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# Do We Really Need "Leadership"?

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*Picture a school without a principal — would it sink? Or would the teachers find ways to run their own school, in accordance with purely educational rationales?*

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The literature of school reform, indeed, the literature of education itself, is filled with calls for better leadership, stronger leadership, more responsible leadership. But are we sure we need leadership of any kind? Are we sure that leadership itself and the cult of personal leadership are not in large measure the problem with public education in the United States today?

These are startling questions for some people. How could one question the importance of leadership? And yet, there is a point in questioning received wisdom. Business tells us that in the stock market, for example, when everyone is quite agreed about the prospects for a particular company or industry, it may well be time to look elsewhere or to sell short. So also in our own field, the very unanimity of opinion about the necessity of leadership may be sufficient reason to examine it with a skeptical eye, or, perhaps, to invest in something else.

Educational leadership can be said to be embodied in the office of the principal. The "effective school literature" is virtually a paean to the virtues of the principal as "strong" leader. Therefore, the school itself is a likely

first focus for our inquiry. The issue may be clarified if we describe two typical schools, the descriptions simplified and exaggerated to make a point. These may serve as models to allow us to see certain of our assumptions about leadership more clearly.

## Middleville Elementary

Our first school is a K-6 school in, say, Middleville, U.S.A.. Middleville Elementary has one or two teachers for each grade, three or four special education teachers, a part-time librarian, a school secretary, and a part-time nurse. All these are women. There are also a principal, two custodians, and a gardener. These are all men. The teachers, librarian, and the nurse all have college degrees. The special education teachers, the librarian, and one or two regular teachers have advanced degrees. The principal also has an advanced degree. The custodians and the gardener do not have college degrees. The principal has the highest salary in the school, followed by two of the older teachers, the custodians, then the nurse, the librarian, the younger teachers, and the gardener, in that order. The principal, secretary, and

nurse have telephones in their offices. The teachers do not.

The teachers spend all day in their classrooms, teaching the students in accordance with a standardized district curriculum, testing them from time to time with standardized district and state tests. The principal works in his office, supervising the teachers and the other staff. He orders textbooks and materials, reads memoranda from the central office, writes memoranda to the central office, hires teachers and staff, represents the school to the community. He is, he says, responsible for the school. If the budget is awry, he is accountable. If a child or adult is injured through negligence, he is accountable. If there is an emergency, he is expected to take action.

(But if some of the children do not learn what they need to learn, he is not held accountable. That is, his career is not affected. The problem is studied. Or perhaps it is simply expected and not seen as a problem at all.)

Now, it is a common assumption that the most prestigious, most highly paid individuals in an organization are prestigious and highly paid because they do the most important work. It is less commonly noticed that the argument can run the other way, that work done by the most prestigious person in a group is *therefore* seen as the most important and thus is most highly rewarded. Thus, in industry, for example, the Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Corporation is said to be unusual in that it rewards its scientists as well — or nearly as well — as it rewards its financial managers. The former do work that can be easily

confused with low status manual labor; the latter engage in activities traditionally associated with high status career patterns. And yet the corporation depends for its very existence on its scientists. It is odd that it is considered exceptional that it pays them accordingly.

The exception here is the proof of the rule. The *Challenger* disaster showed how in normal circumstances, lower-status and lower-paid experts can be almost casually overruled by people with a talent for meetings, reports, and bureaucratic intrigue.

Another strand of argument here is about gender. The principal's work — men's work — at Middleville Elementary School is more important than the teachers' work — women's work — as evidenced by the pay differentials, by the working conditions, by the fact that they work for him. The teachers at Middleville Elementary School work by teaching children; the principal does not. The teachers are in classrooms that often look something like rooms in a home. The principal is in an office. The teachers spend their day talking with children. The principal spends his talking with adults. He wears a suit.

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He must appear to the children as the archetypal middle-class father — putting on his suit every day, going to the office, sitting at his desk, while the "wives" watch the children.

Although there has been some progress of late in certain circumstances, notably academic life and the not-for-profit sector, the school is often the scene par excellence in which the conventional drama of the most prestigious individuals being male plays out. And it is in the schools, after all, that children learn the gender-determined division of labor that will pertain to their own lives. The children at Middleville Elementary School observe that they work under the guidance of female teachers, but that these women all work for a man, who can interrupt their classes at will, who is the arbiter of discipline, who is the boss. A girl might wonder about this. But, of course, it seems natural enough.

At Middleville Elementary, hierarchy is also determined by historical structures. It is said that the Pennsylvania Railroad, at the time the model of managerial modernity, was organized with stationmasters every few miles along the line, at the distance required by the relatively low power of telegraphic signals of the day. The stationmasters reported to superiors events on their section of the line. And these superiors reported to their superiors. This was simply a manifestation of mid-19th-century information technology, but soon enough it became a model for managerial structures. They, too, became pyramidal.

It seems natural now to us that the organization of work should be hierarchical. Other forms seem unnatural; they need to prove their efficacy. All this is over-determined, particularly in our schools, by considerations of gender and by the history of our

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## **The principal's work—men's work—at Middleville Elementary School is more important than the teachers' work—women's work.**

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formative institutions. Once we have school districts, as opposed to simply having schools, then we feel the need for the pyramidal, hierarchical system of communication and control that we see everywhere about us: in the military, in the government, in business. The principal is the stationmaster of the school district; an inhabitant of the first layer of management. He is not necessarily an educator.

The principal is the natural analogue to the local store manager, to the first lieutenant, to the postmaster, to the bishop. But the platoon is fairly sure it can get along without that young college fellow; the whole point of the Reformation was the extraneous nature of the Church's hierarchy.

Why can't the school get along without the principal?

### **Middleville High School**

There are 2,000 students at Middleville High School, 120 teachers, 12 department heads, 3 assistant principals, 4 counselors, 50 paraprofessionals — cooks, gardeners, security guards, janitors — and half a dozen pyramidal structures culminating at the common apex of the principalship.

The principal at Middleville High

School is a strong leader, an ex-coach with graduate credits in administration, a man who keeps order both in the corridors and at the games. He is a respected, an integral, member of the community. This is typical, is it not? The high school principal is a representative man of his community. It is nearly part of the job description.

"All our high school principals are good old boys," they say in a large

## When the principal, Mr. Johnson, left in midyear, the teachers began to manage the school themselves.

Southern school district, "especially Mary Sue" — the only woman among them. When asked to list their duties, the high school principals of that district easily listed 50 or 60 items of plant management — little, if anything, involving the education of children. It would be eccentric in that district, in most districts, for a high school principal to participate in faculty seminars, to take a sabbatical to study literature or mathematics, to exercise *educational* leadership, as there is no traditional place for such activities, no reward structure to encourage them, no collegial support for them.

High school principals are second-layer administrators, the peers of urban postmasters, police chiefs, captains of great ships. They usually have more in common with their colleagues in parallel bureaucratic structures than they do with kinder-

garten teachers or chemistry teachers, or graduate students in "the subject areas." As with their peers in other bureaucracies, they are at once the group from which higher administrators are chosen and the constituency of those administrators. As with department chairs and deans at a university, as with senators and governors, so here the lines of loyalty are strong. A district superintendent can be seen as the creature of his high school principals. They knew him before, and they are secure in their power.

And it is this power, the very pressures and complications of leadership, that is one of the fundamental reasons for the existence of the typical high school, its structure and size. No one can seriously claim that the sheer size of the average 2,000-student high school improves the quality of education. Yet, the heroic, "strong" public high school principal is necessary if the huge bureaucracy of Middleville High School is to function normally.

And the immense complexity of Middleville High School is necessary if there is to be employment for such men.

### Middleville Elementary Transformed

Let us go back down the street to the quiet of Middleville Elementary School, where something unusual has just happened. The principal, Mr. Johnson, has left in mid-year to take a job as an insurance salesman. Because the Board of Education was preoccupied with a coaching scandal at the high school, it has not filled his position. The school secretary, Sally Reynolds, has continued filing attendance reports and the like, as she always has, but has taken to posting central office memoranda on the bulletin board in the teachers' lounge

rather than putting them in the principal's in-basket.

The teachers have formed what they call the "Busy Work Committee" to deal with such administrative matters. They have also formed curriculum, special education, research, and budget committees. The kindergarten, 1st-, and 2nd-grade teachers have designed an ungraded early primary unit that follows a developmentally appropriate curriculum tailored to the abilities of each student. The special education teachers have mainstreamed their students and are spending most of their time in the early primary unit, as their research shows that with proper support at that age, most referred students can leave special education by 3rd grade. (Some of the 4th and 5th grade teachers are uncertain about this strategy. They are carefully observing the progress of the special education children in their rooms in order to collect data on the effects of this policy.)

When a budget allocation for basal readers arrived, the Curriculum Committee recommended to the staff that the money be spent on real books instead. The teachers voted to do this, and the central office didn't notice. (There was a search under way for a new superintendent at the time. No one was concerned with these odd events at an elementary school.) Some parents joined a group of teachers in developing a performance assessment system of accountability that the parents understood better than test scores and report cards.

One of the teachers taught herself to use a computer database program, and others relieved her of teaching duties for an hour or two a day so that information about their students could be made properly accessible for the first time. Standardized test scores did not tell them what they wanted to know

and were not presented in ways that helped them teach better. The teachers know that timely, reliable, and valid data information is the very lifeblood of program evaluation. They want their programs to be the best possible and have decided to subject them to continuous evaluation.

Teachers thematized the upper grade science curriculum and combined it with a writing across the curriculum initiative. And, just to take care of those very few children who from time to time benefit from being "sent to the office" to calm down, the nurse brought in a huge old tabby cat for them to hold.

The children call the tabby "Mr. Johnson."

There actually are such elementary schools scattered here and there about the country. They do not run into problems because of a lack of personalized leadership. One in a wealthy suburban district has just eight teachers (and a cat). Another serves a poor, ethnically diverse group of over 600 students. It has more than 50 faculty members (but no cat). They both seem stable enough. Their students are learning well. And yet, when schools like these are

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mentioned, central office people — state department of education people — object, often citing "accountability." There must be a principal, they say, someone who is accountable.

This is a rather odd argument.

For who is actually held accountable for the education of children in this country? New York City has a thousand principals, but for many years about as many were relieved of their responsibilities because of a failure to educate the children in their

care as might have been expected to have been struck by subway trains. It was virtually a chance

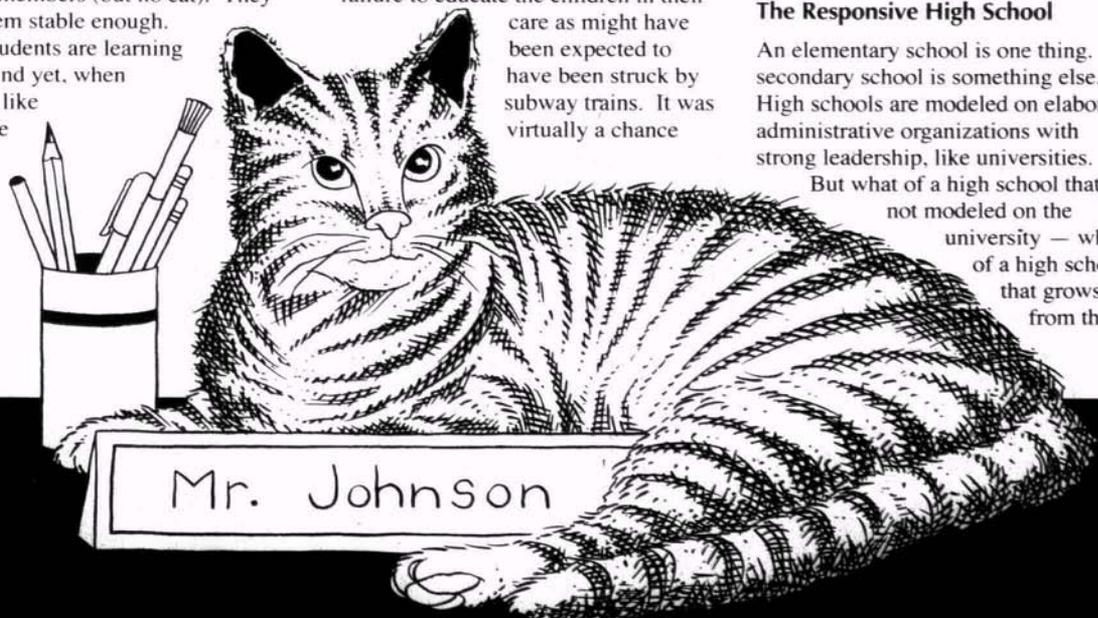
occurrence. And New York, at least in this matter, is typical.

There are very few places in this country where a principal's career is hurt if the children entrusted to him do not learn. One problem with the "accountability" argument, then, is simple: principals are often *not* accountable. Another is its implicit assumption that accountability must be individual. In corporate law, accountability and liability are well established as concepts affecting groups. It is not, in theory, more difficult to hold the staff of Middleville Elementary School accountable than it would have been to hold Mr. Johnson accountable. And the staff of Middleville Elementary School welcomes that accountability. They want their children to learn. They are proud when their children learn more than socioeconomically based predictions said they would. They think it only right to be held accountable for this — and to be rewarded if they help their students more than might be expected.

### The Responsive High School

An elementary school is one thing. A secondary school is something else. High schools are modeled on elaborate administrative organizations with strong leadership, like universities.

But what of a high school that is not modeled on the university — what of a high school that grows from the



needs and goals of its students and their society rather than from the requirements of an adult career pattern? We do not have to look far for examples of small secondary schools: independent schools, alternative schools, schools sponsored by value groups of one sort or another. Some of these have exemplary leaders. Others have more routine headmasters. But these schools need not rationalize their decision to employ headmasters on the grounds that the institution's size demands it. The choice of their leaders is an educational decision.

We could elaborate a model of a non-hierarchical high school to match our pleasant utopian elementary

school. It would be learner-centered. Teachers would continually invent the curriculum. Administration would not be more important than education. But our society is a complex function of many interlocking institutions and most of these, if not all, also believe in leadership. It is unlikely that an institution as central to the preservation of society as schooling would be allowed to reject our traditional cult of personal leadership.

This critique of schools, of the institution of the principalship and its context in traditions of gender and bureaucracy, is not meant to apply universally; it does not apply to larger entities — the superintendents of large districts, for example, are rational

parts of these structures. We are talking about schools. The current wave of school reform is about making school decisions purely in accordance with educational rationales. The relationship between teachers and learners should be cherished and made as productive as possible. If we ground our decisions in this educational purpose, we might yet find ourselves in need of educational leadership.

Or we might simply need a few more old tabby cats. □

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## Charting a Course: *Social Studies for the 21st Century*

The National Commission on Social Studies in the Schools has released the Curriculum Task Force report, *Charting a Course: Social Studies for the 21st Century*. The Report proposes the first comprehensive revision of the social studies curriculum in 55 years.

The report recommends 12 years of social studies instruction for the schools, a history-geography matrix interwoven with the social sciences, and a three-year course in United States and world history combined.

*Charting a Course: Social Studies for the 21st Century* is available from NCSS for \$7.00 per copy plus \$2.50 postage and handling charges for all orders under \$20.00. Include 10% postage and handling for all orders over \$20.00. A 20% discount for bulk orders of ten or more copies is available.

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