

# *Introduction*

## *The Role of Leadership and School Improvement*

**B**ased upon reports in the media and the prevailing political rhetoric, one would conclude that concern about the quality of public education in America is at an all-time high. In spite of many high profile efforts to address the problem, significant gaps in achievement between students from advantaged communities and their disadvantaged counterparts show no signs of shrinking. This explains why when communities search for a new chief executive to lead the schools often their top priority is finding someone with a credible strategy to quickly improve the quality of student performance.

There is no question that quality leadership influences organizational behavior. While anyone can be appointed to a position of authority, a person will only merit the title of “leader” if and when others elect to follow their lead. Therefore, any school executive who desires to lead a school community in the pursuit of a dramatic improvement in student performance needs to approach that work with a clear perspective on how they plan to influence others to bring about change.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF QUALITY INSTRUCTION**

Increasingly, there appears to be one area of consensus in the research on the factors contributing to school effectiveness. The single variable (under the school’s control) that is consistently cited as making a difference in student performance is the quality of the teacher (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Tekwe et al., 2004). This particular finding has led to

a host of reform proposals. The approach gaining the most popularity is one that seeks to harness the power of teacher quality through a set of strategies that when taken together produce what Jeffrey Henig, Katrina Bulkley, and Henry Levin (2010) recently labeled the “portfolio model” of school reform. In the portfolio model, districts use alternative structures such as charters, magnets, and vouchers to break up school systems and foster innovation by inviting excellent teachers to start their own schools and become entrepreneurial while encouraging student and parental choice.

One sees the rationale, which informs the “portfolio” model, reflected in another approach that has been gaining momentum nationally. This is the view that student performance will dramatically improve if enough underperforming principals and teachers are fired or when persistently low-performing schools are forced to wither away and die. However, for the portfolio model to work, one must assume that a large enough number of highly effective innovative charters or alternatives will emerge to take the place of the schools that will be forcibly closed. This model also presumes there will be enough good applicants ready and willing to take over for all the low-performing teachers who have been fired.

Recently, the US Department of Education gave a big boost to the portfolio model by offering financial incentives to states that would commit to school improvement policies that included closing underperforming schools, enacting coercive personnel practices, and creating reward systems that encourage teachers to compete for merit pay awards.

Both our experience and our reading of research leads us to wholeheartedly agree with the relationship of teacher quality and school improvement. What concerns us, however, is the nature and tone of the current discussion on what school leaders should be doing to foster the type of world-class teaching force our nation needs if we truly aspire to create world-class schools. We have been reading a steady stream of reports, in both the professional literature and the mainstream media, about ironfisted school superintendents who have recently led or who are currently leading efforts to significantly improve student performance in their community’s schools. Invariably, the school leaders who receive the most press are the one’s pursuing one form or another of the portfolio model. In article after article, we hear unions demonized as the enemy, tenure equated with child abuse, and the argument put forth that the only

route to real reform is the application of tough love by powerful and frequently autocratic CEOs.

This trend concerns us for several reasons. In their commentary “Can Portfolio Management Save Urban Schools,” Henig and his colleagues (2010) caution that repeating the same anecdotes over and over again doesn’t necessarily make them any more true. They caution this<sup>1</sup>:

*The ideas behind these changes are fuzzy, the forces propelling them ill defined, and the likely consequences debated with vague abstractions rather than evidence-based arguments. Chicago, New Orleans, New York City, and Philadelphia are among the national leaders in the movement to shift from a centralized bureaucracy that directly manages a relatively uniform set of schools toward a model in which a central office oversees a diverse portfolio of schools that might include traditional public schools, privately managed schools, and charter schools.*

The success of the portfolio model for improving entire school systems has yet to be demonstrated. At best, the data may support it as one model worthy of consideration. A larger concern is that this approach is built on an assumption that there is and will always be a large enough supply of motivated and skilled teachers to staff all our schools. The reality is there simply aren’t that many able and motivated people seeking careers in teaching, and increasingly, it is becoming difficult to keep good teachers from leaving the profession. One of the consequences of years of heated political rhetoric on school reform is that significant numbers of veteran teachers are feeling disempowered, devalued, and fearful.

For a number of years, American public schools have been finding it difficult to find enough applicants to fill every classroom with a qualified teacher. Furthermore, it has proved to be even harder to find qualified teachers willing to work in schools that serve the most disadvantaged and educationally challenged students. Add to this the reality that a high percentage of the current teaching force plans to retire in the next five years. Finally, the research on teacher retention (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004) has consistently reported that nationwide nearly 50 percent of all new teachers will leave the profession in less than five years. Sadly, and for a variety of reasons, in the United

States a high percentage of the folks who chose teaching for their career end up losing their motivation to teach after spending comparatively little time working in a public school.

We are concerned about the emotional impact that the blaming the victim syndrome is having on the dedicated professionals who are struggling every day to provide the best possible education for their students. We worry about the chilling effect that the current atmosphere of fear is having on the willingness of classroom teachers to be creative and innovative when designing strategies to meet the needs of an ever more challenging student body. And we worry about the long-term consequences of a national movement that seems willing to bet our children's future on an approach to school improvement with little or no empirical data supporting it.

On the positive side, we know, from personal experience, that there is a better way forward. It is our personal experience that first motivated us to write this book. We were fortunate to have worked as members of the professional staff in a district where for over thirty years a collective, passionate, and consistent pursuit of excellence was the norm. We have experienced firsthand the consequences of transformational leaders working with teachers as partners not adversaries. We have seen how this perspective led to consistently improved student performance, improved teacher quality, greater professional satisfaction for teachers, and stronger community support for schools.

## **THE CONDITIONS OF TEACHING**

The 2010 Program for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2010) confirmed the results of numerous recent international comparisons. Students in Finland, Singapore, and South Korea far outperformed their counterparts in the United States. A recent analysis conducted by the respected international consulting firm McKinsey and Company (Auguste, Kihn, & Miller, 2010) identified what it believed to be the most significant difference between the public education systems of Finland, Singapore, South Korea, and the United States. They felt the most salient difference was the academic qualification of the teaching force. In the three high-performing countries (Finland, Singapore, and South Korea) 100 percent of public school teachers performed in the top one third of

their high school and college graduating classes. The report contrasted this with the United States, where less than 25 percent of classroom teachers had scored in the top third on the SAT or ACT exam. While the authors acknowledge these statistics don't produce an exact comparison, they argue the underlying message from their data is clear. The "best and brightest" of America's college graduates aren't being attracted to teaching in the same way as they are in these other countries.

The most frequent and simplistic explanation given for why top US students shy away from teaching is the comparatively low pay scale. While we won't argue that compensation isn't an issue, pay alone is simply not an adequate explanation for the unattractiveness of teaching in American schools. Furthermore, there is little, if anything, we can do as individuals—at least in the short run—to dramatically change teacher compensation in the United States. But the evidence from the McKinsey & Company study suggests that there are other factors that motivate talented young people and encourage them to choose teaching as a career in other cultures as diverse as Finland, Singapore, and South Korea. In the report "Closing the Talent Gap Report," McKinsey & Company cited the following factors as significantly influencing the attractiveness of teaching in the three high-performing countries:

- A compelling peer group
- A professional working environment
- Opportunities for continued learning
- Prestige in the community

Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Stanford University, summarized her understanding of these international comparisons this way: "The three high-performing jurisdictions get 'the right people' into teaching and prepare them well, make the profession attractive, provide ongoing teacher support, and develop high-quality leadership" (quoted in Heiten, 2011).

As was stated previously, we had the good fortune of working in a school district, under the direction of a superintendent, where the application of skilled transformational leadership succeeded in attracting and nurturing an excellent professional staff and fostered a steady and persistent approach to school improvement that enabled the growth of a professional learning community where staff enjoys

the same four job-embedded benefits that were identified by the teachers of Finland, Singapore, and South Korea.

We have tracked the effects of this model of transformational leadership for over thirty years. While circumstances and times have changed, we believe these principles of leadership are timeless. This book reports on one particular transformational leader, Dealous Cox, and his impact on individual teachers and administrators. We will show how, when sustained over time, the principles of leadership he demonstrated can be used to transform professional behavior throughout an entire district yielding positive results for both students and teachers for years to come.

### **Note**

1. From “Can Portfolio Management Save Urban Schools?” by J. Henig, K. E. Bulkley, and H. M. Levin, 2010, *Education Week*, 30(6), p. 28. Reprinted with permission from the authors.