

School Reform Strategies and Normative Expectations for Democratic Leadership in the Superintendency

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Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational
Administration, November 11-13, 2005
Nashville, TN

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The concept of democratic leadership emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century in response to the effects of social change on schools and to growing dissatisfaction with autocratic management. One of its most prominent advocates was John Dewey, an eminent philosopher who viewed scientific management's obsession with efficiency to be detrimental to a well-balanced social interest (Razik & Swanson, 2001). Democratic school administration was not practiced widely, however, until America had suffered a great economic depression circa 1930. After many successful businesses failed, classical theory and scientific management, the philosophical pillars of the Industrial Revolution, lost much of their glitter (Callahan, 1962; 1966). Seizing the moment, prominent education philosophers described the infusion of business values into public education as undemocratic. They contended that citizen control over public education had been eroded incrementally by superintendents who had pursued technical efficiency at the expense of liberty (Kowalski, 2006b). One of these activists, George Sylvester Counts (1932), called for reforms that would return political power to the community so that public schools could play a pivotal role in building a new social order.

Efforts to restore participatory democracy in school districts after the 1930s was spearheaded primarily by education professors such as Ernest Melby, a former dean of education at Northwestern University and New York University (Callahan, 1966). Melby (1955) believed that an infatuation with industrial management had led superintendents to become less reliant on their greatest resource—the community. He warned administrators about the dangers of insulating themselves from the public and urged superintendents instead to “release the creative capacities of individuals” and “mobilize the educational resources of communities” (p. 250). Moreover, oppressive administrators were thought to have a direct negative influence on organizational culture and an indirect effect on school productivity. More specifically, autocratic administrators were thought to have two detrimental effects on teachers: they would adopt the same behavior in dealing with students and they would be reluctant to express opinions concerning school improvement, even in areas where they possessed considerable knowledge (Razik & Swanson, 2001).

During most of the last century, the political face of democratic administration was not widely discussed, primarily because politics and professionalism were viewed as incompatible

concepts (Kowalski, 1995a; 2006b). Public education was generally viewed as a sacred trust that should be held above the political fray (Blumberg, 1985) and most practitioners regarded political activities as antithetical to professional behavior (Björk & Lindle, 2001; Kowalski, 1995a). In truth, however, politics have been and remain integral to democratic traditions. During the current quest for school reform, convictions that superintendents should never engage in political action have waned both because of more precise distinctions between democratic statesmanship and self-serving political behavior (e.g., Björk & Gurley, 2006), and because of the realities associated with pursuing school improvement at the local district level (e.g., Petersen & Barnett, 2006). Consider the following social and institutional conditions that promote power sharing and inclusive decision making:

1. Public schools must compete for scarce resources with other public agencies (King, Swanson, & Sweetland, 2003; Wirt & Kirst, 2001) and therefore, superintendents often find themselves lobbying or engaging in other forms of political persuasion.
2. As communities become more diverse, political tensions in local school districts escalate (Fowler, 2004; Hoy & Miskel, 2005) and therefore, superintendents often find themselves adjudicating inevitable conflict.
3. In many states, authority to raise fiscal resources still resides with forces outside the organizational boundaries of school districts (Odden & Picus, 2000) and therefore, superintendents must galvanize policymakers, employees, and other taxpayers in order to implement education initiatives (Howlett, 1993; Knezevich, 1984).
4. In an information-based society, stakeholders excluded from participating in critical decisions usually become alienated (Bauman, 1996) and therefore, superintendents must utilize inclusive approaches to visioning, planning, and policy development (Kowalski, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that school reform is one of the critical variables elevating democratic leadership to a normative standard for school superintendents. The more salient issues in this regard are listed in Table 1. Four of these factors—a renewed emphasis on liberty, teacher professionalism, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, and state specific

Table 1

Reform Related Factors Creating Normative Expectations for the Democratic Leadership

Factor	Example
State deregulation and directed autonomy	Moving the locus of reform to districts and schools
Proposed governance changes	Requiring site-based councils
Renewed spirit of liberty	Giving citizens greater power and authority
National reform initiatives	Enacting the No Child Left Behind
Teacher professionalism	Treating teachers as colleagues
Failed reforms	Lessening emphasis on political coercion
Required collective visioning and planning	Increasing community involvement
State standards and accountability	Involving the public in resolving critical issues
Pressures for equality	Emphasizing social justice and moral education
Political realities	Gaining community approval for change
Increased diversity in most districts	Resolving inevitable conflict

conditions—are described in this paper to demonstrate a nexus between school improvement and the perceived need for democratic leadership.

Renewed Emphasis on Liberty

The political aspects of policymaking are related to deeply-held values that have influenced public education in America from its very origin (Stout, Tallerico, & Scribner, 1994). Values are basically enduring beliefs about what is desirable (Razik & Swanson, 2001). Historically, education policy has been the product of constant interplay among three values: *equality*, *efficiency*, and *liberty* (Guthrie & Reed, 1991). King et al. (2003) identify three other values that have been given increasing attention over the past few decades: *adequacy*, *fraternity*, and *economic development*. Liberty refers to “the right to act as one chooses” (Swanson, 1989, p. 274); from a policy perspective, it usually promotes the decentralization of authority as a means to maximize citizen freedom (and hence political power) (Kowalski, 2003).

The simultaneous pursuit of social meta-values in the form of public policy has often produced political tensions. The most notable examples have included conflict between liberty and equality as demonstrated by more than 40 years of school finance litigation. Neither the court of public opinion nor state courts, however, have been willing to sacrifice one value in order to make another dominant in education policy (King et al., 2003). Consequently, major

reform policy often reflects compromises between centralization (favoring equality) and decentralization (favoring liberty) (Kowalski, 2003). As criticism of public elementary and secondary education increased in the early 1980s, for example, state government began assuming a more central role in shaping reform initiatives (Mazzoni, 1994). This approach was intended to ensure uniformity, debatably a motive linked to equality. The most common tactic was to force school districts to adhere to intensification mandates—policies that simply made educators to do more of what they were already doing (e.g., increased graduation requirements, lengthened school years, longer school days). This reform strategy essentially relegated superintendents to a managerial or enforcement role (Kowalski, 2006b) and produced fragmentation, a primary barrier to large-scale reform (Fullan, 2000). Many of these improvement initiatives were contradictory in nature (especially in relation to state versus local control), poorly implemented, and eventually abandoned (Orlich, 1989).

By 1990, many observers realized that political-coercive strategies would not produce their intended level of improvements. In part, they failed because they ignored three basic beliefs that should guide public education in a democracy:

1. A dedicated belief in the worth of the individual and the importance of the individual in participation and discussion regarding school life.
2. A belief in freedom, intelligence, and inquiry.
3. A conviction that projected designs plans, and solutions result from individuals pooling their intelligent efforts within communities. (Maxcy, 1995, p. 73)

Those studying the changing strategies underlying school reform in the 1990s (e.g., Bauman, 1996) reported that democratic processes reflected in shared visions, school councils, and shared decision making were replacing autocratic processes in which power elites mandated change during the 1990s (Bauman, 1996). Many of those who conduct research on superintendents (e.g., Björk & Gurley, 2006; Kowalski, 2005; Petersen & Barnett, 2006) concluded that this new strategy required superintendents who possessed political acuity and highly developed communication skills. These attributes had become increasingly essential in a political context in which community participation was necessary. Thus, superintendents no longer were mere implementers of national and state policy (St. John & Clements, 2004). Now, they were expected to facilitate discussions in which all members of a district's various publics were encouraged to state and then test their education values and beliefs (St. John & Clements, 2004). As

philosophical divisiveness and political polarization produce elevated levels disunity and dissatisfaction, the need for democratic superintendents who can implement a communicative view of school reform grows.

Teacher Professionalism

During the 1980s, students and educators were the primary change targets but in the 1990s, the focus had become the organizational dimensions of schools (Kowalski, 2003). More specifically, the intent was to improve school performance by restructuring essential institutional components. Newmann (1993) identified four pervasive characteristics of this process: improving student learning experiences, changing the professional lives of teachers, changing traditional governance structures, and increasing accountability for both administrators and teachers. Fullan (1999) and Sarason (1996) associated reculturing (i.e., to changing fundamental beliefs that influence behavior in traditional schools) with restructuring. Regardless of how school restructuring may be defined, the core issue is a reconceptualization of administrator and teacher roles (Bredeson, 1995).

Clearly then, empowerment is a critical element of school restructuring and this fact makes the relationship between reform and teacher professionalism axiomatic (Sergiovanni, 1992). Noting that empowerment was not the simple transfer of power from administrators to teachers, Starratt (1996) defined the concept as

...a process that involves mutual respect, dialogue, and invitation. It implies recognition that each person enjoys talents, competencies, and potentials that can be exercised in responsible and creative ways within the school setting to the benefit of children and youth. (p. 110)

Both in reality, administrators and teachers simultaneously face the public's demand that they be accountable to the community and the organizational demand that they provide expert knowledge to make critical decisions (Shedd & Bacharach, 1991). Many authors (e.g., Bauch & Goldring, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1987; Strike, 1993) have discussed the dynamics associated with this inherent conflict between participatory democracy and pedagogic professionalism, including relevance to modern-day reforms (e.g., Sykes, 1991; Zeichner, 1991). These tensions focus most directly on power and authority:

Democracy institutionalizes distrust. Professionalism relies on trust. Because we distrust our rulers, we have instituted a system of checks and balances to prevent any interest of office from amassing too much power. Because certain practices rest on expertise and knowledge not widely distributed in the populace, we trust professionals on their pledge to use such knowledge in the best interests of their clients. These two systems of preference formation, service delivery, and authority allocation appear fundamentally at odds with one another, and the great historical puzzle is how a strong form of professionalism flourished just in the world's greatest democracy. (Sykes, 1991, p. 137)

Tensions between democracy and professionalism usually are compromised, with the degree of authority and trust granted by society varying from profession to profession. In the case of school administration and teaching, practitioners have been allowed to claim professionalism but they have been granted relatively little trust and freedom away from their immediate workplace.

The attention given to teacher empowerment specifically and to teacher professionalism generally stems from a widely known fact; whereas teachers have had little influence on school-wide decisions, they have had near complete influence over activities in their classrooms (Short & Greer, 1997). This condition presents both philosophical and political problems. With respect to the former, excluding teachers from institutional decisions is incompatible with circumstances found in established professions (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 1994; Kowalski, 1995b). For example, physicians routinely influence important policy decisions for the hospitals in which they practice. In addition to being excluded from participating in important institutional decisions, teachers have been isolated (Zielinski & Hoy, 1983), uninformed with respect to policy development (Kowalski, 2003), and treated as targets rather than authors of change initiatives (St. John & Clements, 2004). Professionalism connotes independence as well as competence; accordingly, allowing them to make leadership decisions (i.e., decisions pertaining to *what* should be done) is as pertinent to the district and school levels as it is to the classroom level (Murphy, 1995).

Politically, the instrumental view of school reform—treating teachers as instruments for enforcing decisions made by others—presents an obvious change barrier (St. John & Clements, 2004). Both collectively (e.g., via teacher unions) and individually, teachers can resist and even scuttle school improvement initiatives they reject. Those studying failed efforts to improve

schools (e.g., Duke, 2004; Hall & Hord, 2001) appropriately concluded that the best designed reforms could be and often were attenuated by teachers who did not believe in them. In this vein, Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) advised that no matter how “noble, sophisticated, or enlightened proposals for change may be, they come to nothing if teachers don’t adopt them in their classrooms and if they don’t translate them into effective classroom practice” (p. 13).

Until recently, two primary approaches have been used to change schools: the use of power and coercion and the introduction of new ideas through staff development. The former approach has never really worked well in public education, because reliance on laws, regulations, and mandates flies in the face of conventional wisdom (Finn, 1991). Providing close supervision over teachers to ensure strict compliance with change initiatives is simply not feasible. The latter approach usually failed if the new ideas presented via staff development did not comply with the prevailing culture of the teacher’s school. After studying public schools from approximately 1970 to the mid-1990s, Sarason (1996) concluded that no substantive modifications had occurred during this period in either governance or in educator roles. He deduced that inertia was primarily attributable to a prevailing negative institutional culture that prompted principals and teachers to view education reform as a predictable recurring expression of dissatisfaction that eventually dissipated if ignored. This culture also socialized most teachers to avoid direct responsibility for the quality of their practice; as an example, they accepted the premise that some students would fail regardless of their interventions.

In various forms, a nexus between teacher professionalism and democratic administration has been addressed in the literature for more than 50 years. School reform activities have merely served to revive and publicize this important connection. Many respected scholars (e.g., Fullan, 1999; Strarratt, 1996) have recognized that neither refusing to share power nor completely surrendering it is an effective alternative for superintendents who want to improve schools. Applying this wisdom to the school district administration, superintendents should neither dictate change nor should they relegate the process entirely to others (Kowalski, 2006b). Rather, they should lead and facilitate inclusive processes leading to visions and school improvement objectives.

Although the focus here is the effects of teacher professionalism in the context of reform on democratic leadership styles, it is important to note that tension between professionalism and community participation is an equally cogent issue. Applying participatory democracy to school

reform within local communities brings educators face-to-face with parents and other citizens and determining parameters of authority in such situation is obviously problematic (Zeichner, 1991). Experiences with school-based councils remind us that empowering parents and other citizens can reduce rather than increase the autonomy of educators (Bauch & Goldring, 1998). Consequently, promoting teacher professionalism requires skilled democratic leadership in the community as well as in schools.

No Child Left Behind

In recent years enthusiasm among state and national leaders for high-stakes testing has become a national preoccupation and educational trend. Federally and state supported initiatives, like charter schools, vouchers, parental choice, high stakes testing, and decentralization, provoke substantive questions in the minds of many about the future of public education and those who staff and lead public schools (Anthes, 2002; Kowalski, 2006b). In particular, the recently revised Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (also known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)) has presented notable challenges for superintendents and spawned questions about the leadership role they should assume in this political mêlée (Petersen & Young, 2004).

NCLB represents the most comprehensive change to ESEA since its enactment in 1965. Perhaps more importantly, this national reform effort represents a major shift in thinking in the United States about education and more specifically about administrative roles in school districts. Although there are several underlying initiatives in this reform measure, four require a substantive change in the professional life and decision-making parameters of superintendents. They are: (a) assessment and accountability, (b) parental choice, (c) resource flexibility, and (d) quality teachers. While each of these areas represents challenges and opportunities for district leaders, the focus here is on parental choice.

District leaders are keenly aware of the positive influence parental and community involvement has on improving the quality of schooling (Griffith, 1996) as well as increasing the academic achievement of children (Peterson, 1989; Xiato, 2001). NCLB also recognizes the importance of parents and offers parents of children in low-performing schools a range of educational options.

. . . parents with children in schools that fail to meet state standards for at least two consecutive years may transfer their children to a better-performing public school, including a public charter school, within their district. If they do so, the district must provide transportation, using Title I funds if necessary. Students from low-income families in schools that fail to meet state standards for at least three years are eligible to receive supplemental educational services—including tutoring, after-school services, and summer school. In addition, the NCLB Act provides increased support to parents, educators, and communities to create new charter schools. (Hickok, 2002, p. xii)

NCLB requires districts to notify parents “promptly” of eligible students attending schools identified for improvement, corrective action, or restructuring of their option to transfer their child to a better public school or to obtain supplemental educational services (Hickok, 2002). Offering parents’ data and choices, on the surface, appears an important step in enabling parents to make wise decisions about their children’s education. However, due to a variety of factors, from access to information to a parent’s ability to understand the information or data they have been given, creates a new expectation of district leaders (Young, 2002). In this landscape of community political dynamics, NCLB is attempting to strengthen the linkages with communities, parents and schools. As these networks develop and intensify community members and parents demand higher levels of participation (Björk, Kowalski & Young, 2006). Superintendents find themselves in more frequent contact with elected officials, community interest groups, school board members, the media, and parents. (2006). Coupled with the frequency of contact, is a heightened level of complexity in the role the superintendent must play. As Johnson (1996) states, “The issue for superintendents is not whether to engage in politics but ‘what kind of politics prevail here.’” (p.155). For district superintendents increased parental choice, whether utilized or not, impacts their ability to lead. At a minimum, increased efforts and resources will have to be re-allocated toward parental outreach and education. This expansion of more rigorous and visible external accountability elevates the need of the superintendent to be more democratic in their style of leadership while potentially having a profound influence on educational policy (Education Commission of the States, 2005). Superintendents must successfully involve parents by creating various and creative formal and informal avenues for parent, business, and community participation (Petersen & Barnett, 2006). Sustained district wide improvement as

envisioned by NCLB is not possible without a strong connection across the levels of the school organization and to initiate such reform successfully, democratic leadership of the superintendent must be aligned with the changing nature of schools and schooling (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2006).

State Specific Conditions (Declining Enrollment in California)

Organizations like the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) have examined the impact of declining enrollment on a national level for several years. Although many districts across the country are experiencing this trend, the focus here is on declining enrollment in California and on the consequences of this trend on the leadership behavior of district superintendents. Although the population of California continues to grow in many geographic areas, other parts of the state are experiencing declining student enrollments. As of 2002, over 400 districts reported that they were losing students (California Basic Educational Data System [CBEDS], 2003-04). Further, 20 of the state's 48 counties reported a loss of population.

Declining enrollments are a product of significant demographic shifts caused most frequently by economic conditions (e.g., land/resource changes and housing costs) and welfare reform (Thomas & French, 2003). A loss of students translates into a loss of revenue. As a result, some districts are unable to fully engage in reform initiatives intended to enhance teaching capacity and increase student achievement. Thomas and French (2003) in a report for the California County Superintendents Educational Services Association (CCSESA) reported numerous problems as the result of declining enrollment. Examples included (a) high rates of governing board member turnover, (b) a loss of local control in the sense that community members did not want to serve on the board, (c) an inability to recruit and retain qualified staff, and (d) high rates of administrator turnover. The authors then stated that "the net effect is a degree of district paralysis with respect to long-term planning, standards-based quality control, and overall effectiveness" (p.2). The state's weak economy and a flat K-12 state enrollment projection for the next several years also exacerbate the issue and place superintendents in untenable situations (Tyler & Kibby, 2004).

What has occurred as a result of these external pressures is a more transparent and inclusive leadership orientation of district leaders. For example, many school districts, especially small and rural districts, have put together district or school site committees to address issues ranging

from budget development to bus routes. In most cases the primary focus of these committees is centered around the development of a coalition of key stakeholders as district partners in areas like budget development, information processing, community outreach and decision-making (Tyler & Kibby, 2004). Aside from focusing on purely economic strategies for increasing enrollment and decreasing expenditures, other approaches undertaken by districts experiencing declining enrollment have included pooling the resources of two or more small districts and sharing a superintendent (e.g., Shasta County).

Clearly strategies to deal with declining enrollments deployed by superintendents have varied, but most of them have entailed efforts to cultivate inclusive decision-making environments so that stakeholders would have opportunities to contribute their “collective wisdom” to school improvement efforts. Scholars writing about democratic decision making have emphasized the importance of respecting different points of view (Truman, 1971) and varied group interests (Mawhinney, 2001). In light declining enrollments, dwindling resources, and heightened accountability, pressures on superintendents to move toward democratic leadership styles have mounted. The effected administrators find themselves in a complex web of political, social, and economic expectations—competing perspectives that reflect an array of organizational and community priorities affecting the type and scope of issues that are addressed (Petersen & Williams, 2005). As superintendents find themselves responding to a multiplicity of individuals and groups in this decentralized and transformative process, they are required to possess expert pedagogical knowledge; as well as a highly developed set of communication skills and most importantly a great deal of political savvy.

Conclusion

The philosopher Thomas Hobbes indicated that the fundamental problem of social order deals with the question of how to enhance the prospects of realizing mutual gain. Public education, once viewed as one of the most important resources in America’s global prominence, has become fragmented and polarized (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), and educational leaders have born the brunt of these new challenges and national perceptions. The current political climate emphasizes accountability and transparency and it has had a residual influence on the leadership practices of district superintendents (Kowalski, 2006b, Petersen & Young, 2004). As Callahan (1964) reminds us, “Sometimes the major thrust for change [of the superintendent’s role] has

come from outside the profession and sometimes within. Actually the changes have always been a result of both forces—it is simply a matter of which is strongest at a particular period” (p. 3).

This paper described four contemporary issues to demonstrate that school reform is a critical variable contributing to the elevation of democratic leadership as a normative standard for superintendents. As the discussion of these examples reveals, the concept and practice of democratic leadership have emerged in response to the effects of the realities of practice. More than two decades of attempted reforms have taught us two important lessons: meaningful improvement is most likely at the individual school and district levels (Duke, 2004; Fullan, 2000); reform is most likely if it is supported politically and economically by local residents (Kowalski, 2003).

In the case of democratic leadership, philosophy and politics have been inextricably linked; however, school reform factors promoting democratic leadership unmistakably have been largely political. Consequently, this leadership style is unlikely to be embraced long-term unless it is deemed philosophically acceptable. History reveals that after enjoying a previous period of popularity, primarily during the 1930s and 1940s, democratic leadership fell out of favor. Critics, including many practitioners, and school board members, judged the concept to be overly idealistic and generally ineffective in relation to practical problems of practice (Kowalski, 2006a). The lesson is quite clear. Superintendents who adopt more democratic styles in response to political pressures usually revert to their former behavior once those forces dissipate. Therefore, discussions of democratic leadership, and especially those in the professional literature, need to address both the political and philosophical underpinnings of this concept.

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