

The Superintendency in Retrospect

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As recent retirees from neighboring urban school districts in British Columbia, we found *Education Canada's* invitation to reflect on the nature of the superintendent's role both a healthy and daunting assignment; healthy in its stimulus to think hard, together, about what we have learned from our experiences; daunting in its challenge to offer something meaningful to others without becoming either too specific or general, too personal or detached.

If hindsight is at least somewhat 20/20, we hope our reflections are useful. They are offered, however, with the caveats that our contexts were characterized by their own particular histories, dimensions, and socio-political environments, and that these are our personal perspectives based upon our particular experiences, enriched by conversations, both locally and nationally, with other superintendents over the years.

Although we spent our entire careers in public education and many years working in close association with superintendents, the transition into that job surprised us with its complexity and intensity. While pre-service training is available for positions of senior administration and leadership in education, there is no training to prepare for the full realities of the superintendency, and – despite our proximity for many years prior – we found little opportunity to gain real insight into that role before assuming it. This was not due to secrecy, or any lack of collegiality on the part of incumbents, but rather to the uniqueness and relative isolation of the role. At the same time as we worked closely with superintendents over the course of years, we were immersed within our own supportive roles with little opportunity for objective and analytical observation or reflection with potential mentors. Additionally, the superintendency was not a role either of us actively sought, so we were not creating or pursuing such mentoring or preparatory opportunities. Consequently, it was not until we were in the role that we became fully aware of its distinct nature.

In our experience, the superintendency was a particularly solitary position, uniquely positioned between political and pedagogical demands. Standing astride these two canoes, we felt strongly connected to each, bridging and buffering in both directions, yet frequently unable to fully interpret or connect these often divergent domains and never able to completely settle into either. Our duty to put the best possible face on initiatives that emerged from the compromises of political decision-making and to press for compliance was often in conflict with our duty to protect the organization and its people from overload or distraction. This required adapting – and sometimes even diluting or delaying – directives to fit available resources and competing demands. Everyone in the school system encounters similar dilemmas as they seek to achieve ends defined by others and somehow fulfill their dual duty both to those in authority and to those for whom they are responsible. However, while we found many willing and capable colleagues, as the CEO we had no professional peers in our organizations with the same information, perspective, duties, or experience.

While the districts in which we served were considered highly successful, it was important to press for ongoing improvements in order to move beyond the confines of traditional structures and conventional thinking and practice. Such improvements involved the systemic inclusion of students formerly segregated in special programs, adapting to large numbers of students with English as a second language, employing new technologies to personalize education, giving students a voice and greater responsibility for their learning, and preparing them to succeed in a rapidly changing post-industrial and globalized world. In addition, of course, our districts faced the usual stream of operational challenges that vied for attention and diverted energy from the quest for growth and adaptation at a pace commensurate with the changes in the socio-political surround.

As crises arose and various aspects of the ongoing need for system change came into focus, the board, community, and schools continually called for decisive and effective action to fix problems, right wrongs, or seize opportunities. Calming this cacophony and moving it towards harmony required us as superintendents to respond definitively and immediately where necessary while sustaining a strategic focus at all times, to listen empathetically without taking on the angst of others, to remain calmly alert, and to direct urgent attention to the right issues. This mediation

of competing interests and issues was the central challenge of the superintendency. It called for an artful blend of authority and influence, being at once the senior bureaucrat in the district organization and the symbolic leader of the educational community that populated it. Again, the challenge of effectively combining management and leadership functions is not exclusive to the superintendency, but we found that it reached a zenith in that position.

Our communities were generally proud and supportive of their schools, but were subject to an increasing social/political trend to accept and perpetuate myths and mis-informed opinions about “dysfunctional” schools. The intensity of such criticism and complaint seemed directly proportional to the critic’s distance from schools, reflecting a spreading malaise of cynicism about all existing authorities. Staff were capable and committed, but increasingly distressed by economic strain, rising expectations, and societal changes combining to escalate complexity, turbulence, and intensity. Our schools were not in crisis, but pundits increasingly suggested otherwise, and it was certainly true that they were under significant stress, which often decreased staff’s inclination and ability to engage in adaptive change, causing many to seek the comfort of the familiar and accepted rather than the excitement (along with the relative uncertainty) of the new and promising.

These struggles with shifting internal and external influences affect all public and governmental institutions, and there are many different beliefs about how (or if) they might be resolved. In our districts, we chose to accept the fact that contextual dynamism and complexity were inherent attributes of our professional organizations. To us, this implied that effective leadership must focus on transformation rather than incremental changes in policies, procedures, and practices. At the same time, however, it was essential to ensure the continued stability, viability, and excellence of an educational system that serves both the public and private good. In balancing a transformative and long-term change process with day-to-day operation and accountability, we found it essential to work collaboratively across the system to articulate and highlight a guiding set of core values – a shared understanding of central purpose.

The diverse interests, beliefs, and expectations in the community often converge with the aforementioned societal tensions and become focused on the board and superintendent. Boards

deal with this in various ways and with varying success, which can change dramatically every three years through the election of even a couple of new trustees. Since the time frame for genuine and systemic change is longer than three years, much of the responsibility for the sustained focus required to move the school system lies with the superintendent. In theory, the board sets policies and the superintendent enacts them. In fact, to steer a steady course of organizational change and development, this relationship must be reciprocal.

Even assuming a strong partnership between board and superintendent, characterized by mutual understanding and carefully considered decisions, the loosely coupled nature of the school system makes change initiatives a challenge. Policy directions within a professional bureaucracy¹ cannot be implemented by fiat. The aspirational goal of “enabling all learners”¹ (as stated in the preamble to the School Act in British Columbia) requires deep knowledge, profound commitment, and enormous creativity by professional staff at every level, but most particularly in the unique context of each classroom. Thus, the school system cannot succeed through compliant behaviour alone; it also requires commitment. This cannot be mandated, but must be earned through the respectful communion of people commonly devoted to a compelling moral purpose. We were fortunate that this was the case in our districts, as we believe it to be generally true of Canadian education systems.

Externally driven or imposed change, particularly upon an already stressed professional staff, runs a risk of resentment begetting passive resistance. Worse still may be a response of superficial or ritualistic compliance, where some change may seem to be happening as practitioners wait for this “latest and greatest” innovation or expectation to fade away, which it often does, leaving front line educators confirmed in their caution, or even cynicism, about future proposals from the superintendent or board. The more appropriate and constructive approach is an appreciative and respectful one that invites practitioners into a mission-driven dialogue about the desired change, involves them in defining it, and supports ongoing

¹ The term “professional bureaucracy” is taken from Henry Mintzberg’s *The Structuring of Organizations* (1979), which contrasts a Machine Bureaucracy that relies on hierarchical authority, with a Professional Bureaucracy that affords staff greater autonomy (i.e., professionalism).

implementation and institutionalization of new practices. This, of course, takes longer and is far more complex, but is the only way to effect genuine, lasting change.

Unfortunately, we found such approaches and processes were not well understood by provincial policy makers, and often difficult for boards to accept because of their strong sense of responsibility to effect rapid systemic improvements or respond to specific community expectations. Naive approaches to policy implementation are reinforced by the fact that, in poorly performing systems, imposed change may be a necessary first step and can result in quick short-term improvements in some cases. Stories of such “turn-around” initiatives from other jurisdictions have been popularized in both the news media and educational literature. However, when imposed upon organizations that are already performing well, the outcomes can be more regressive than progressive and can negatively affect a collegial professional culture.

To be truly effective, change requires a combination of pressure and support that balances clear expectations with strong, meaningful encouragement. This needs to be provided in a genuinely respectful way that generates a positive sense of urgency through the commitment of teachers to valued purposes, a belief that the change will result in improved life chances for their students, and evidence that they will receive support as they deal with the difficulties that accompany all change processes. Imposed change runs the significant risk of creating what Andy Hargreaves calls a *Performance Training Sect* that is obedient to organizational ends and means but incapable of learning and adapting.² Professional learning communities that actively inquire into learning and strive for continuous improvement in their practices arise only from internally motivated commitment.

For us, the implication is that, despite the understandable desire of government, boards, and the community to seek “control” and direct, immediate impact, imposed system change is at best temporary and superficial, and at worst harmful. Real change in a professional bureaucracy is a slow process of individual learning and organizational re-culturing. We have seen such change

² Andy Hargreaves, *Teaching in the Knowledge Society: Education in the Age of Insecurity* (New York; NY: Teachers’ College Press, 2003).

occur, for example, in the ongoing journey towards truly inclusive educational programs, in the institutionalization of pervasive support for learners with English as a second language, and in the development of balanced literacy programs. Once such change becomes established, it endures because it has become part of the shared assumptions, values, and traditional practices of the district as a professional culture.

This is not to say that inappropriate practices or behaviours should be allowed to correct themselves on their own timeline. Clearly, there is a duty to exert authority in order to effect immediate change in cases of misconduct or harmful practice, but improvements to what is fundamentally a high-performing education system come only through consistent expectations and sustained support over an extended period of time.

As superintendents, we found ourselves at the nexus between this understanding of the nature of the school system and the often-contrary expectations of many in the greater community. Our ability to reconcile these two perspectives, explain them to each other, encourage patience and supportive involvement on the part of the community and urgency on the part of the school system, and to strengthen the relationship of mutual regard between them depended on our credibility in both quarters. Such credibility grew out of the evidence of our genuine respect for the interests and priorities upheld by each, our ability to foster a common sense of resolve and purpose between them, and our resourcefulness in providing the requisite means towards fulfilling their common purposes.

This was complex, often messy work, best understood through a cultural lens and approached with a balance of rational and relational strategies – the latter being essential to the animation of the former. We had our greatest impact when we were able to weather the endless parade of issues that challenged us without being overwhelmed by them, doing what was necessary to sustain the district without forgetting that, albeit necessary, management alone was far from sufficient. Our ability to also effect intended change required that we hold steadfast to the ethical principles and moral purposes that gave meaning to our work and seize every opportunity to articulate, demonstrate, and advance them. When sustained over time, such persistent attention to an issue was able to mobilize and broadly distribute latent leadership by others who

were committed to the same ideals and willing to apply their creative energy to those ideals in whatever role they held. When that happened, and only when that happened, did we see real change that we believe will persist.

In all its complexity, the superintendent's role is an essential one – to the school district as an organization and social institution, to the greater system of which the school district is a part, and to the profession and field of education. Most directly, the role and person within it are essential to the overall welfare of the school district – its stability and credibility, performance and progress. At the same time, neither the role nor the person acting within it can and should ever be preeminent. Like any human organization and enterprise, the school district and its schools are dynamic organisms, subject to, and generative of perpetual cycles and phases of experience, activity, and development. No single position or person within it should ever presume to control or own that dynamism. Knowing and respecting it, managing it, guiding and positively influencing it, however, are all central to the superintendent's actual effectiveness and particular contribution to the ongoing life of the organization.

Any person aspiring to or assuming the superintendency should do so with the clearest possible in-going sense of the purpose to be fulfilled by his/her particular attributes in relation to that particular district/organization in that particular time of its experience and development. To this end, ultimately effective superintendents are those who know what they stand for and are good at, identify their district's *a priori* needs and opportunities, envision desired change, and focus their influences and resources accordingly. It is also vitally important that they recognize that their time will be temporary, the organization will eventually and inevitably be carrying on without them, and the best they can hope to do is to affect at least some aspects of the district's culture in a way that will have some positive and enduring impact on others; namely, on the students and those who serve them.

Whatever impact we may have had on our districts, it pales in comparison to the impact the districts had on us. The experience was challenging, edifying, rewarding, perplexing, depleting, and humbling in ways that we could not have imagined in advance. Looking back, there are many aspects of it for which we are personally grateful and by which we feel we have been

honoured; there are others we would not want to experience again. That's life, as they say, but within our shared reflection is an earnest hope that, in any setting, the role of the superintendent can be given its greatest possible chance for positive, progressive, and enduring contribution, both by the persons within it and by all those whom they serve and depend upon in a commonly intended, reciprocal relationship.