

NO LEADER LEFT BEHIND: PLANNING TO PREPARE EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL LEADERS IN THIS ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY

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ABSTRACT

*The release of *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983) was a most significant event in creating a movement of reform in education across America. This report was very critical of the status of education in America and helped to spawn the standards and accountability movement in education, which is in existence today, including standards and increased accountability for educational leaders. While there is much research available on educational leadership and its evolution since *A Nation at Risk* was published, there also appears to be a growing body of research that suggests a shortage of educational leaders is occurring throughout the nation, both at the building and district level, in urban, suburban, and rural districts, and in each geographic section of the nation. It is essential, therefore, that current and future educational leaders have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead our schools and school districts in a manner so that all children can achieve and be successful. It also means that the educational community must be willing and able to provide the appropriate amount of support and resources, so that there will be an adequate supply of excellent educational leaders now and in the future, and that such leaders will not be left behind as victims of the stress and politics of the contemporary landscape of educational leadership in America. This paper examines the depth of the shortage of educational leaders, the reasons for this shortage, and offers a recommendation that reflective leadership be an integral part of training, preparation, and support for present and future educational leaders.*

INTRODUCTION

In *School Leadership That Works* (ASCD, 2005), Marzano, Waters, and McNulty suggested that, “at no time in recent memory has the need for effective and inspired leadership been more pressing than it is today. With the increasing needs in our society and in the workplace for knowledgeable, skilled, and responsible citizens, the pressure on schools intensifies. The expectation that no child be left behind in a world and economy will require everyone’s best is not likely to subside” (p. 123). It is essential, therefore, that current and future educational leaders have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to lead our schools and school districts in a manner so that all children can achieve and be successful. It also means that the educational community must be willing and able to provide the appropriate amount of support and resources, so that there will be an adequate supply of excellent educational leaders now and in the future, and that such leaders will not be left behind as victims of the stress and politics of the contemporary landscape of educational leadership in America.

The release of *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983) was a most significant event in creating a movement of reform in education across America. This report was very critical of the status of education in America and helped to spawn the standards and accountability movement in education, which is in existence today. As the demand for school accountability intensified throughout the years since the release of this report, so did the development of state and national standards in areas of curriculum, assessment, data-driven decision making, and improved achievement for all students. Subsequently, a significant amount of pressure has been placed upon educational leaders to improve the quality of education, at all levels and across all disciplines. Today, educational leaders are faced with the challenge of meeting these demands for higher levels of student performance in an environment of increased accountability by policy makers at federal, state, and local levels. While there is much research available on educational leadership and its evolution since *A Nation at Risk* was published more than two decades ago, there also appears to be a growing body of research that suggests the educational community will need to focus its efforts on developing leaders with new and different types of skills to lead our schools. The Institute for Educational Leadership, for example, states, “Schools are changing. . .no one can say for certain how the schools of this new century will differ from those of the past century-but, there can be little doubt that these schools will require different forms of leadership” (2000, p. 1).

THE PROBLEM: A SHORTAGE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Just as there exists in literature support of the need for effective leadership in education, there is also an abundant amount of research to suggest that the nation today is facing, and most likely well into the future, a critical shortage of educational leaders. The Educational Research Service (1998), in collaboration with the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NAASSP), found that there existed significant shortages of qualified candidates for the principalship at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, and that this shortage occurred in urban, suburban, and rural districts as well. In 1999, the New York City school system began its new school year with 195 principal vacancies and another 144 schools being led by interim or acting principals (AACTE, 2001). Also in 1999, 20 percent of the principals in Vermont either resigned or retired (Hinton & Kastner, 2000), and the Institute for Educational Leadership, citing a study completed by the University of Minnesota, predicted that 75% of all school principals in Minnesota will resign or retire by 2010 (IEL, p. 5). Furthermore, the National Association of Elementary School Principals in its *NAESP Fact Sheet* (2003) provided the following data:

- A ten-year study from 1998 indicated that not only will principals be retiring earlier, but, more than half plan to retire as soon as they are eligible, continuing the 40% turnover rate well into the next decade.
- More than 66% of NAESP members indicated that they will retire during the next decade, according to a 2002 NAESP survey.
- Of the responding principals in a New York state survey, 48% of the principals plan to retire by 2007. (NAESP, p. 1)

The shortage of potential school leaders also is occurring because, even those who are qualified and have the appropriate certification, are simply not applying for leadership positions. Orozco (2001), for example, found that less than 40% of qualified school administrators in California actually decided to move into school leadership positions (p. 1).

To compound this issue of a shortage of building level leaders, The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) indicated in a recent study that the quantity of qualified leaders needed to replace those who are leaving is decreasing and that finding leaders to help turn-around underperforming schools is becoming an even greater challenge (Bottoms, 2003). The Wallace Foundation (2003) posited that “districts and individual schools perceived as having the most challenging working conditions, the largest concentration of impoverished students, the lower per pupil expenditures and lower salaries, find it hardest to attract principal candidates” (pp. 4-5).

This shortage of educational leaders, however, is not limited to the schools only. There is very strong evidence to suggest that school districts are and will be facing a shortage of superintendents as well. Studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s began to suggest that such shortages were beginning to occur and would continue well into the future. According to the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), it is predicted that nearly 70% of superintendents are at or near the age of retirement and that more than two-thirds of those surveyed were over the age of fifty (AASA, 2001). There are more than 700 superintendents in New York State alone, and according to the New York State Council of School Superintendents *Snapshot V* (NYSCOSS, 2004), “more than 50% of responding superintendents indicated that they will retire by 2007 and 81% will retire by 2011” (p. 10). A study completed by Auburn University’s Truman Pierce Institute found that “close to 90% of superintendents and close to 70% of principals in Alabama plan on retiring by the end of 2007” (Salter, p. 1).

REASONS FOR THE SHORTAGE

Wanted: A miracle worker who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second-guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of paper and work double shifts (75 nights a year out). He or she will have carte blanche to innovate, but cannot spend much money, replace any personnel, or upset any constituency (R. Evans, Education Week, April 12, 1995).

Several themes occur throughout the review of the literature regarding why there exists a shortage of educational leaders in our schools and school districts. While compensation is frequently mentioned,

other issues such as stress, time, politics of the position, and the ever-changing role and expectations of being an educational leader in America today appear to be as prevalent. According to ERS (1998), the top three reasons for teachers not wanting to become principals was the lack of compensation, stress, and time. Boehlert and O'Connell (1999) found that experienced principals were reluctant to apply for positions of higher authority due to their perceived lack of experience, inadequate compensation, the amount of stress, and the amount of time needed to perform the duties of these positions. Research by the Montana School Boards Association (1999) found that factors such as salary, stress, and time were often mentioned by teachers as reasons for not wanting to enter school administration. Groff (2001) found that the rise of charter schools and vouchers and the perception that the public is not generally happy with education are factors that impede educators from becoming school leaders.

The perception that the job of the principal has changed over time has become a factor in why some educators may not wish to take on the responsibilities of school leadership. Orozco (2001) posed the subtle question: "School leadership--is it even doable?" (p. 1), citing issues such as the size of schools; shortages of teachers; higher accountability; constant changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment; and, having less support staff. Lovely (2006) offered that the following factors help to dissuade educators from becoming leaders: time and work overload, stress, salary, and interference from inside and outside the organization. Natt (1999) pointed to the decreasing gap between principal and teacher salaries, especially when time and amount of responsibilities are factored in. Moore (1999) found that the reasons teachers are not intending to become principals is due to time constraints on personal life, interference from both the educational bureaucracy, politics from outside groups, and the ever-increasing demands on accountability. Warchol and Batts (2000) suggested that longer work days and weeks are placing more stress on those who are presently in leadership positions at both the school and district level, and can be a primary reason why potential leaders in education decide not to apply for leadership positions. The Maryland Task Force on the Principalship (Maryland State Department of Education, 2001) found that the job of the principal was perceived by many in the field of education as being too stressful, underpaid, and requiring too much time.

The reasons for the shortage of superintendents are similar. Cunningham and Burdick (1999) found that there exists a relatively low supply of candidates for the position of superintendent due to board interference and micromanagement, time, stress, and the higher levels of accountability combined with fewer amounts of resources. AASA (2000) found that the reasons for the superintendent shortages included inadequate funding of education, too many demands on the time and efforts of the superintendent, and the ever increasing mandates from local, state and national policy makers. Almost 90% of the superintendents in New York State agreed that the job of superintendent was stressful, an increase of 7% in only three years (NYSCOSS, 2004). According to this report, "the demands on the superintendency are becoming more intense and causing superintendents to think about retirement sooner-rather than later" (p. 28).

Superintendents are also leaving their positions earlier as well. Czaja and Harman (1999) found that superintendents who voluntarily left early did so because of new job opportunities, family reasons, and personal reasons, while those who left involuntarily did so because of problems with the school board, union issues, and "moral and ethical discord" (p. 2). Cunningham and Burdick (1999) found that the reasons for superintendents leaving their position was due to board interference, diminishing financial resources for the school district, loneliness of the job, amount of time involved, and stress. Salter (2000) found that the two main reasons that superintendents were leaving in Alabama were school board micromanagement and time/stress. In "Career Crisis in the Superintendency" (AASA, 2000), it was noted that 90% of the superintendents felt that districts should provide them with more help and support to ensure their well being and success (p. 33). In unpublished research, Litchka and Polka (2006) found that superintendents in Georgia and New York State felt very lonely, isolated, angry, and to a certain extent depressed, when they were confronted by school boards that victimized them professionally and personally.

LEADING THROUGH REFLECTION: HELPING SCHOOL LEADERS PERSEVERE, SURVIVE, AND SUCCEED

If you understand others, you are smart; if you understand yourself, you are enlightened.

-Lao Tzu, in Tao Te Ching

We had the experience but missed the meaning.

-T.S. Eliot, in Four Quarters

In 1996, the Interstate School Leaders Consortium (ISLLC), under the direction of the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), adopted a set of voluntary national standards for educational leaders. Six standards were adopted, and for each standard a definition was provided as well as a listing of knowledge, dispositions, and performances that educational leaders should possess. According to the authors of the standards, “one intent of this document is to stimulate vigorous and thoughtful dialogue about quality leadership among stakeholders in the area of school administration” (ISLLC, 1996, p. iii.). Since 1996, more than 30 states have adopted these standards, professional development programs have been aligned to these standards, university programs for leadership preparation have been revised according to these standards, and many professional organizations across the nation are using these standards to help support leadership development in education (Murphy, 2001).

While these standards guide the development of educational leaders in areas of visionary leadership, instructional leadership, resource management, collaborative leadership, ethical leadership, and political/community leadership, it is rare to find programs of study, staff development, or support programs that address one of the most fundamental causes of the current and future shortage of educational leaders: the stress and loneliness of being an educational leader, either at the school or district level, particularly during these times of high accountability, resource depletion, and the interventionist politics of local boards of education and interest groups. Consider what Miller (1984) implies with regards to leadership and the Lone Ranger:

Problems were always solved the same way. The Lone Ranger and his faithful Indian companion (read servant of somewhat darker complexion and lesser intelligence) come riding into town. The Lone Ranger, with his mask and mysterious identity, background, and life-style, never becomes intimate with those whom he will help. His power is partly in mystique. Within ten minutes the Lone Ranger had understood the problem, identified who the bad guys are, and has set out to catch them. He quickly outwits the bad guys, draws his gun, and has them behind bars. And then there is always the wonderful scene at the end. The helpless victims are standing in front of their ranch or in the town square marveling at how wonderful it is now that they have been saved, you hear hoof beats, then the *William Tell Overture* and one person turns to another and asks, “But who was that masked man?” And the other replies, “Why, that was the Lone Ranger!” We see Silver rear up and with a hearty “Hi-yo Silver,” the Lone Ranger and his companion ride away. It was wonderful. Truth, justice, and the American Way protected once again. What did we learn from this cultural hero? Among the lessons that are now acted out daily by leaders are the following:

- There is always a problem down on the ranch (read plant, office, building, etc.) and someone is responsible.
- Those who get themselves into difficulty are incapable of getting themselves out of it: “I’ll have to go down or send someone down to fix it.”
- In order to have the mystical powers need to solve problems; you must stay behind the mask. Don’t let the ordinary folks get too close to you or your powers may be lost.
- Problems get solved within discrete periodic time units and we have every right to expect them to be solved decisively. (p. 34)

Thus, the issue may become, what happens to those principals and superintendents who believe or are pressured into believing that they should live up to the standards of being a leader described by Miller? If educational leaders are perceived by policy makers and the public as being someone who must have all the answers, must resolve all of the problems (educationally and societal as well) quickly and effectively, what happens to these leaders when they do not have the immediate answer or solutions? Unfortunately, leaders may become confused, apprehensive, become mistake-prone. Then, adversity or

crisis may occur. According to Ackerman (2002),

School leadership can take a person from an inspired moment to a crisis in an instant. Things happen unrelentingly, and a leader is expected to know or do something at the moment. Beneath the surface tension, wounding is often felt at a deeper and more personal level, where a leader's decision, motive, and integrity are impugned by others. (p. xii)

Tirozzi (2004) referred to the profession of the principal a *Profession in Crisis* in which he stated: The bottom line is that not only is it difficult to attract qualified candidates, but [also] the training that candidates receive from administrator preparation programs is often inadequate, and ongoing professional development is episodic at best. Many university programs for school administrators are not closely aligned with the instructional and real-world demands principals face, and the use of post certification development programs is the exception rather than the rule. (p. 43)

Patterson and Kelleher (2005) implied that such adversity is a "Metaphor of Storms":

Significant and unplanned disruptions to expectations for how life will unfold-and the storms of school leadership and life are also exceedingly varied in kind and intensity-predictability and unpredictability. (pp. v-vi)

Murphy (1994) suggested this "role overload" (p. 24), which ultimately leads to a "personal sense of loss for principals, a loss of control and a loss of professional identity" (pp. 24-25). While improving the achievement of all students must remain the forefront of all that is to be done in education, including that which is expected of educational leaders, it is imperative that the emotional health and well-being of these leaders be addressed as well. The works of Argyris (1982), Schon (1983, 1984, 1987), Kolb (1984), and Mezirow (1991, 1995) have contributed to the knowledge, understanding, and application of learning, reflection, and action. These studies support the position that leaders in education that have reflective thinking skills are more adept at recognizing that problems and difficult decisions as solvable, providing a foundation for effective planning, and helping the leader address the issues of fear and isolation when it comes to decision-making (Schon, 1983). Smith (1995) suggested that reviewing events can enhance the practice of effective leadership by avoiding situations that were not handled properly in the past, and will allow leaders as practitioners to deal with situations that may be unique to leadership itself. Schon (1987) advocated the idea of reflective leadership in which the leader is reflecting and being mentored throughout the entire process. The Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) posited, among other things, that:

School systems take a fresh approach to professional development, mentoring, coach and peer support networks, and that the unprecedented, unnecessary, and unproductive stresses placed on today's principals need to be alleviated by reconfiguring and supporting the primary role of the principal as leader for student learning. (pp. 12-13)

Ackerman (2002) advocated a new kind of leadership in which:

A conscious and skillful development of a supportive environment that learns to manage and adapt to its problems collectively--that is a culture that truly depends on the knowledge and leadership of the group, rather than always pointing a finger at someone else, especially and only toward the leader, the school can be remolded to reflect a culture of shared responsibility of what happens, as well as what does not happen. (p. 131)

Lovely (2004) proposed a number of ways in which the principalship can be improved, including the position that:

The work of principals must be valued and recognized at every level of the school district. Socialization activities to help principals combat job isolation and overload are important. Principals need structured opportunities to reflect upon problems and ponder solutions. (p. 4)

PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

Reflection is often used as a method by which to mentor and support leaders. Reflection is essential for the leader to think about and improve one's leadership abilities. In particular, reflective thinking will allow educational leaders to identify the gaps in their knowledge base and practices, including but not limited to decision-making and problem solving. Beatty (2000) reports that there exists a climate of "denial of emotionality" (p. 335) within the educational leadership environment, and this can have the

effect of having leaders “limiting the potential for professional renewal and synergy” (p. 335). While it might be that reflective practices may be natural in all humans to a certain degree, perhaps a more formal understanding and application of reflective leadership may help to alleviate the stress and anxiety of being a leader in today’s educational environment. Gosling and Mintzberg (2004) proposed, “Study after study has shown that leaders work at an unrelenting pace, that their activities are characterized by brevity, variety, and discontinuity, and that they are strongly oriented to action, and actually dislike reflective activities” (p. 151). Thus, deeper questions may need to be posed: Do educational leaders have the knowledge and understandings, skills, and dispositions to be able to adequately reflect? And if so, do they have the time, support, and resources to use reflection to improve their leadership skills and abilities? Researchers such as Ackerman, Bolman, and Deal, Greenleaf, Patterson, Sergiovanni, and Wheatley are but a few who suggest the importance of reflection and reflective leadership. Reflective practices involve the thoughtful processing of how individuals, teams, and organizations carry out their work. This approach makes mindful the impact of relationships with the children and families served by our programs, within all levels of the organization and with collaborating partners within our communities. Organizations and teams employing the use of reflective practices create a safe environment in which to share, reflect, support, and provide information, and make decisions. Staff members listen, observe, find capacities, question, and share multiple perspectives.

Thus, the issue not the lack of available research and support mechanisms to help our educational leaders cope with the emotional stress of being a principal or superintendent, but how often are leaders--both current and aspiring--exposed to the theories and applications of being reflective and of being a reflective leader. To meet the challenge of providing educational leaders with the knowledge, dispositions, and performances necessary to be reflective leaders, it is recommended that the following be considered for planning purposes:

1. Reflective leadership is identified as a critical component of the institution’s framework for leadership preparation.
2. Reflective leadership is integrated within both the scope and sequence of the institution’s leadership preparation program.
3. The curriculum is based upon current research, applications of reflective leadership, and research and practice that are linked.
4. An integral component of reflective leadership training should include practical applications in the “real world” environment of contemporary educational leadership.
5. The individual needs of educational leaders are addressed through continuous professional development activities, with the institution making a concerted and continuous effort to “reach out” to practicing educational leaders. Training in reflective leadership cannot be a “one time occurrence” that may occur in one course or workshop, but on a consistent basis with reinforcement and support.

Loyola College in Maryland has initiated a process of infusing reflective leadership in its graduate programs in the areas of business, education, and pastoral counseling. In training educators, including those for leadership positions, the education department has adopted three learning outcomes: competence, conscience, and compassion, and within these, refers to reflective practice and the care and development of the whole person (*Cura personalis*). While reflective practices are found throughout the education department’s curriculum, the concept of reflective leadership has not been formalized. Thus, the initiative being undertaken has the opportunity to have reflective leadership practices put into effect both within the department and across the college as well. Facilitating reflective thinking can help to reduce isolation and improve the leadership skills of school leaders. It is anticipated that this collaborative effort will allow the college not only to meet its mission of “inspiring students to learn, lead, and service in a diverse and changing world” (2006, p. 6), but also to play an integral part of resolving one of the issues that is causing the shortage of principals and superintendents across the nation--stress and emotional toll of educational leadership in contemporary America.

Bolman and Deal (1995) suggested that: “Leaders who have lost touch with their own soul, who are confused and uncertain about their core values and beliefs inevitably lose their way or sound an uncertain trumpet” (p. 11). It is critical, therefore, that if principals and superintendents are to provide

the necessary leadership to ensure that no child is left behind, then it is just as critical that those same leaders are provided with opportunities, resources, and support to better understand themselves and the dimensions of educational leadership in the 21st century. Hopefully, the theories, practices, and application of reflective leadership will help to resolve the shortage of educational leaders and also ensure that no educational leader--now or in the future--is ever left behind. As Blackburn (1999) suggested, "Reflection matters because it is continuous with practice. How you think about what you are doing affects how you do it, or whether you do it at all" (p. 7).

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