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Lessons from British Columbia: leaders get the job done despite the odds

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ABSTRACT *The micropolitics of top-down reform mandates in British Columbia, imposed on Surrey SD No. 36, one of the largest, most complex and highly politicized school districts in western Canada form the context for my reflections on leadership in these e-mail exchanges. I describe some of the strategies used by some schools to mediate provincial expectations while working simultaneously and interdependently to create rich learning opportunities for students. Successful school-related reform depends upon creating a professional culture where collaborative structures enable the organization for learning to be the collective responsibility of teachers. The concept of the self-renewing school is used to examine the importance of context and relevance in addressing the micropolitics surrounding teachers engagement in the reform. I outline critical elements of the role of the principal managing micropolitics. I conclude by arguing that no matter what the constraints are, effective leaders will find a way to get the job done despite the odds. Their experiences offer important lessons from micropolitical work for improving macro reform activity.*

Hi! I'm Fred Renihan, Superintendent and CEO of School District No. 36, British Columbia, Canada. I have 28 years experience spanning all levels of Educational Administration in the public education system. Former positions include Superintendent; Dean and Professor, Brandon University; Assistant Deputy Minister and Deputy Minister of Education; Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction; Regional Director of Education; and School Principal. I retain a strong research interest in the areas of school effectiveness and improvement, policy-making in education, and educational leadership.

The Surrey school district is one of the largest, most complex and highly politicized school districts in Western Canada. Curricula for our schools are provincially mandated and tightly prescribed in terms of required learning outcomes for students. Accountability is high. The working conditions of teachers are contractually mediated and jealously guarded by a powerful and militant teacher union, a fact that brings it into frequent conflict with management and trustees. The Board, which is elected on political lines, and therefore inextricably enmeshed in party

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politics, is in constant danger of losing sight of what the district is all about namely, keeping student learning firmly at the centre.

Educational reform in British Columbia, Canada, is about external and internal imperatives. External reform efforts have become synonymous with large-scale policy direction characterized by multiple innovations in curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and parental and community involvement. All are 'top-down' inspirations.

Internal reform efforts reflect attempts by some schools and school districts to enhance learning opportunities for students and how, within the context of local limitations and possibilities, school professionals find ways to mediate provincial expectations while working simultaneously and interdependently to create rich learning opportunities for students. This is the arena of micropolitical action in which teachers strive to keep abreast of rapid change while coping with the burden of trying to meet multiple and competing demands from a variety of audiences.

Enough has been written about the failure of large-scale educational reform to give us reasons for some serious cynicism with respect to the top-down models that have served us so poorly thus far. In my experiences as assistant deputy minister of curriculum and evaluation, as dean of an education faculty and more recently as superintendent of a large urban district, I have become convinced that central to successful school-related reform, is the concept of a professional culture wherein the values of people in the school are key to the possibility of meaningful change; wherein organisation for learning is the collective responsibility of teachers; and, wherein recognized complexity demands structures that are collaborative. I believe that, in such environments, the changing needs of students require teachers who are also life-long learners.

In defining effectiveness as a multidimensional phenomenon, Rosenholtz (1989) advocated a more expansive definition of school success, one that would explore the dynamics of the school as a social organisation to better cast light on how such places really work. Such a notion strikes a resonant chord concerning the problematic matter of the portability of school reform efforts and drives the heart of the restructuring literature which advocates the need to examine, from a cultural perspective, the structure and context within which each school operates in order to determine how positive change is effected.

The foregoing point implicitly recognizes the self-renewing potential of schools and underscores my firm belief that the school is, as Goodlad has suggested, 'the optimal unit for enduring an successful educational change ... with its pupils, teachers, principals—those who live there every day as primary participants' (1975: 175). Implicit also, is the notion that self-renewing schools have cultures of adaptability, an openness to ideas from elsewhere and, most important, a realization that improvement efforts come to very little if teachers are not inclined to adopt them.

The examination of two conditions present very large considerations in the support of intended reform efforts. The first is context. This includes the educational environment in which innovation happens; the personal dispositions and professional skills of the actors involved; their values, attitudes, and relationships with one another and how these conspire to synergistically create optimal circum-

stances for student success. It is within such microcosms that reforms either fail or flourish. We need to be mindful, therefore, of the respective ecologies in which they are engendered. And we need to study these ecologies in order to understand and respond and respond intelligently. The second condition has to do with relevance. By this I mean the incentives which motivate teachers' work in order to be convinced that reform efforts are worthwhile. Stated another way, why should teachers bother to go the extra mile? What is in it for them? These are sentiments that I have expressed to me every day.

I believe that a great dissonance exists between the agendas of politicians and policy-makers and the interests and abilities of our educators in the trenches to respond. Simply put, there is a severe dislocation between the intentions of policy-makers for educational improvement and the experiences of teachers in the classrooms of our schools.

The good news, however, is that no matter how we conspire to hamper the efforts of teachers to work diligently in the interests of student learning and development, there are always those who will overcome the constraints and achieve excellence despite the odds. It is these cases (and we have lots of them) that hold the key to successful educational reform. Such cases provide valuable lessons for 'bottom-up' reform and argue strongly for the study of micropolitics as a viable platform for the practice of leadership in reforming schools.

I have read with interest the contributions to date and am struck by two things:

- The manner in which large scale reform efforts (macro level activity) get translated (or fail to get translated) into practice in our schools.
- The issue of context and how specific local circumstances mediate how well reform efforts are implemented.

As I indicated, I work in a district in which militant union activity is the norm. As you might appreciate, the teachers' contract determines what is done and how it is done in our schools. How teachers are hired; how staff development is resourced; how the instructional day is scheduled; how special needs students are supported; how the curriculum is taught and tested; and, how staff meetings are conducted are all matters that are tightly prescribed in terms of specific articles in the collective agreement. These are fiercely protected by union sentinels.

Before I came to my present district, I had formed some understandings about instructional leadership, understandings which I accepted as given and assumed to be fixed. These understandings did not come in some kind of conceptual vacuum, but derived instead from the literature and research associated with educational leadership and which included the following:

- that the principal has a pivotal role in the recruitment and hiring of staff and that this activity establishes, in large measure, the principals ability to shape a strong culture and a powerful vision for the school;
- that the principal is a central actor in collaboratively developing and shaping a staff development program to achieve agreed upon goals;

- that the principal has the scope and authority to shape curricular goals and that this is a prime leadership responsibility; and
- that the principal, in order to be effective, has to have access to the resources necessary to achieve curricular and instructional objectives.

In my district (because of the constraints imposed by the collective agreement) none of the above assumptions hold. One would think that, in these circumstances, the task of providing educational leadership would be downright impossible, that all one could expect principals to do would be to provide a maintenance function, to mind the store as it were.

Such is not the case. Most of the principals in my district are providing stellar quality instructional leadership. How they do this is quite frankly beyond my capacity to fully understand. Some things, however, are patently clear. In terms of staffing, some administrators tamper openly with the recruitment process, bribing, coaxing, pleading with some teachers while dissuading and discouraging others. By such strategies the negative effects of the collective agreement are effectively ameliorated.

In terms of staff development activity, some administrators engage in elaborate efforts to win the staff over and persuade them to use collectively bargained professional development funds to work toward school wide initiatives that the staff and administration have jointly identified as a focus for activity. Others use funds that have been accessed from elsewhere and redirect them to professional development activity designed to pursue an agenda that the principal has been instrumental in initiating. In instructional and curricular terms, the most effective principals find ways to focus the attention of staff on initiatives that they consider fundamental to student growth and development. They do this by sometimes blatantly ignoring the mandates of the agreement in aligning staff with instructional programs, or by 'seeking forgiveness afterward' rather than working from the constraining bonds of 'prior approval'.

I am not suggesting that such leadership responses do not find expression in leadership activity in other schools and school districts. Indeed, I think that any school-based leader worth his or her salt will be involved in this sort of activity on an ongoing basis. The point I want to make is this: no matter what the constraints are, effective leaders will find a way to get the job done despite the odds. Furthermore, they will find ways to do it very well. However, the strategies they employ may not necessarily be found in current theory on educational leadership. Perhaps this provides the best argument for the application of the micropolitical lens because it is in this sense that the 'experiences' of the protagonists in reform efforts can be adjudicated on the anvil of whether the macro-level 'intentions' have been met. Perhaps by examining the experiences of those charged with implementing mandated reform, important lessons from the micropolitical world may be learned for the betterment of macro level reform activity.

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