unfolds, but saying the wrong thing at the wrong time can be disastrous. Because public relations is a specialty area, choosing the right spokesperson to manage external messaging makes all the difference in a recovery effort.

"… a crisis of significant magnitude also means preparing for the generosity of others."

Considering crises vary in magnitude and meaning, circumstances may arise in which direct assistance from outside resources is necessary. Because work in a school environment is foreign to noneducators, choose a partner deliberately. Selecting the right partner helps avoid pitfalls that can hinder a response. One viable partnership to consider is the education service agency, which can provide a full range of assistance and do so while maintaining the integrity of the school district.

PREPARE

The extent of impact experienced in Newtown provides clear evidence that districts cannot afford to be short-sighted in preparing to manage the aftermath of a crisis. Given the number of priorities competing for attention in a district, however, an efficient use of time is to think big. While this may appear excessive, scaling down a prepared response is easier than improvising in the moment. As Rudy Giuliani, the former New York City mayor, stated, "[I]f you prepare for those challenges that you predict, you will be better equipped to handle all problems, even the unexpected ones."

As strange as it may seem, a crisis of significant magnitude also means preparing for the generosity of others. Don't underestimate the volume of community members, mental health providers, government agencies and state and national organizations that will be clamoring to help. Managing these human resources can quickly turn into a logistical nightmare if done incorrectly.

Newtown was overwhelmed at first by the volume of unsolicited mental health providers offering assistance. The school district's leadership confronted several problems needing quick resolutions.

First, a staging area was needed to validate credentials of those providing help. Then a system was created to coordinate and monitor the activities of these volunteers once they were cleared for duty. Finally, the approved volunteers needed places to work. Office space and parking for volunteers, as well as for those accessing the services, became a premium commodity. To avoid getting snarled in a space crunch, you want to create safeguards to preserve your own room to work.

Second, a system is needed to manage charitable donations of both monetary and material goods. School districts generally are not in the business of handling large sums of money donations as was experienced in Newtown, so they will need help to properly account for and distribute these funds as well as to thwart any involvement by unscrupulous opportunists. Material donations also need full accounting, but unlike cash donations, material goods require storage space and manpower to move and inventory. In both cases, a pre-existing partnership with an outside resource will ease the logistical burden during an already stressful time.

PRACTICE

A crisis is best characterized as helplessness in the face of intolerable danger. The activity that most empowers individuals in maintaining control is practice. School districts routinely conduct various practice drills throughout the school year. But different times now require changes in practice that add further dimension to the purpose and manner of these drills. Live and table-top drills that more closely simulate actual crises not only provide valuable experience in reacting to a potentially life-threatening situation, they also help identify any underlying vulnerabilities.

Instead of adding to an already full plate, think creatively to balance readiness needs with other agendas competing for time. For example, some districts are now substituting "lockdown" drills with "active shooter" exercises coordinated with local law

enforcement. One note of caution, however, when running simulation drills for the first time: Be ready to respond to claims that added realism may be too distressing for students and staff.

Lessons learned from past events can help. For instance, in the aftermath of the mass shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado, school communities vehemently opposed lockdown drills, arguing they would come across as too frightening and risky for students. Some suggested the drills be held without children present. Today, the practice of lockdown drills is an institutionalized procedure in schools.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

A likely comparison can be made between responding to the aftermath of a crisis and running a marathon. Anyone who has done either will confirm that success requires not only meeting the physical demands but also the mental challenges.

Like the marathon, developing a school district's response readiness requires logging in the miles. Done deliberately, the 3 P's contribute to the economy of motion necessary to mitigate negative outcomes and manage the unpredictable nature of a crisis and its aftermath. You don't want to get caught living with a false sense of security! ■

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Michael Regan, author of the accompanying article, suggests these resources relating to crisis planning in a school setting.

- Critical Response and Intervention Services in Schools, Cooperative Educational Services, Trumbull, Conn., *www.ces.k12.ct.us/CRISIS*.
- Emergency Exercises: An Effective Way to Validate School Safety Plans, U.S. Department of Education, *http://rems.ed.gov/docs/Emergency_NewsletterV2I3.pdf*.
- Emergency Management for Schools, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, *http://rems.ed.gov/docs/FY10REMS_FGM_NHMD_EMExercises.pdf*.
- Homeland Security Exercise and Evaluation Program, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, *https://hseep.dhs.gov/pages/1001_HSEEP7.aspx*.
- Overview of Emergency Management Exercises, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, *http://rems.ed.gov/docs/Training_FY09REMS_BOMA_TableTopsDrills.pdf*.

RETHINKING OUR APPROACH TO SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

Alternatives to suspension and expulsion and the zero-tolerance practices of the past

By Michael D. Thompson

In the wake of recent school tragedies, nobody understands better than school leaders the challenges in creating a welcoming and supportive learning environment while maintaining order and safety.

While more school districts look to move away from zero tolerance policies of the past, educators continue to feel the pressure to remove disruptive students from the classroom. Yet disciplinary strategies that remove students have been shown to increase the likelihood of a host of negative outcomes, including dropping out of school and juvenile delinquency. Research also shows children of color and those with disabilities, particularly emotional and behavioral disorders, are disproportionately affected by disciplinary actions and are over-represented in the juvenile justice system.

"… an increasing number of districts and schools are implementing alternatives to suspension and expulsion, improving resources for administrators, teachers and other school staff and providing the supports and services to get students back on track."

As such, an increasing number of districts and schools are implementing alternatives to suspension and expulsion, improving resources for administrators, teachers and other school staff and providing the supports and services to get students back on track.

RECENT RESEARCH

A 2013 report by the UCLA Civil Rights Project (*http://bit.ly/1kY1Klv*) found approximately two million, or one in nine, middle and high school students were suspended at least once in the 2009–10 school year based on U.S. Department of Education data.

The high rates of exclusionary actions are consistent with the 2011 Council of State Governments Justice Center's "Breaking Schools' Rules" study, which followed nearly every 7th-grade public school student in Texas over a six-year period. The study found the majority of students — nearly 60 percent — had been suspended or expelled during that time. The overwhelming majority of suspensions resulted from actions that give school leaders the latitude to deal with misbehavior (discretionary suspensions), not mandatory removals.

Furthermore, African-American students and students with special needs were disproportionately disciplined for discretionary violations, such as disrespect, tardiness and disruptions. Nearly three of four students who qualified for special education services during the study period were suspended or expelled at least once, with students whose record reflected they had been coded as emotionally disturbed having nearly a 24 percent higher probability of being suspended or expelled for a discretionary reason.

In addition to confirming the negative academic and juvenile justice-related outcomes associated with exclusionary disciplinary actions, the study also examined schools that had similar characteristics and student populations and found these schools varied significantly in how often they suspend or expelled students. ("Breaking Schools' Rules" is available at *http://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/breaking-schools-rules-report/*.)

The growing body of school discipline research makes a compelling case for changing the status quo. School districts and individual schools have the power to reduce their dependence on out-of-school suspensions and expulsions to manage student misbehavior. Many are implementing innovative strategies to create alternative options with promising results; yet significant

barriers prevent these efforts from reaching scale. This is due, in part, because they require internal and external resources and collaboration from multiple systems, notably health and other social service professionals, law enforcement, courts and probation departments.

PRACTITIONER NEEDS

Educators long recognized what research has revealed: Students succeed in an environment where they feel safe, supported and connected to each other and the adults in the building. Likewise, when students are actively engaged in learning, they have improved academic, social and health outcomes and fewer behavioral problems. The safest schools are marked with high levels of student engagement and strong relationships among students, parents and educators.

Many educators agree suspensions and expulsions should be a last resort, reserved for the most serious offenses. The emphasis should be on preventing student misbehavior by proactively establishing structures and policies to improve school climate, encouraging positive student actions and implementing targeted and intensive behavioral health strategies. School districts grapple, however, with finding the resources to address the range of students' behavioral health needs. They also need examples of best practices and promising strategies for nonexclusionary interventions that can be tailored to the needs of their students and their district capacity.

In response, the Council of State Governments Justice Center is leading a consensus-building project that is convening experts in education, behavioral health, school safety, juvenile justice, social services, law enforcement and child welfare. Youth, parents, advocates and community partners also play a critical and active role in the project. The initiative will develop a comprehensive report with policy and practice recommendations and implementation guidance to minimize dependence on suspensions and expulsions to manage student behavior; improve students' academic outcomes; reduce their involvement in the juvenile justice system (including alternative strategies to school-based arrests and direct court referrals when appropriate); and promote safe and productive learning environments. (More about the School Discipline Consensus Project is available at *http://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/projects/school-discipline-consensus-project/.)*

GROWING SPOTLIGHT

The good news is that school discipline issues never have been in a brighter spotlight nor have they had such extensive grassroots momentum. Even as the consensus project progresses, policymakers and practitioners are prioritizing school discipline as a key education, health and social justice issue. President Obama's 2014 budget proposal includes several new investments related to school mental health, school climate improvement efforts and school security, which flow from the president's post-Newtown, Conn.,"Now is the Time" report.

Further, as a result of the commitment and hard work of local communities, advocacy groups, educators and other agents of change, several states, districts and individual schools have undertaken significant improvements to school discipline systems with the goal of keeping students in the classroom, improving school climate and safety and supporting behavioral health needs of all students.

Several states convened legislative and stakeholder task forces to develop recommendations, and some passed legislation or regulations revising school discipline policies or are providing additional support to educators around alternative strategies to suspensions and expulsions. Among the noteworthy:

- The Colorado General Assembly passed legislation in 2012 amending grounds for suspensions and expulsions, requiring training for school resource officers and requiring school boards and districts to revise codes of conduct and disciplinary codes to keep kids in school.
- The California legislature passed five bills last year reforming school disciplinary policies. The legislation provides additional flexibility to school administrators in decision making, authorizes the use of alternatives to suspensions and expulsions and prohibits schools from denying enrollment to students who have had contact with the juvenile justice system.

Several other states, including Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts and Washington, have introduced or are considering legislation related to limiting the use of suspensions and expulsions, supporting students' behavioral health needs, requiring the collection of

discipline data and improving school safety measures. Some jurisdictions are addressing civil rights actions related to school discipline.

LOCAL DEVELOPMENTS

At the local level, promising approaches and practices are emerging. These include:

- Providing training and professional development to educators, specialized instructional support personnel and school resource officers around alternatives to suspension and arrest, creating positive learning environments and providing supports to students with particular behavioral health needs;
- Implementing alternative strategies to suspensions and expulsions, such as restorative justice, peer mediation and youth courts;
- Establishing student support teams to identify students with acute behavioral health needs, provide necessary supports and monitor students' progress;
- Developing school-based health centers that provide mental and behavioral health and substance abuse services; and
- Reforming truancy and ticketing policies and school policing protocols.

Additionally, over recent months, school districts in Buffalo, Denver, Chicago, New York City and Los Angeles have revised their school codes of conduct to provide administrators more discretion in handling disciplinary matters, limiting the maximum length of time for suspensions and preventing some infractions from being punished by out-of-school suspensions.

School system leaders remain at the center of these activities and have an unparalleled opportunity to advance the national discussion around school discipline, school safety, climate and behavioral health, as well as move the field forward with the support of multiple stakeholders and the engagement of youth, families and communities. ■

"… school districts in Buffalo, Denver, Chicago, New York City and Los Angeles have revised their school codes of conduct to provide administrators more discretion in handling disciplinary matters, limiting the maximum length of time for suspensions and preventing some infractions from being punished by out-of-school suspensions."

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GRIT, CHARACTER AND OTHER NONCOGNITIVE SKILLS

The author of *How Children Succeed* on an alternative way of thinking about those factors that contribute to student success

By Paul Tough

Over the past decade and especially in the past few years, a disparate congregation of economists, educators, psychologists and neuroscientists have produced evidence that calls into question much of the conventional wisdom about child development. What matters most in a child's development, they say, is not the student's cognitive ability or how much information we can stuff into the student's brain in the first few years of schooling.

Instead, what matters is whether we are able to help her develop different qualities, a list that includes persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit and self-confidence. Economists refer to these as non-cognitive skills, psychologists call them personality traits, and the rest of us sometimes think of them as character.

To call this a new school of thought is probably premature. In many cases, the researchers adding to this growing store of knowledge are working in isolation. But increasingly, these scientists and educators are finding one another and making connections across the boundaries of academic disciplines.

The argument they are piecing together has the potential to change how we raise our children, how we run our schools and how we construct our social safety net.

BREAKTHROUGH THINKING

If there is one person at the hub of this new interdisciplinary network, it is James Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago. Heckman might seem an unlikely figure to be leading a challenge to the supremacy of cognitive skill. He is a classic academic intellectual, his glasses thick, his IQ stratospheric, his shirt pocket bristling with mechanical pencils.

Heckman grew up in Chicago in the 1940s and 1950s, the son of a middle manager at a meatpacking company. Neither of his parents was college educated, but they both recognized early on that their son possessed a precocious mind. At the age of 8, Heckman devoured his father's copy of the popular self-help book *30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary,* and at 9, he saved up his pennies and ordered *Mathematics for the Practical Man* from the back of a comic book.

Heckman became a professor of economics, first at Columbia University and then at the University of Chicago, and in 2000, he won the Nobel Prize in Economics for a complex statistical method he had invented in the 1970s. Among economists, he is known for his skill in econometrics, a particularly arcane type of statistical analysis that is generally incomprehensible to anyone except other econometricians.

Meanwhile, the subjects Heckman has chosen to focus on are anything but obscure. In the years since winning the Nobel, he has used the clout and cachet the honor brought him not to cement his reputation within his field but to expand his pursuits and his influence into new areas of study that he previously knew little or nothing about, including personality psychology, medicine and genetics. (He actually has a copy of *Genetics for Dummies* on his overstuffed office bookshelves, wedged in between two thick texts of economic history.)

LEVELING EFFECTS

Since 2008, Heckman has been convening regular invitation-only conferences populated by equal numbers of economists and psychologists, all engaged in one way or another with the same questions: Which skills and traits lead to success? How do they develop in childhood? And what interventions might help children do better?

The transformation of Heckman's career has its roots in a study he undertook in the late 1990s on the General Educational Development program, better known as the GED, which was at the time becoming an increasingly popular way for high school dropouts to earn the

equivalent of high school diplomas. In many quarters, it was seen as a tool to level the academic playing field, to give low-income and minority students, who were more likely to drop out of high school, an alternative route to college.

The GED's growth was founded on a version of the cognitive hypothesis: the belief that what schools develop and what a high school degree certifies is cognitive skill. If teenagers already have the knowledge and the smarts to graduate from high school, they don't need to waste their time actually finishing high school. They can just take a test that measures that knowledge and those skills, and the state will certify that they are, legally, high school graduates, as well-prepared as any other high school graduate to go on to college or other postsecondary pursuits.

This is an attractive notion, especially to young people who can't stand high school, and the program has expanded rapidly since its introduction in the 1950s. At the high-water mark, in 2001, more than a million young people took the GED test, and nearly one in every five new high school "graduates" was actually a GED holder. (The figure is now about one in seven.)

Heckman wanted to examine more closely the idea that young people with GEDs were just as well-prepared for further academic pursuits as high school graduates. He analyzed a few large national databases, and he found that in many important ways, the premise was entirely valid. According to their scores on achievement tests, which correlate closely with IQ, GED recipients were every bit as smart as high school graduates.

However, when Heckman looked at their path through higher education, he discovered that GED recipients weren't anything like high school graduates. At age 22, Heckman found, just 3 percent of GED recipients were enrolled in a four-year university or had completed a postsecondary degree, compared to 46 percent of high school graduates.

In fact, Heckman discovered that when you consider important future outcomes — annual income, unemployment rate, divorce rate or use of illegal drugs — GED recipients look exactly like high school dropouts, despite the fact they have earned this supposedly valuable extra credential, and despite the fact they are, on average, considerably more intelligent than high school dropouts.

A MISSING ELEMENT

From a policy point of view, this was a useful finding, if a depressing one. In the long run, it seemed, as a way to improve your life, the GED was essentially worthless. If anything, it might be having a negative overall effect by inducing young people to drop out of high school. But for Heckman, the results also posed a confounding intellectual puzzle. Like most economists, he had believed that cognitive ability was the single most reliable determinant of how a person's life would turn out. Now he had discovered a group — GED holders — whose good test scores didn't seem to have any positive effect on their lives.

What was missing from the equation, Heckman concluded, were the psychological traits that had allowed the high school graduates to make it through school. Those traits — an inclination to persist at a boring and often unrewarding task; the ability to delay gratification; the tendency to follow through on a plan — also turned out to be valuable in college, in the workplace and in life generally. As Heckman explained in one paper: "Inadvertently, the GED has become a test that separates bright but nonpersistent and undisciplined dropouts from other dropouts." GED holders, he wrote, "are 'wise guys' who lack the ability to think ahead, persist in tasks or to adapt to their environments."

What the GED study didn't give Heckman was any indication of whether it was possible to help children develop those so-called soft skills. His search for an answer to that question led him almost a decade ago to Ypsilanti, Mich., an old industrial town west of Detroit. In the mid-1960s, in the early days of the War on Poverty, a group of child psychologists and education researchers undertook an experiment there, recruiting low-income, low-IQ parents from the town's black neighborhoods to sign up their 3- and 4-year-old kids for the Perry Preschool.

In this study, the recruited children were divided randomly into a treatment group and a control group. Children in the treatment group were admitted to Perry, a high-quality, two-year preschool program, and kids in the control group were left to fend for themselves. And then the children were tracked — not just for a year or two, but for decades, in an ongoing study that is intended to follow them for the rest of their lives. The

subjects are now in their 40s, which means researchers have been able to trace the effects of the Perry intervention well into adulthood.

The Perry Preschool Project is famous in social science circles, and Heckman had encountered it, glancingly, several times before in his career. As a case for early-childhood intervention, the experiment always had been considered something of a failure. The treatment children did do significantly better on cognitive tests while attending the preschool and for a year or two afterward, but the gains did not last, and by the time the treatment children were in the 3rd grade, their IQ scores were no better than the control group's.

However, when Heckman and other researchers looked at the long-term results of Perry, the data appeared more promising. It was true the Perry kids hadn't experienced lasting IQ benefits. But something important had happened to them in preschool, and whatever it was, the positive effects resonated for decades.

Compared to the control group, the Perry students were more likely to graduate from high school, more likely to be employed at age 27, more likely to be earning more than $25,000 a year at age 40, less likely ever to have been arrested and less likely to have spent time on welfare.

NON-COGNITIVE SKILLS

Heckman began to rummage more deeply into the Perry study, and he learned that in the 1960s and 1970s, researchers had collected some data on the students that had never been analyzed. These were reports from teachers in elementary school rating both the treatment and the control children on "personal behavior" and "social development."

The first term tracked how often each student swore, lied, stole or was absent or late; the second one rated each student's level of curiosity as well as his or her relationships with classmates and teachers.

Heckman labeled these *non-cognitive skills,* because they were entirely distinct from IQ. And after three years of careful analysis, Heckman and his researchers were able to ascertain that those non-cognitive factors, such as curiosity, self-control and social fluidity, were responsible for as much as two-thirds of the total benefit that Perry gave its students.

The Perry Preschool Project, in other words, worked entirely differently than everyone had believed. The good-hearted educators who set it up in the '60s thought they were creating a program to raise the intelligence of low-income children. They, like everyone else, believed that was the way to help poor kids get ahead in America.

Surprise No. 1 was that they created a program that didn't do much in the long term for IQ but did improve behavior and social skills. Surprise No. 2 was that it helped anyway — for the kids in Ypsilanti, those skills and the underlying traits they reflected turned out to be valuable indeed.

A RADICAL PREMISE

How do our experiences in childhood make us the adults we become? It is one of the great human questions, the theme of countless novels, biographies and memoirs, the subject of several centuries' worth of philosophical and psychological treatises.

Until recently, though, there has never been a serious attempt to use the tools of science to peel back the mysteries of childhood, to trace through experiment and analysis how the experiences of our early years connect to outcomes in adulthood.

That is changing, with the efforts of this new generation of researchers. The premise behind the work is simple, if radical: We haven't managed to solve these problems because we've been looking for solutions in the wrong places. If we want to improve the odds for children in general, and for poor children in particular, we need to approach childhood anew, to start over with some fundamental questions about how parents affect their children, how human skills develop and how character is formed. ■

Paul Tough is the author of How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), from which this article is drawn, with the publisher's permission.

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THE SUPERINTENDENCY AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

Why you should consider all the tools at your fingertips an indispensable part of your school leadership work

By Chris Kennedy

"When you hire me, you don't just get me, you get my network." At least, that's what I argued four years ago when I interviewed for the superintendency.

An hour prior to the start of the interview with the board of education trustees, I was given a question. And without hesitation, I was on my computer sharing the question on Twitter.

Over the next several minutes, I fielded a dozen responses from my network. There were a few quotable quotes, some links to helpful research on the Internet and a couple of "good luck" wishes. I took their thinking, blended it with my own and put together a presentation. Although the school board might have been curious about what I thought, I figured they were probably more interested in knowing I could find the best thinking, synthesize the ideas, contextualize them for our location and then share them in a thoughtful way — all in a timely manner.

Had I attempted this just a year prior, I may have been asked to leave the interview, or even be accused of cheating. It shows how quickly our world is shifting — what might have been considered disingenuous or even cheating a decade ago is now considered effective professional networking.

Since that interview, I have only become more reliant on my network, both in the face-to-face form and in the digital world.

THE NETWORK'S POWER

The value of a strong network is nothing new, and social media serves to extend the reach of that network. Now, more than ever, it is not just what you know but who you know.

Traditionally, our personal and professional networks included the people with whom we went to high school or college or with whom we work and engage on a daily basis. These networks now extend globally. Social media allows us now to build diverse networks with those in similar roles, across different segments of the community that have an interest in education. We not only get to connect with those we agree with, but build a network that transcends the echo chamber we sometimes can see in our daily connections.

Certainly, traditional structures where we gather in role-alike groups still exist — there are sessions for teachers, administrators, support staff, parents and the community, and sometimes we bring these groups together. Online, the roles tend to blur, and it is the ideas that become the focus with the most current thinking and range of views. Tremendous power is available in being able to ask a question and engage so many in the answer.

District leaders can (and do) build networks across North America to learn from and with educators, such as Michael Smith, superintendent in Tuscola, Ill.; Pam Moran, superintendent in Albemarle County, Va.; Patrick Larkin, assistant superintendent in Burlington, Mass.; and the hundreds of other district leaders who publicly share their ideas through social media.

MODEL THE WAY

We are continually encouraging our teachers and students to embrace digital tools. Leaders have a role to play in modeling their use as well. We want students to take the risks in their learning and not to be afraid to make a mistake. Increasingly, we want them to engage with the real world, to own their learning and to create content for the digital world. We can help by modeling all of this.

True, social media can be daunting for school district leaders -- the technology is new, and there are many waiting to pounce on any misstatement. This, though, is the world we want our kids to participate in.

What we can do is model the integrity, honesty, compassion and care in this space that we would want all others in our community to show. Our blogs as superintendents can lead to principals blogging, to

teachers blogging and to students blogging. Our participation can model for others in our organization the power of the tools and also serve as the example for others to follow. Our participation does model the engagement we want for our communities in the serious issues of teaching and learning and does so in a respectful and appreciative way. District leaders can move (and model) beyond talking about it and start being about it.

Admittedly, I find blogging to be scary. I do it every week, but every time I hit "publish," I worry I may have committed a spelling mistake for the world to see or have said something that will be misconstrued or may have gotten my facts blatantly wrong. I have been in schools as a student and educator for about 35 years, I can only imagine the stress students must sometimes feel when they put themselves out there publicly — and it is also good for me to understand this.

REAL AND CONNECTED

The superintendency often is seen as a role disengaged and detached from the reality of classrooms and schools. Social media can change that perception.

I clearly recall one angry parent who came to see me about his child with a concern about a decision made at one of our elementary schools. He explained his situation and ended by saying, "And I trust your opinion on this. I have read your blog and know you have four kids in school, so you obviously understand what it is like to be a parent." In a way, my blog validated my credibility, not because of anything I had said, but because it helped to make me more real.

Social media engagement also allows leaders to keep tabs on what is being said in the community and elsewhere about your school or district. One can follow students, teachers, parents, media, politicians and others and then engage with them. Often, what is in the newspaper tomorrow or the day after is being discussed on social media today. The community wants to know what the superintendent thinks, and blogging lets one do this on one's own terms.

OUR OWN WORDS

There are many people who are happy to provide a version of what the superintendent thinks and says. The local news media often paraphrase the remarks of the superintendent, as do union leaders and others in the community. Social media allows us a platform to connect directly with the community to tell our story. Instead of lamenting that our stories are not told factually and fully and that the only news reported is bad news, we can change that — by telling our own stories through social media.

The proliferation of social media had led to more public gossiping than ever. By the same token, the use of social media can help us reach our community unfiltered. I know my blog postings — typically done two to four times a month — influence the water cooler

FINDING THE TIME FOR SOCIAL MEDIA

The superintendency already is a completely consuming job, so how can you possibly find the time to invest in social media? These are my suggestions for those looking to add social media to one's work routine.

- **Create manageable expectations.** Whether it is a blog, Twitter or other tools, be realistic about the commitment you can make to participating in social media.
- **Choose a few tools and use them well.** There are thousands of tools available. Select a few and develop a comfort level with them. Start with tools such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter, all of which are heavily subscribed by those around you.
- **Block out some time.** As you get into a routine, schedule time each week to spend engaging in social media. It might be 15 minutes a few nights a week or some time on Sunday morning, but it needs to become part of your routine.
- **Decide what this will replace.** As you start tweeting and blogging, decide what you won't do and what this will replace. As you engage in social media, some of the more traditional outlets, such as reading newsletters, can be eliminated.
- **Embrace mobility.** Be sure people know you want to be contacted, and then ensure you have access to all these tools on your mobile phone whether it is phoning, texting, tweeting or Facebook use. You want to be mobile so you don't have to be in the office to be at work.

conversations in our schools. When I wanted our district to engage in a conversation about final exams, a blog post on the topic laying out some of the positives and negatives helped guide the conversation.

The profile and political nature of our job, the relationship with the school board and government officials all can give pause. I am careful and clear about the areas I discuss in social media and those I don't. My focus is on teaching and learning. While I spend time discussing budgets and labor contracts with our board, those are issues for them to speak about publicly.

While others will gladly say what we believe if we let them, social media does help break down some of the traditional barricades to reaching the people we want to teach. It also can humanize us and allow us to share our thoughts and stories in our own words.

PROFESSIONAL BENEFITS

Professional learning and development for educators used to be scarce. Educators depended on monthly magazines, professional journals and occasional conferences. Now, phenomenal resources are available just one or two clicks away.

While school districts' physical boundaries remain well-defined, when it comes to professional learning, the district geography is blurry and becoming ever-less important. We are finding ways to connect and engage online that have little to do with geography. And just what can you find online? Without question, another superintendent in another school district is wrestling with the same issues you are dealing with.

My digital professional network has enhanced my face-to-face network. At last year's AASA National Conference on Education, I connected with many colleagues I had known digitally in the past. I have found a common trend that I connect with people online and then meet them and then continue online — the combination of both digital and face-to-face connections have made these relationships far stronger than those I know exclusively online or in person.

Through Twitter and blogs, I have discovered we can connect with others in the field, solve problems and open ourselves up to new ideas and learning.

FIVE INDISPENSABLE TOOLS

Chris Kennedy, one of the more prolific bloggers in the superintendent ranks, believes every superintendent should consider using the following social media tools for professional purposes:

Blog: Consider this your home base for social media and the venue for sharing your ideas on leadership and education practices. My blog is where I share my thinking, and it serves as a great portfolio of the work that has engaged me.

Facebook: Often considered more of a personal communication tool, it remains an excellent way to connect to your community. It is still the No. 1 social media tool used by our families, so it functions as a great place to share photos from events and alert the community of upcoming events.

SlideShare: This is the place to post all of your PowerPoints so they are easily accessible to educators in your district and elsewhere. No longer do I distribute presentations by e-mail. Rather, I make them all accessible through SlideShare so others can use and share them.

Twitter: This is your avenue for connecting to your community 140 characters at a time. Twitter is a wonderful professional learning network, connecting me with colleagues from around the world.

YouTube: Short videos of your school visits or records of your speeches now can go online. The use of video is growing, and YouTube is a great place to create a repository of your work.

DOORS TO OPPORTUNITY

Social media opens up opportunities. It gives space to highlight the work in our school districts. Each week I am sharing the best practices and programs I see in our schools — from teachers using inquiry, to students being able to self-regulate to maximize learning, to schools using digital devices. And then, we can connect

this work across the district and around the world.

Being engaged also opens up personal opportunities — from speaking and consulting opportunities to first insight on job openings. Social media means you have the power of your network to bring to any future job.

Anyone who sees participation in social media as another demand on an already full schedule hasn't yet discovered the power that participation can have. None of us are truly too busy to blog, tweet or otherwise engage in social media. If we aren't doing it, we just haven't yet realized why it should be a priority.

"I am sharing the best practices and programs I see in our schools — from teachers using inquiry, to students being able to self-regulate to maximize learning, to schools using digital devices."

West Vancouver is a school district of just over 7,000 students in British Columbia, Canada. But through involvement and engagement of our staff in social media, we are known around the world. ■

Chris Kennedy is superintendent of the West Vancouver School District in West Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

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Twitter: @chrkennedy
Blog: cultureofyes.ca

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A ROAD MAP TO NATIONAL SUPERINTENDENT CERTIFICATION

By Martin Ringstaff

AASA, The School Superintendents Association, recently announced the first cohort of administrators going through its National Superintendent Certification Program.

The program is a robust experience for superintendents focused on strengthening their skills as school system leaders. I am writing this reflection so others can understand the positive impact the program has on what we do every day. As a superintendent, it was an eye-opening experience for me to see that others across the country shared some of the same issues I have in Tennessee.

AASA Executive Director Dan Domenech welcomed the first session and provided a program overview. Topics discussed included leadership, the board of education and the superintendency, and using technology to support leadership and learning. Vincent Matthews, superintendent of the San Jose Unified School District, served as our Master Teacher. Matthews offered great insight, allowed for in-depth collaboration and led us through four days of relevant discussions.

Each participant was challenged to complete a capstone project — an ongoing district improvement project to be completed over the course of the two-year academy. The closing session culminated with a presentation by participants highlighting the results of their respective improvement initiatives.

We were assigned mentor superintendents. These mentors were present during our first session. We heard their leadership stories and worked on developing our own leadership stories. This leadership story is not a reflection on our education and job path but a constructed narrative that explains where we came from and where we are going. Believe me, there is a difference between the two.

One of the most interesting parts of the program was hearing from seasoned professionals working in school systems around the country. These individuals included Michael Hinojosa (former superintendent, Cobb County Public Schools, Georgia), John Deasy (superintendent, Los Angeles Unified School District, California) and John Pedicone, (former superintendent, Tucson Unified School District, Arizona). Deasy was accompanied by one of his school board members, Steve Zimmer. It was impressive to listen and learn from this discussion about superintendent-board relations.

All of the materials for the sessions were downloaded from iTunes to our iPads, with videos and documents linked into the downloadable document. From the many quotes and videos of influential leaders to the videos of what we may not want to emulate, it helped us learn and grow.

We had pre-session assignments as well as post-session assignments, including reading case studies and working on our capstone projects. We evaluated case studies on different school systems and looked at decision-making processes of other superintendents and reflected on how we would handle similar situations.

We have three sessions remaining over the next 18 months. In the next session, we will explore building relationships, improving communication, marketing our school system, developing political mapping and learning from veteran superintendents in a panel discussion. The third session includes creating an accountable and learning-focused district, leading and managing people, discovering the role of instructional technology, and reviewing and analyzing data for improving student achievement. Topics covered in the fourth and final session will include managing change and resources, analyzing the budget and the superintendency, managing a balanced life and presenting our capstone projects.

I am only in my third year as a superintendent, but I have never been a part of something as powerful as this program. I was excited when it was announced, but after attending the first session, I am even more motivated to see what will happen when we are back together in January. AASA, in my opinion, hit a home run on this program. I do foresee the National Certification Program being one of the most successful programs ever in the AASA arsenal of professional development. ■

For more information about AASA's National Superintendent Certification Program, visit *www.aasa.org/superintendent-certification.aspx.*

Martin Ringstaff is the superintendent of Cleveland City Schools in Cleveland, Tenn. Ringstaff is one of the early participants in the AASA National Superintendent Certification Program.

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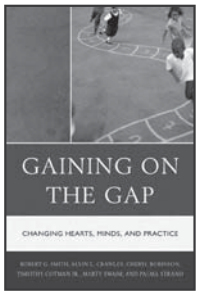

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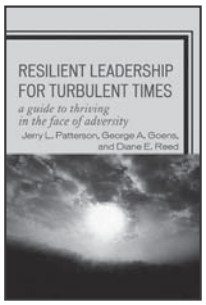

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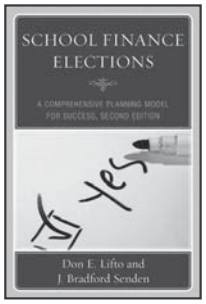

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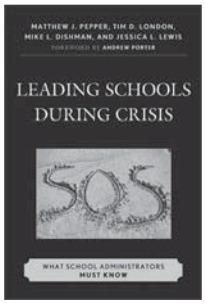

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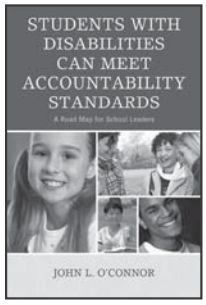

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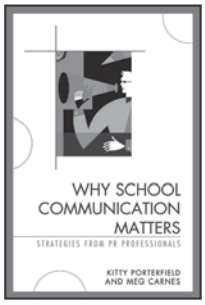

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DAVID MCGEHEE

Superintendent | Lee's Summit R-7 School District, Missouri

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DONNY BYNUM

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