

The Individual School and Its Principal:

Key Setting and Key Person

in Educational Leadership

THE ARTICLES in this issue of *Educational Leadership* discuss the individual school as a setting for educational leadership, some factors related to the principal as a leadership person, and some pressing problems faced by schools and principals today. This lead article first presents an argument to support the thesis that individual schools, over any other organizational unit, are the natural settings for initiating educational change, and then goes on to identify the concerns that must be encompassed by the principal in assuming his leadership role.

The Setting

The individual classroom, the natural spot for improving daily instructional practices, is not the best organizing center for effecting far-reaching educational revision. Even the most promising young teachers lose their creativeness and, chameleon-like, take on the drab coloring of an uninspiring school setting. Many mediocre prospects, on the other hand, blossom in a setting where the total school staff, under effective leadership, is developing an exciting program. Shifting to consider a total system, one is discouraged by the number of complex

structures from which emerge handsome courses of studies but few lasting changes among schools involved. Is it probable that, in adding contributing factors in any accomplished educational change, the individual school unit is the common denominator?

The individual school unit has an organismic wholeness. It is educationally complete, in the sense that it has all it needs to function as an adequate agent of change. The individual school has a body politic made up of parents and pupils; a professional team of teachers with a designated leader; the necessary accoutrements such as buildings, equipment, and materials. These are the essential ingredients for establishing a tradition (in the best sense of that word), a past against which to appraise the present and plan the future. These are the essential ingredients, too, for creating an institutional personality that conditions the present and sets a course for the future.

The organismic wholeness of the individual school does not negate the added usefulness of an educational structure embracing several schools as a total structure. But it does delimit *what* such an aggregate can accomplish and *how* it can bring about changes

appropriate to its structure. An elaborate framework for curriculum change, for example, that is not an extension of the individual schools within the system is doomed to failure. Top-level control of a sort that suppresses individual school initiative ultimately destroys both itself and any will to change existing in the local units. The focal point for educational change is the individual school. Therefore, efforts directed toward change will be effective to the degree that they preserve the unity and foster the initiative of individual schools.

Community structure supports the organismic wholeness that is the individual school. Lay people view the school their children attend as "the school." Professional educators are more inclined to view "the school" as a societal institution, embracing all the educational units to be found in America. Change to the citizen means doing something about the pressing problems of the local school. He may be interested in the national or regional scene for comparative purposes but strong, personal involvement comes when the focus is upon the school his child attends.

Since the neighborhood school ordinarily is the only educational door immediately open to the patron, it is at the level of the individual school that lay people should be involved. And since lay people must be involved, by right and not the whim of school

people, it follows that the individual school is the promising place to initiate, carry through and evaluate any process of basic educational change. Thus, the gap between community concern for education and school reflection of the concern is kept constantly at a minimum.

The Person

The second and rather obvious assumption of this paper is that the principal is the key figure in any process of educational change. He is at the helm of the most promising unit for change. It is discouraging to note that the principal has been so frequently bypassed—by consultants, curriculum coordinators, superintendents, and others—either because those involved did not know any better or because the principal had a formidable reputation for blocking previous efforts at change.

The principal is affected by a variety of forces and conditions, whether or not he attempts to do anything about them. He is likely to be a successful leader to the degree he brings these forces and conditions within his "span of control"—that is, the degree to which he encompasses or in some way accounts for them in his operation. The significant factors to be encompassed within the principal's span of control are these: self, direction, other people, the change process, certain cultural realities, pacing and timing.

Self-Understanding

There are many temptations to role-play in positions of educational leadership. The principal, for example, may come to derive, quite unconsciously, deep satisfactions from the role

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of benevolent father, blocker, expediter, trouble-shooter, philosopher or efficiency expert. Ultimately, the drive for satisfactions from the role may become so compelling that it becomes the prime motivating force in his life.

Needed as insurance against such distortion is a mirror in which reality may be viewed in relation to some concept of "normality." Self-understanding and a view of normality often may be gained or retained through:

1. The establishment of an honest and forthright relationship with colleagues;

2. The portrayal—through staged role playing, sociodrama and psychodrama—of various kinds of ego-satisfying devices, sometimes resorted to by principals;

3. Psychotherapy, when the reality perceptions of the individual have progressed to an advanced stage of distortion.

From insights gained, the principal is able to become more effective as a leader through:

1. Determining personal strengths and weaknesses;

2. Determining and accounting for those weaknesses that probably are not modifiable;

3. Carrying out a plan of improvement in those areas essential to providing the kind of leadership the principal sees as being desirable and realistic for him.

A Sense of Direction

There are exponents of leadership who claim that leaders lead on the basis of the authority invested in them. They know where to take the group by virtue of the status positions they hold.

The writer rejects this concept of leadership.

By contrast, there is another concept of leadership, endorsed here, that views leaders in the role of seeking group consensus, a consensus that should be much more than mere compromise. Unfortunately, much malpractice has been conducted under the guise of this concept of leadership. Such a concept does not excuse the designated leader for refusing to act before "all the data" are in. All the data never will be in. Nor is it an excuse for going to the group with decisions that are merely ramifications of a policy framework already established.

The effective leader has a sense of direction that is his own; his own in that he has made his own synthesis of the thoughtful wishes of the group. This means that channels of communication with parents, with children and with teachers must be kept open. On a larger scale, the effective school principal has a grasp of the over-all purposes of education in a democracy and has translated these somewhat abstract concepts into a personal sense of direction that guides daily action. A principal without such a sense of direction is indecisive in daily activity; he fails to inspire confidence among those who associate with him. An essential aspect of his span of control is missing.

Other People in the Span of Control

The principal's span of control must embrace two levels of concern for people. The first is a general one. He must seek to understand people—their drives, the personal needs that must be satisfied, and the variety of biases and vested interests that enter into their de-

mands. He then approaches his leadership task with full knowledge that so long as people make up the educational enterprise, it never will be possible to pre-stock a supply of ready-made decisions. There always will be dislocations, dissatisfactions, upheaval and protest. Furthermore, the dislocations will not delay until the principal is rested, ready or temperamentally adjusted to them. If a person always must be tying things up in neat packages, he had better stay away from a position of educational leadership or expect to be chronically unhappy.

On a more direct level, the principal's span of control encompasses understanding of the particular humans who go to make up his daily life. He must refrain from "smacking down" the most belligerent who usually is most in need of his help. He must learn to relax in the company of more able colleagues, knowing that these are the people upon whom his own strength depends. He must seek to foster leadership among others as an essential aspect of insuring continuity in the process of educational change.

The effective educational leader, then, is a student of human personality. He may choose to ignore people. In doing so, however, he does not escape people. His span of control is incomplete and, consequently, his effectiveness is reduced to the degree that he fails to embrace concern for people.

The Change Process

The effective school principal includes understanding of the process of change in his span of control. We know relatively little about what causes teachers actually to change their prac-

tices. But we have a few guidelines derived from experience and experimentation that suggest desirable conditions for effecting change.¹ For example, sound educational leadership: (a) includes in decision-making representation from all those likely to be affected by the consequences of that decision; (b) initiates change through problems significant to those seeking to improve their practices; (c) seeks to identify an hierarchy of significance among educational issues and problems.

These are rather obvious guidelines for the school principal. But adherence to them in practice is demanding; it is easy to "postpone" the group activities implied until "there is more time." Or, they may be shrugged off as appropriate only for "indecisive and ineffective people" who really don't know the action that is called for.

The principal may choose to ignore whatever evidence we have to guide the process of educational change. But he cannot escape the consequences. His leadership effectiveness is reduced through failure to acquaint himself with this aspect of leadership as well as through inadequate use of what he knows.

Knowledge of Cultural Realities

It is exasperating to hear some principals brush off what appear to them to be less immediate concerns with the excuse that they are "practical school

¹ See, for example, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, *Instructional Leadership in Small Schools*. Washington: the Association, 1951; Gordon N. Mackenzie, Stephen M. Corey, and Associates, *Instructional Leadership*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1954.

men." They are implying, apparently, that they are competent in meeting administrative demands as they arise. But they are also implying, unwittingly, that these demands may be dealt with out of context so far as the cultural setting of the school is concerned.

The school is a social institution, an instrument of the people. Without some understanding of cultural reality and the role of public education within this reality, the principal is more likely to make decisions that lie beyond his jurisdiction, that actually run counter to the best interests of society, and that violate the legal framework within which schools must operate.

Most principals are required to make decisions that reflect insight into such fundamental considerations as:

1. The legal framework governing his relationship to the board of education, the parents and children;

2. The lines of demarcation between church and state that affect the school's stand on religious issues;

3. The responsibility of the individual states for the conduct of education and the relations of decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States to state assumption of that responsibility.

These are only three of the broad, cultural considerations affecting the daily decisions of the "practical school man," whether or not he is aware of them. The effective school leader must encompass these, too, in his span of control.

Timing and Pacing

Considering their importance to the school principal, timing and pacing have been given relatively little atten-

on in educational literature. They are elusive concepts. Some people say that timing and pacing are instinctive in the good leader. The writer believes they are educable. He believes, furthermore, that good timing and good pacing are significant traits of the effective leader.

Good timing results from knowing when to initiate an action. Good pacing results from knowing how fast to move forward with an action.

Many excellent educational ideas have come to naught because action was taken at the wrong time of day, on the wrong day, in the wrong year, or even in the wrong century. Principals have come back from summer workshops stimulated to make significant educational changes. Then, exasperated because little happened, they have condemned the ideas instead of their own failure to recognize and prepare for the readiness of those to be affected.

Good timing and good pacing demonstrate the success of the educational leader in encompassing all other significant factors in his span of control. His timing and pacing are good because he has insight into himself, understands people, has some sense of where he and education are going, makes intelligent appraisals of the cultural setting, and is aware of the conditions under which change is most likely to be effected.

Most of the articles that follow deal with considerations that should lie within the principal's span of control. In so doing, they elaborate upon our conception of the span of control to be developed by those who would become effective leaders in individual schools, the significant settings for educational change.

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