

# 3

## LEADING IN COMPLEX POLITICAL ENVIRONMENTS

### WHAT WE ARE LEARNING FROM SUPERINTENDENTS OF EDUCATION

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This working paper examines some of the key issues and challenges confronting some of the most significant actors in American political affairs—superintendents of education—and explores how they can drive meaningful educational reform through exercising capable leadership to implement bold new actions in the face of overwhelming demands.

Over the past two years, my colleagues and I at the Center for Public Leadership, in collaboration with the Harvard Graduate School of Education, have been working with twelve superintendents from large urban districts across the country in attending to these leadership challenges. We have learned a lot from this process about the demands of leadership in complex political environments, particularly as it pertains to educational reform. This paper touches on some of these insights and also raises some important research questions that need further investigation.

In 2000 the Wallace–Reader’s Digest Funds asked the Center for Public Leadership to design a program that enhances the capacity of superintendents to exercise leadership in this complex political setting. They felt strongly that a new kind of educational leadership program was called for—one that addressed how to operate effectively in highly uncertain and ambiguous political environments and could truly have a significant impact on school reform as manifest in the learning outcomes of children. After interviewing more than a hundred superintendents, academics, and principals we designed the leadership program. The program would focus on how to facilitate adaptive problem solving; how to make effective interventions into school systems and the community; the design of the strategies needed to muster support and protection from the political system; how to establish a profound sense of purpose and mission that can keep people focused on and committed to what really matters—namely the education of children, and the skills and techniques of being an outstanding agent of change who operates with wisdom, prowess, and fortitude.

## FEATURES OF THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

An educational adviser to the mayor of a large city on the East Coast made the following statement about the superintendent in his city. “She is a wonderful person,” he said, “full of interesting ideas and always coming up with creative programs. But she has no leadership skills! She thinks her ideas will carry the day and fails to realize that she has to sell her programs and get the support needed to drive them through. Her job, really, is all about leadership. She’s supposed to be a leader and she is not. She doesn’t listen well, she upsets a lot of people, and she’s too dogmatic. She is a real expert on education, and I’m sure was a great teacher. But I tell you, in the position of superintendent it means nothing unless you know how to lead in very demanding political environment. And she can’t do that.”

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Indeed, the political challenges facing the modern superintendent are significant and often overwhelming for the professional educator. Very few are prepared for such a daunting undertaking. Educational expertise, or even managerial competence gleaned from years of experience in the business world, may be inadequate in facilitating genuine education reform. The environment in which most superintendents are asked to perform is unpredictable, highly politicized, and immersed in complex social and economic dynamics. The state of the public education system in America is both volatile and complex, requiring an increasingly rare combination of skills to operate successfully as a leader and an agent of change, particularly in large urban areas.

The role of the superintendent is more difficult than it has ever been. In the course of our training and research, the first thing we noticed was that of all the political positions in the country, superintendents are in the most precarious position of all. Many of them leave their jobs ahead of schedule. In large urban areas, rarely do they last longer than three years. They either quit in frustration or are forced from office.

Over the past two decades there has been a growing emphasis on accountability in the field of education. Simultaneously, there has been a growing politicization of the process and an increase in competition with the emergence of vouchers and charter schools. Under the No Child Left Behind Act “failing schools” can lose funding and even be closed down—leaving irate parents looking for someone to blame. That someone is usually the superintendent. Indeed, the superintendent is expected to “fix the system” and make sure it works for everyone. Given this shifting and volatile context, there is a constant and desperate call from superintendents for help and support. Indeed, there is a realization that superintendents need a new set of skills to cope with these difficult leadership, political, and reform-oriented challenges. Given how demanding the job is, a significant number of former CEOs from the business world and military generals have “thrown their hat into the ring” to see if they can do a better job than the professional educator. While the jury is still out, this new brand of superintendent does not appear to have fared any better. In fact, some have got themselves into considerable trouble given their ignorance of educational processes and their insensitivity to the political realities in which educational problems are imbedded.

We know that facilitating change in complex social systems is a difficult undertaking, bordering on the impossible—with two steps forward and three steps backward. Bureaucratic and political institutions such as education are not designed to cope effectively with change. Political battles warp people’s notions of reality and exacerbate problems by driving seminal issues underground or making them so “hot” no one wants to touch them. The Swiss sociologist Hans Ulrich made the following astute observation concerning the management of modern bureaucratic institutions—and his statement is particularly relevant to educational systems. He wrote:

*One can hardly now assert that today's institutionalized society is performing particularly well; on the contrary more and more undesirable and undesired situations seem to be becoming more frequent in practically all fields of life. Much that was yesterday still functioning faultlessly today periodically gets out of control or produces negative side effects in no longer acceptable proportions. It often appears that systems have completely divorced themselves from the supervision of their supposed controllers and are operating according to self-generated norms that no one wants. That suggests that the management of the system is obviously not as good as it should be from a social science perspective which ... results from the fact that the true meaning of [leadership] has up to now not been widely understood. (H. Ulrich, Self Organization and Management of Social Systems, 1984, p.91.)*

As Ulrich says, how to lead and manage these complex social and bureaucratic systems is not well understood. People do not know how to do it well. Superintendents struggle bravely to have a positive effect on schools but feel thwarted by bureaucratic procedures imposed on them by the state and federal governments. They feel frustrated by intractable social problems that spill over into the school system. They are bewildered by community expectations that the schools should be doing much of what good parenting in the past attended to. And they are angered by the political game playing of school boards and unions, which saps time, energy, and commitment from them, thus minimizing the time they could be spending in schools or in the community. This is all the more reason why leadership is required—leadership that generates thought and movement, participation and engagement, focus and purpose, and a problem-solving capacity that leads to the attainment of worthwhile local, state, and national objectives.

We have concluded that to be an effective agent of change, the superintendent must appreciate the nature of complex social systems and why the problems they face are not amenable to quick fixes or simple solutions. Based on our observations, we have noticed three key features of that environment that affect profoundly the manner in which leadership is practiced, how change must be approached, and the overall quality of contribution provided by the superintendent. They are:

- 1 In complex social and political systems, goals are often problematic, ill defined, and inconsistent with the reality of the situation that the people face.
- 2 Active participation and commitment by members and factions in the social system varies and is based on different motives.
- 3 The institution of education is expected to attend to individual, organizational, and societal needs and values, and these needs and values are often in conflict with one another.

I will now briefly discuss each one of these features and the implications for leadership and change.

### **1. Goals are problematic, ill defined, and often inconsistent.**

In working with our group of superintendents we observed that the educational environment had many competing goals and objectives, with different players, factions, and units marching to the “beat of their own drum.” In fact, many groups connected with education, such as unions, teachers, administrators, and parents operate on a variety of ill-defined, often inconsistent objectives, goals, and preferences. They form a loose collection of changing ideas and wants, rather than a coherent structure with a consistent purpose, with each part contributing unambiguously to well developed and broadly accepted objectives.

Much of the present leadership and management theories for executives and educators introduce mechanisms for control and coordination that assume the existence of well-defined goals and technology, as well as substantial participant involvement. However, when goals, objectives, and purposes are hazy or still emerging, and member commitment is varied, superintendents are faced with significant leadership challenges related to generating commitment, alignment, and participation from all the relevant factions—including politicians, parents, central office staff, principals and teachers, and unions.

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If people are uncertain as to what precisely they are supposed to be doing that actually leads to progress, then any system of accountability and responsibility will be eroded, and confusion, chaos, and work-avoidance dynamics are the natural and predictable consequences. To illustrate a basic philosophical conflict that had implications for the entire activity of schooling, one superintendent posed this rhetorical question: “Is the purpose of schools to educate children to be employable in the market economy, or is it to educate young people to be self-directed critical thinkers?” No one had ever

addressed that question to her satisfaction. Another superintendent added: “Is the purpose of the Central Office to be an employment center for the community with its own rules and bureaucracy or a real support system for the schools?” And another superintendent offered this: “What really is the function of the school board? Do they exist to represent the interests of parents and children? If so, why do they engage so much political infighting?” In the absence of a clear and shared sense of purpose and understanding of the role and functions of the various actors in the system, people become cynical and despondent about change and skeptical of authority figures and politicians who think they know how to do it.

Although schools and a department of education may be well established, those responsible can easily avoid the task of defining progress, establishing goals, and building a shared sense of purpose and alignment around what is important for the community as it pertains to education. This evasion stems from the difficulty involved in getting multiple parties to accept responsibility for the problem and to do the requisite work of wrestling with the real issues (rather than wrestling with the superintendent). The creation of a common purpose and the articulation of strategies and goals, with their attendant claims and responsibilities, can be potentially threatening to certain factions and groups that thrive in the ambiguity of the political milieu.

## **2. Commitment, participation, and contribution by members and stakeholders varies.**

The stakeholders and constituents of any institution vary in the amount of time, talent, and effort they are willing to devote to problem-solving work. In the realm of education, teachers, principals, students, and school boards are obvious members, but then so are journalists, mayors, state legislators, nonprofit organizations, and “the community.” Some individuals are more committed to educational purposes and goals than others. Some are very committed but to different purposes, having a vested interest in a particular program or approach. Some are committed but just don’t have the time to help. There are also those who do not want to help but chose to engage in counterproductive activities such as criticizing, politicking, game playing, and blatant subversion of the superintendent’s agenda.

Perhaps the most immediate and important partner in change should be the school board, but that is not always the case. Many boards are actually an impediment to change, given the political interests of the board members. And while each member embodies a particular point of view or concern of the community, they often have enormous difficulty in integrating one another's views into a coherent whole that fosters focused and intentional change. One Chief State School Officer had this to say:

*A problem with education is that everyone thinks they are an expert. Everyone has had direct experience in the school system, and they try to import their experience. This becomes very intrusive and actually paralyzes the system. I have one superintendent who refuses to talk about any kind of reform or changes at all because he's so worried with the board breathing down his neck that one mistake and he'll be removed. How can you make any changes or lead into the future with that kind of pressure? Board members are tipping off the press and building coalitions against the superintendent. The poor guy hasn't got a chance. Yeah, it gets pretty ugly.*

While many superintendents complained to us about this system of governance and the ineffectiveness of their school board, all of them realized that a good part of the challenge was to make that relationship work—even though for some it seemed impossible. One successful superintendent explained how he intervened telling the school board that he was tired of its behavior and that it was not helping anyone. He provoked and challenged the board to change its approach to working with him, and invited it to create a shared vision and mission for educational reform. With the support of a consultant, his provocation and invitation worked. The whole process was riddled with conflict, but there was a commitment to sticking with it, which all did, resulting eventually in a sense of alignment and shared commitment. The superintendent acknowledged that challenging the board was a risky move, but it uncovered hidden agendas and all manner of difficult problems and unchecked perceptions that could be worked through.

These problems are more than just problems of personality or attitude. They are systemic and structural problems. Often we hear superintendents say, “If only the Central Office staff had a better attitude.” Or, “If only the school board members weren't so intrusive and controlling.” These are legitimate concerns, but they must be explored using a more systemic perspective than an individual analysis. They are common problems, therefore what is it in the way these systems are formed and managed that leads to the emergence of dysfunctional dynamics? This provides an important leadership challenge regarding how to create new processes and build commitment among various factions to ensure that there is alignment around what's important and a willingness to address hard issues. Successful superintendents do just that. They are constantly attending to processes and alignment, and providing the necessary data, support, and communication needed to energize and sustain it—from the school board, the community, the business community, their principals, and local politicians.

### **3. There are individual, organizational, and societal needs and values to which the educational system must attend.**

Superintendents are much like the plate spinner on the old Ed Sullivan show, who ran up and down the table trying to keep a dozen plates spinning precariously on thin sticks. No matter how hard he tried, eventually the plates all came crashing down. One reason for this comparison is that contemporary educational organizations exist to meet multiple needs and demands, both internal and external to the system. These needs are often conflicting. For example, one primary purpose of the bureaucracy is to provide a service to the public. The need to create jobs and keep people gainfully employed often clashes with the need for efficiency of operations. The need for secrecy and the control of information often clashes with the need for

openness, trust, and the sharing of data. The need for internal control and adherence to procedure and regulations often clashes with the need for creativity and innovation. The needs of a parent to fast track her child’s education by keeping him in gifted and talented programs might clash with the need to build an egalitarian and racially tolerant school community. The need to lower taxes and put an added financial burden on the community might clash with need to invest in and build better schools in the community.

These demands and needs place an enormous responsibility on politicians, government administrators, and superintendents as they seek to attempt to exercise leadership and facilitate reform. On a daily basis they are confronted with telephone calls and e-mails voicing problems and complaints from parents, the union, the media, and various interest groups. All have particular needs and wants that they hope the superintendent can fix. These complaints generally reflect the multiple and often conflicting demands

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placed on the educational system by society in general. In a way, the superintendent is expected to be all things to everyone, thus putting the superintendent between a “rock and hard place.”

One superintendent told us that while he sympathized with the concerns of the public, often all he could do was take their abuse, explain the procedures, and encourage people to be patient. However, the institutional demands, as manifest in the never-ending files that grace his desk, are time consuming and detract from the real agenda of reform. The ever-present staff problems related to motivation, conflict, performance, and training take his time as well. In discussing leadership and change, this superintendent indicated, “I don’t have time to be a leader. I just do my best to keep things from falling apart. What’s more, no one pats me on the back when I produce real change. They just get angry. If I fix a leaking roof in a school gym, then they are grateful.”

Superintendents need a framework to help them diagnose adaptive problems and distinguish them from technical concerns. They need to determine what is important for sustainable reform that affects the learning outcomes of children. They need to figure out what the priorities are and where their attention should be focused. This is certainly not easy, as there are so many competing interests and issues to attend to. One former superintendent, who is now an administrator at a nonprofit educational organization, highlighted this problem of determining what to address. She told us:

*I don’t think many superintendents have a sense of who their customers are, namely the children. One superintendent agreed with me that we must be focused on the customer, but he was referring to an interest group, not even the parents, let alone the children! That’s a good indication that something is amiss in the system. But I can’t blame them. They are just spinning their wheels and they are in a vulnerable position. There’s just too many people trying to cook the pie. When was the last time you read about the higher vision, mission, or goals of your kids’ school in the local paper? What we read about are the fires, crises, and debacles. To be honest, I don’t think anyone knows really what they should be focusing on.*

Adaptive work requires unbundling complex problems and clarifying issues that represent unchanging conditions and those that a group must work on in order to generate any kind of sustainable change. Many superintendents are inclined to narrowly define the key problems and concerns they are seeking to address. Their framing of the problem is generally incomplete and, therefore, they never resolve the concerns they are seeking to address. For example, some superintendents described the cause of a certain problem in monolithic terms such as assigning blame to “the principal” or the “school board” or “the

union.” Some also acknowledged that many of the challenges they faced were not specifically related to people or their roles but to deeper social issues that affected all in society, such as a breakdown in family dynamics, racial tensions, or debilitating poverty. Irrespective of how they defined the problem and causes, many of the superintendents we talked to felt “stuck.”

## CAN THE SUPERINTENDENT SUCCEED?

In the mid-twentieth century, a superintendent might have been able to address just a few of these challenges and succeed. Today, however, slipping on any one of them can lead to disaster. We noticed that in recruiting superintendents, many school boards still seem to focus on only a few key skills seen as necessary for their particular situations. For example, one district that was embarking on a new reform program required someone who could “break through” the union barriers and push on with their vision regardless of the entrenched opposition. It was also expected that such a person would not last long, given the history of the problems in the district. On the other hand, a district that had reached the implementation stage of a reform program required someone who could repair relationships and work with groups to “fine tune” the issues and make changes sustainable.

Still, for multiple reasons, most superintendents don’t last long. Some burn out, some are victims of the political process, and some are fired because of a “lack of progress.” The message that the superintendents in our program gave us was that it is very difficult to attend to all these issues at the same time. In the words of one superintendent, “It’s like being in a mine field. You don’t always know where the danger is. The attack could come from the press, or an angry parent, the union, or even the mayor. You are always trying to build relationships, but a single problem in just one school could bring you down.” One superintendent I interviewed talked about the difficulty of leading reform in his district:

*The moment I mentioned school reform, everyone got very upset. I got angry notes from teachers and administrators. Basically, I was told not to waste my time. The union president actually said to me that the mood was such that no one was going to take me seriously and if they just resisted long enough, I would go away like my predecessors. That’s the way teachers are. They say, ‘Here we go again, another reformer.’ To them it’s a joke. They know that if they wait long enough I’ll go away. So now I don’t even use the word ‘reform.’ I just do what I do, and hopefully when we put all the pieces together someone can say I’ve actually reformed the system. Time will tell if I succeed or not.*

This raises the question, Can educational systems be transformed? Sadly, there are more stories of failure than success of people who have tried to provide leadership on behalf of large-scale systemic change. But we can certainly learn from the success stories. Most of the superintendents in our program have displayed capable leadership in reforming their districts. It can be done, and there are people out there doing an extraordinary job. But it isn’t easy. What can make a difference is how the superintendent conceives his or her role, and how they understand what the process of “leading change” is really about.

In our Harvard leadership program we looked at change as a systemic process requiring multiple negotiations and accommodations with the various actors and constituents who were affiliated with the system. The French sociologist Michel Crozier explained that the process of change in complex systems is never a unilateral process of heroic leadership, but a communal process that is embedded in the values of the various factions:

*Change is not a question of deciding on a new structure, technique, or method, but rather the beginning of a process in which actions and reactions, negotiations and cooperation are implicit. It is not a matter of implementing the will of one individual, but rather of using the capacities of various groups associated with a complex system to cooperate in a new way on a common project.*

*Successful change is, therefore, not achieved by replacing an old model with a new one conceived in advance by supposedly wise heads. It is the result of a collective process which makes possible the mobilization and even the creation of resources. If we redefine the problems of planned change in this way, it becomes possible to bring out a dimension which seems to us fundamental to every process of change, whether planned or natural: we are speaking of learning, i.e. the discovery, creation and acquisition by the actors concerned, of new relational models, new modes of reasoning, and similar collective capacities. (Actors and Systems: The Politics of Collective Action. University of Chicago, 1980).*

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Change is a learning process that is facilitated by the leader as he or she prods people to confront and deal with the problematic realities of why the system is not performing up to its potential and what, where, and how it can be changed. It cannot be dictated, and cannot be planned according to how we have traditionally thought about planning. It is a highly creative and even risky process requiring an appreciation for systemic dynamics and the art of intervention to ensure that the right levers are pulled to get people’s attention, support, and engagement.

It is important to realize that all change produces some degree of distress as people are challenged to give up certain perspectives and behaviors that are no longer helpful or productive in furthering the objectives of the system. This distress should be embraced as healthy and necessary if adaptive work is to be facilitated. Change is never a linear process of simply creating a plan and following it through to completion in a straightforward and predictable way. On the contrary, when values, traditions, and power are at stake, change will inevitably produce heat. And that heat can drive certain factions, interest groups, and stakeholders to act in strange, defensive, and even subversive ways. But the heat can also be the energy source that ignites the creative fires needed to explore the deeper aspects of entrenched problems.

Since the heat associated with adaptive work is inevitable, the leadership challenge is to regulate it—turning the heat up or down as required to support problem-solving and adjustment processes. For the superintendent, he or she must consider what is it that people have to learn in order to produce the desired change; what is it that people have to give up and discard; and what is it that people need to understand and embrace if change is to be imbedded in the habits and practices of the people. They also need to consider how much distress the people can tolerate as they undergo a period of disorientation in their lives as they struggle with change. Without a certain level of distress, communities are unlikely to have the motivation to acknowledge underlying problems or be open to generating innovative solutions. But, if there is too much distress they likely will reject change and blame the superintendent for not making it an easier and more palatable exercise.

Leading reform is a daunting task, but it comes with the job of the contemporary superintendent. The job description of most urban superintendents demands that the superintendent be an agent of change who

can operate in turbulent and uncertain environments, and get results. The reality is that change is essential for progress. The fact that the modern world is changing at a rapid pace due to economic, social, and technological developments suggests that it is impossible for a school not to be affected in some way or other by these forces. The winds of change are ever present, and require leaders who can mobilize resources, gather opinions, promote debate, and generate learning so that change can be directed towards meaningful societal purposes. If this type of activity is minimal or even absent, then a local school, or the school district, is really no different from a boat without a rudder being tossed about on the stormy seas.

## WHAT ARE THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES FACING SUPERINTENDENTS?

From our work with the superintendents we have noted that the following challenges surfaced time and again. In our leadership program we have attempted to address these challenges. While the challenges are stated in my words, they capture the essence of the problems and opportunities superintendents face. These challenges fall into the following areas:

- 1 Bureaucratic and political concerns related to managing expectations and facilitating reforms
- 2 The challenge of building productive working relationships with multiple factions
- 3 Personal frustrations associated with lack of progress and constant attack and criticism
- 4 Managerial challenges related to planning, coordination, and execution of complex programs

We will now expand on each of these challenges.

### 1. Bureaucratic and Political Concerns

**Government and Bureaucracy:** Reform attempts are regularly thwarted by different levels of government and institutional bureaucracy that make excessively prescriptive demands of the superintendent and that are often inconsistent with the superintendent's agenda.

**Unions:** Unions can cooperate or impede reform. What they do often depends on the quality of the leadership provided by the superintendent and by the head of the union. The danger is that rather than focus on what is in the best interest of children, the players wage a battle that is ideologically driven and pertains to very narrow and parochial interests.

**Teachers:** Teachers do not automatically embrace new reform initiatives. One reason for this is that they have little trust or confidence in the superintendent to succeed in their agenda. Teachers have seen many reform-minded superintendents start with great promises but fail to deliver. Often the superintendent fails to engage and listen to the teachers and find out what they think should be done. They are often neglected in the reform process. Therefore, given that they are occasionally treated as "invisible," they may become cynical about change, and just bide their time until the superintendent leaves. Teachers are also tired of being scapegoated by politicians and the community for the lack of progress on improvements in test score results.

**Resource constraints:** A continuing funding shortfall throughout the nation has inevitably had an effect on the ability to provide competitive salaries, sound infrastructure, and new technologies to school systems. In the absence of adequate financial backing, bold promises quickly turn into hollow rhetoric that leaves many people frustrated, cynical, and disillusioned about educational change.

## 2. Building Productive Working Relationships

**Governors and Mayors:** Political authorities and elected officials regularly blame and scapegoat the superintendent in times of duress, leading the superintendent to feel betrayed, attacked, or undermined. Every politician seems to have an opinion about education and most are not afraid to use educational issues to curry favor with their constituents or to advance their agenda in some way that is deleterious to what the superintendent is trying to accomplish.

**School Boards:** It's not uncommon for school boards to overwhelm the superintendent with irresponsible grievances and parochial concerns that detract from the real work of education. One of the superintendents in our program explained that she spends 70 percent of her time attending to school board-related issues at the expense of doing other vital work such as developing her principals. In some cases, some school boards try to "run" the district and keep the superintendent on a "short leash" through micromanagement. The superintendents in such a predicament often feel constrained and impeded from doing what they were hired to do.

**Unions:** The union might openly attack or quietly undermine the superintendent's reform efforts. Either way, unions are often very suspicious of the superintendent's agenda, and fear that the superintendent is out to reduce the "hard won benefits and rights of teachers." The union generally has the interests of teachers in mind, but sometimes those interests are not consistent with the interests of sound educational practices.

**Parents:** Parents always want what's best for *their* child but regularly get caught up in emotional battles by virtue of their loyalty to a certain principal, teacher, school, or program. They also can be suspicious of a superintendent's agenda and worry that he or she will be gone within a year or so. A community might want good schools but often does not want to pay more taxes to fund school improvement. This places a greater burden on the superintendent and the school system to do more with less. A constant problem is to mobilize parents to be committed to supporting educational reform. There is always a small group of parents who show up time and again to meetings and programs, but in poor urban districts the challenge is to find ways to connect to parents (many of whom are single and working long hours) and enlist their support and participation.

**Media:** The press sometimes sensationalizes problems and makes it very difficult for superintendents to move forward with their agenda. There is a propensity for reporters to look for negative stories, which tend to be presented simplistically or sensationally and without adequate facts. The media, however, can be a partner in change by educating the community on the issues and problems and ensuring that problems are ripened and readied so that change can unfold with minimal attack or disruption.

### 3. Personal Frustrations of Survival

**Dealing with Competing Expectations:** Attempts to satisfy one group inevitably results in the superintendent coming under attack by another group. They are constantly violating someone or some group's expectations of what should be done. Superintendents often find themselves thinking that they "just can't win." The factional political fights in some districts are very ugly and serve as a major distraction to the process of educating children. Nevertheless, factional interests are a reality of a democratic system and superintendents must be able to operate effectively in such a milieu.

**Compromise of Personal Mission:** A profound sense of purpose and mission may have led the superintendent to take on the job, but they often feel disheartened because their vision is consistently compromised due to short-term crises that seem to repeatedly emerge and the political deals that must be constantly negotiated in order to simply "survive." As one superintendent explained, "I started with a dream and ended with a nightmare." Superintendents must figure out to keep their dream and vision alive and ensure that they do not succumb to excessive bouts of cynicism and despair.

**Excessive Justification:** The superintendents described a feeling of permanently being "on call" to the community, the school board, and the legislature to explain what is happening in each school, why results aren't better, and how are they going to improve things—fast. Added to this watchful number of eyes now is the federal government, with the No Child Left Behind Act. These levels of accountability can become exceptionally negative and constraining, particularly when accountability is politically motivated and not focused on what really matters in a school, or without a consideration for realistic time frames for change.

**The Burden of Responsibility:** The superintendent often becomes the point of blame for anything that goes wrong in the system. Rather than have the luxury of planning and managing an agenda, the superintendent is often more of a firefighter, moving from one fire to the next. Each fire is disruptive and takes the superintendent away from his or her core mission of enhancing school performance.

**Lack of Recognition:** Most superintendents are unsung heroes. When things go well, it is usually the mayor or principals and teachers who get the credit. The superintendents' dedication, effort, and commitment to their work is rarely acknowledged. But at the slightest mishap they are attacked and often vilified. Some of the superintendents in our program reported that many of the verbal and political attacks on them became personal—attacking their personality, work experience, private lives, and in some cases their family.

**Psychological and Physical Stress:** Given all of the above problems, many superintendents constantly feel stressed and emotionally drained. They work long hours, rarely take vacations, and are expected to show up at evening events such as parent meetings and basketball games. As one superintendent said, "I feel constantly tired, and, unfortunately, I get upset with my family very easily. The demands on me never end. I am responsible for all these children in the district, but I feel like I'm neglecting my own kids." At least one superintendent in our program has not taken a significant vacation in seven years.

#### 4. Managerial Challenges of Holding the System Together

**Running a Central Office:** Most superintendents aren't natural managers. They love education and they are experts in teaching and learning processes—but managing a bureaucracy is another thing. The challenges of managing a central office, keeping people aligned and motivated, and ensuring that plans are made and commitments followed through are difficult for many superintendents. They would much prefer to be out visiting schools and meeting with principals and teachers than having endless meetings with administrators and officials. Nevertheless, an efficient and effective central office is a key to their success.

**Strategic Planning:** Superintendents understand the need for planning, but the problem is that most are not in the job long enough to see their plans become a reality. Strategic plans, if they are to succeed, require the input and support of community and various political interests. Sometimes the superintendent does not want to involve the community but chooses to unilaterally impose their vision and strategic plans on it. These plans might be just what the community needs, but the community often is resistant when it feels it is being “told” what to do.

**Coordination:** A major challenge is to ensure that the development and implementation of all initiatives and reforms is coordinated and well thought through. Principals often complain of being overwhelmed by the directives coming out of the central office—something they see as perpetuating bureaucracy rather than helping kids learn. The poor coordination perpetuates the bureaucratic machinery and weighs down the system. The superintendent must be able to create a coordination and communication system to ensure that productive work (not bureaucratic work) gets done.

**Communication and Public Relations:** Most superintendents were never trained in public relations and dealing with the media, yet their job requires almost daily interaction with the press and the community. Managing the flow of information, getting the press on board, and communicating to multiple factions and groups are essential skills. The press can be a great supporter and help in the facilitation of the superintendent's agenda, or they can make progress almost impossible. The importance of public relations and “getting the message out there” is essential for success in a reform process. Many wonderful things happen in school systems, but no one ever hears about these things.

Each of these challenges makes it very difficult for a person to succeed in the role of superintendent. It is almost impossible to do everything that must be done with the quality and commitment needed to ensure change and sustainable results. Clearly, the kind of leadership required to address these many problems and opportunities, while being proactive and facilitating meaningful change, is beyond the current repertoire of the skills of most superintendents. Goodwill and educational expertise is insufficient. Problem-solving skills and good human-relations skills, while critical, are also insufficient. Political skills alone are insufficient. What's required to succeed?

This leads us to the next part of this paper and the following questions: What does leadership need to look like in order to address these demanding challenges? What are the skills, practices, and behaviors needed to effectively exercise leadership in the complex political environment that superintendents find themselves in? How can reform be designed and executed in a way that produces real and sustainable results?

## LEADERSHIP PRINCIPLES ADDRESSED BY THE HARVARD PROGRAM

Although wide ranging, the kind of problems that surface to the superintendent generally have a common characteristic—they have been unable to be resolved satisfactorily at lower levels, in the schools, or in other forums. Hence, they are neither straightforward nor open to quick and easy answers. In fact, they tend to be complex, systemic problems lacking in specificity and definition. They are messy situations of irresolution with many interconnecting parts. Issues based on race, inequality, and poverty are typical examples of these types of problems. Applying technical quick-fix solutions, while it may be politically expedient, may only exacerbate the situation.

This produces a dilemma for the superintendent. He or she is expected to be a “problem solver” and a leader in the popular sense of the word. But it is difficult to solve problems when they are ill-framed and connected with so many other political and social issues. Addressing these deeper issues requires a new approach to leadership—one that mobilizes people, factions, and stakeholders to do what Harvard professor Ronald Heifetz, in his seminal book *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, calls “adaptive work.” Adaptive work is the process of engaging tough issues in a way that leads to a broadening of perspectives, the shifting of values, the changing of behavior, and the accomplishment of sustainable progress.

In contrast to many “descriptive” leadership theories and notions that seem to explain what “great men” do and their respective traits and characteristics, our approach has been to present a normative model of leadership that focuses on how leadership can be used to solve real problems rather than simply get the people to “follow.” In other words, we did not wish to develop superintendents to be leaders in the traditional sense of the term—having a vision and a set of motivational techniques—but our intention has been to train them to get people working on the most difficult problematic realities that are imbedded in people’s values. Their job is primarily a political job, and, we felt, they needed to be trained to operate effectively in sophisticated political environments to focus and align groups and factions around the values and priorities that would progress the system. They need practical steps a leader might take when faced with threatening opposition, angry community members, critical journalists, and skeptical principals. They also need to learn how to be an agent of change who is forward thinking, can diagnose the dangers and obstacles on the path, and can build support networks to address those dangers and enact their reforms. They also needed to learn how to shepherd a community through the period of loss that accompanies change.

In this context, we developed a set of key leadership concepts, tools, and approaches that can guide superintendents in being a change leader and helping their communities do adaptive work. While there are many skills and competencies needed to be a successful superintendent, we chose these eight core concepts to serve as the backbone for our leadership program. We arrived at these principles based on our interviews and discussions with many educators and administrators, and on careful consideration of the challenges facing superintendents today.

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In considering these eight concepts we have not distinguished between which educational policies are superior but rather which leadership practices actually make a difference in increasing an educational system's capacity to deal with real issues. These are not definitive concepts that we wanted to impose on the superintendents, but provocative concepts designed to stimulate discussion and further exploration of the question "What must a superintendent do in order to succeed?"

These eight core concepts of the program are:

***1. Unbundling the Issues: Determining What to Address***

This concept involves distinguishing technical work from adaptive work, and getting clear on what are the big issues that will require leadership as contrasted with the straightforward application of expertise. One of the classic leadership errors in diagnosing challenges of adaptation is defining problems too narrowly, technically, or symptomatically. Adaptive work requires distinguishing unchanging conditions from workable problems and opportunities, and getting beneath the surface of issues to identify underlying causal dynamics. We helped the superintendents to develop a framework for diagnosing adaptive challenges and distinguishing technical from adaptive problems.

***2. Ripening an Issue: Building Readiness***

Ripening an issue is about building a readiness in the community to face the problem. It includes getting the group's attention on an issue long enough to see it as a vital concern and enrolling them in the process of attending to the problem. This includes framing the issue in different ways to see what the different factions resonate to; testing assumptions about the reasons for the problem; and working the issue over time and in different settings to build ownership and responsibility. The problem of ripening an issue exists for a superintendent who feels an unshared urgency about an issue and sets off to spread the urgency. With the superintendents we explored how they succeeded or failed to ripen issues—both at the national level, and at the community and school level—and investigated the contextual variables that determine how an issue ripens in a given situation and in distinct school districts.

***3. Regulating Disequilibrium and Managing Change***

This includes managing the tensions associated with change, factional politics, and resistant elements, and ensuring that people do not flee from the anxiety produced when systems move into a state of heightened disequilibrium when they undergo change. In our program so far, we have posited a variety of means to reduce untoward levels of disequilibrium, including the presence and exercise of authority (providing direction, protection, and order), and speaking to shared orienting values, common identifications, shared history. Yet this is a rudimentary list of levers. In different contexts, the means available to regulate distress will differ. Both generic and context-specific tools that make sense in diverse educational settings have to be richly identified and studied.

***4. The Art of Intervention: Getting Attention and Engagement***

This is about developing the skills to execute interventions that make the various factions and stakeholders in the community aware of the problems, face reality, and get mobilized to address the work of progress. All leadership work is done through a series of interventions. Interventions are actions (speaking, meeting, planning, orchestrating events, etc.) that impact the dynamics of the educational system

and the community, and get people facing some aspect of a problem so work can productively be addressed. Obviously, some interventions are likely to be more successful than others. We have worked with superintendents to examine what are the intervention strategies available to a superintendent, and how can they make more informed choices on when to employ a certain intervention, and what might be the likely consequences.

### ***5. Creating, Managing, and Resolving Conflict in the Name of Learning***

Using conflict and difference creatively and as a source of learning about people's values, fears, and aspirations to ensure a more effective adaptive response is a vital leadership ability. The leadership of adaptive work often requires the orchestration of multi-party conflict to ensure that competing notions of reality, differing aspirations, and unexpressed assumptions are surfaced and worked through in a collaborative spirit. Leaders need empirical and practical frameworks for the management of conflict that go beyond the two-party and coalition-building models upon which so much of the theory in the field of negotiation has been based. They need to understand the functions that leadership and authority serve in holding a multi-party system together, in maintaining its focus, drive, and resilience, and in generating adaptive change through the confrontation of differences.

### ***6. Diagnosing Work Avoidance Patterns***

This includes diagnosing whether a group is or is not doing the required work that supports progress. We know that change is supported by a real commitment to institutional and social learning. This is very hard to maintain when social systems are in a state of anxiety when undergoing change. People can become defensive, anxious, and resistant. This can be manifest in petty politicking and the refusal to engage tough issues, which are intentionally bypassed or driven underground. Certainly, educational systems have their own traditions for handling distress, conflict, or the experience of chaos when a system is in a state of flux. Some of these are highly productive, but some generate a denial of reality or a truncated polity in which the reality-testing of perspectives and values by multiple parties becomes squelched. Superintendents need to understand the diagnostic indicators to help distinguish in various contexts work avoidance patterns from the appropriate reduction of social disequilibrium. This is important as a strategy of pacing adaptive work, and also to develop strategies so that work avoidance dynamics do not displace the intentional work of progress.

### ***7. Partnering for Results***

Building coalitions and support structures to highlight issues, keep factions engaged, and ensure that problematic adaptive challenges are not thrown off the table is an important task of leadership. Responsible leadership strategy involves an assessment of whom to include in the process of problem solving and whom to exclude. In part, this decision will be based on a leader's own view of the issue, but this decision should be based on knowing who represents which piece of the problem and the solution, and which issue is ripe enough in the minds of a critical mass of relevant parties to be represented at the table. A decision on whom to include might also derive from the value of bringing in deviant voices to maintain the creative possibilities of the process, if one has a holding environment (i.e., an authority structure, credibility, and social capital) strong enough to sustain the stresses these voices generate. We have worked with superintendents to determine what principles can serve to define whom to include as events unfold. They have to do better than "include everybody," or "include only your supporters," or "include just those who can hurt you or help you."

## *8. Being a Lightning Rod: Taking the Heat When Doing Adaptive Work*

Invariably, when trying to exercise leadership on demanding political issues a superintendent will become a lightning rod and be the recipient of people’s anger, frustrations, or feelings of loss. Rather than taking it personally, learning how to use the attacks as a source of data and feedback on where the group is at is important for the superintendent. They cannot afford to “short-circuit” and engage in self-defeating behavior. The task of leadership is to successfully manage the attention being given them and redirect it to the issues. We need to study more the successes and failures of people who play this role of redirecting the group’s projections back onto the real work. Especially in this technological age in which the media can instantaneously focus overwhelming attention on an individual, we have to generate action principles for deflecting “sticky” attention from one’s own person back onto the questions and issues at stake.

It is important to remember that in our Superintendents Leadership Program we made no claim to have the definitive answer as to what is really going on in the field of education and how exactly the superintendent needs to operate to succeed. What we have provided is a framework for leadership on adaptive challenges in complex political environments.

The Program has taken place with the twelve participating superintendents, Kennedy School of Government faculty, and Harvard Graduate School of Education faculty. Together we have formed a community that has delved deeply into the prevailing paradigms of our respective disciplines, challenged some underlying assumptions, and begun to tease out useful and relevant ideas that pertain to leadership and reform in complex political settings. The program has been enormously successful. The response of the superintendents has been overwhelmingly positive. We have learned much about their role, their unique contexts, and the demands that they face. In turn, they have learned from us how to hone and refine their diagnostic capacities and how to better intervene into the community to get people to face these problems and adaptive challenges.

### **IMPORTANT TEACHING AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION**

Rather than produce definitive answers, this teaching-inquiry process for developing superintendents to be more skilled political operatives and to exercise effective leadership has led to further questions and concerns that might be pursued if we are to further help these men and woman deal with these significant challenges. In addition to many generic questions, there are a host of critical context-specific questions that need to be answered to inform the practice of leadership close to “where the rubber meets the road” for those who operate in difficult political environments. These questions and concerns have enormous implications for how we choose and develop superintendents and other people in political positions to exercise leadership on society’s most critical problems. Some of these issues are:

**Policy Contexts.** Leadership in any policy area requires strategies and tactics suited to that policy area. The act of leading might differ somewhat in educational settings, environmental concerns, health issues, or foreign policy. Each set of policy problems involves specific institutions, actors, factions, trends, and dynamics. Each set of problems may have a unique issue history and may contain different leverage points for leadership action. But there should also be some generalizable lessons that are relevant to leading in all contexts. For example, the following questions might help us to discover how better to lead in the realm of both policy and practice:

- 1 What distinguishes problems amenable to area expertise from adaptive challenges in any policy? How do we assess whether technical/expert work, adaptive work, or a combination of the two needs to be undertaken and engaged?
- 2 What are case examples of adaptive success and failure in educational reform and other policy domains where reform has succeeded?
- 3 What are leverage points for action? How has leadership with authority and without authority played a role in successful change in the past?
- 4 How can we identify ripening issues that are ready to be addressed? What are indicators of ripeness?
- 5 How can a leader ripen issues for which there is no urgency?
- 6 What holding environments (authority structures, social capital, norms, and values) might be used, created, or strengthened to contain the disequilibrium generated by the adaptive work associated with reform?
- 7 What are the typical patterns of response (productive and defensive) to disequilibrium in a policy context when people are faced with a tough adaptive challenge?
- 8 How can policy be designed, not only to solve problems in a technical sense, but also as a heuristic device to produce social learning and adaptation?

**Institutional Contexts.** Every institution has its own history with its own issues, habits, procedures, and arrangements. Leadership and authority relations in a religious institution will necessarily differ in key respects from leadership and authority relations in a business enterprise, legislature, advocacy group, or international organization. And leadership and authority in education has a particular institutional and historical context that must be appreciated and understood. To better understand how to exercise leadership in a particular institutional context we need to know:

- 1 How is progress made and thwarted on important issues, and how is it different from other institutional contexts?
- 2 What indicators of disequilibrium (conflict, chaos, or distress) can we use to assess when the level of productive engagement with tough issues is too low or too high, i.e., beneath the threshold of learning or overwhelming the institution's carrying capacity?
- 3 Leading people in a chaotic social system, as exists in many states and districts, may require as a primary task the construction of a holding environment—including a viable and trustworthy authority structure—to contain and manage the level of disequilibrium. How might educational institutions better provide a holding environment for sustaining progress on important challenges?
- 4 In an age when many people distrust authority, what modes of exercising authority can restore the capacity for trust? When would authoritarian leadership make sense? Who should display it? Under what circumstances is it appropriate or not appropriate to be authoritarian and demanding? When would the expression of a vision by the

authority figure make sense? What should be the ingredients of the vision? And, what should be the role and function of a vision in mobilizing people to face the reality of their predicament and move forward in addressing real issues?

- 5 If we are to evolve more realistic expectations of authority and thus better social contracts, we will need much greater understanding of the functions that authority systems serve in coordinating social life, as well as the pitfalls of our current expectations. What social functions, in addition to direction, protection, and order (orientation, conflict control, and norm maintenance), are a common part of the essential responsibilities of an authority figure such as a superintendent?
- 6 What enhances adaptive capacity in institutions—the capacity to meet an ongoing stream of adaptive challenges and reforms over time? What values, norms, and organizational designs generate adaptability? What kinds of processes can be created to ensure that multiple streams of adaptive challenges can be worked on?

**Cultural and Social Contexts.** There are many cultures and subcultures in any society that may require different modes, or at least different nuances of exercising leadership and employing authority. For example, in the United States the East Coast is different from the West Coast, and the Mississippi Delta is different from Montana. There are also significant differences in school districts, even within the same city. Large inner-city urban schools have a distinct set of challenges that are different from those of a suburban school in a wealthy neighborhood. These differences have implications for the diagnostic, strategic, tactical, and personal tasks of leadership. For example:

- 1 How, within different settings, do leaders create public spirit, shared commitment, and strong bonds of community?
- 2 What is the nature of the social contract, vis-à-vis authority relationships, in different settings?
- 3 What happens to authority figures when they violate the social contract or fail to meet group expectations?
- 4 How do women, minorities, and others outside the traditional power structure lead with and without authority in different settings?
- 5 How are women and minorities creating new modes of exercising authority as they take positions of responsibility?
- 6 How is multiparty conflict orchestrated successfully within different settings so that issues can be surfaced, learning occur, and values modified?
- 7 How are the modes of doing adaptive work different dependent on the context and setting? What are the levers available for intervention given these differences?

We believe we need not only a plethora of innovations and experiments in leadership education, but also heavy investment in capturing and disseminating lessons from these experiments. We need research on effective leadership education in the field of education, both for heterogeneous groups, in which case we

will be pressed toward generic perspectives, and more homogeneous groups, in which case we must account for the contextual needs of our students. We have to imagine that it is indeed not only possible to teach leadership, but imperative that through our research we discover and learn how to do it well. The Superintendents Leadership Program has been a part of that process.

## CONCLUSION

Over the past three years as we have worked with superintendents we have learned much about the challenges of leading change in educational systems. The participants have brought many of their own case studies to our sessions for dissection and exploration. It has been a fruitful educational experience to intensively inquire into the assumptions, action strategies, and consequences of their various ideas for reform. In working with the superintendents in our program for a sustained period of time, we have seen the manifestation of some courageous and talented leadership. We have also seen a few of them get into serious trouble along the way. We, along with them, continue to seek insight into why these “breakdowns” occurred and to explore what leadership might have looked like in their most challenging predicaments.

All agree that the aim of leadership is to create a system that truly focuses on the quality of the educational experience by addressing the political and social realities in which education takes place. Therefore, leadership is about prodding the various parts of the system to confront and address their role in perpetuating the problems that impede progress. In educational systems, progress equates with improved learning outcomes of children. But there are many actors, including parents, who are critical to the success of this work. In doing adaptive work, many people, not just children, need to learn new priorities, develop more appropriate values, and change their behaviors if schools are to succeed. The superintendent must exercise leadership by better diagnosing who needs to learn what in order to progress, and then orchestrate a process of discovery and adjustment by the various political actors and factions in the community to ensure that reality is faced, problems are attended to, and productive work gets done in a responsible manner. These challenges are great and the work of education is too important to neglect or to treat simply in a technical manner.

We have been impressed by the commitment and caliber of the superintendents we have worked with. The problem certainly does not seem to be one of commitment nor lack of knowledge about educational theory and practice. These are complex systemic and political problems requiring innovative and novel strategies to address. The twelve superintendents of education in our leadership program have done an amazing job in displaying creativity, courage, and prowess in exercising leadership on many critical issues in their respective communities. We have been heartened and inspired by their efforts.