

Old School Meets New School Unsettling Times at Freedom Junior–Senior High

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Abstract:

This article is a case study designed to challenge the beliefs, values, and ideology of graduate students in educational leadership preparation programs regarding social justice and democratic education. This case is designed to assist students in developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to navigate the micropolitical environments that exist in learning communities. This case navigates the multiple sociocultural and political issues a superintendent might experience regarding demographic and cultural change. The case is multilayered and can be used in courses for the principalship and/or superintendency, as well as courses in the foundations of education and leadership.

Keywords: educational leadership; instructional leadership; equity

Article:

Case Narrative Overview—The Community

Belton Independent School District (BISD) is located in the town of Beltonville which happens to be 70 miles from a major urban center in the Southeastern part of the United States. The city of Beltonville continues to undergo demographic change. The city has increased from 25,000 residents to more than 185,000 residents within the past 15 years and has experienced a significant increase in its immigrant population, particularly within the Hispanic and Middle Eastern communities. Affordable housing is becoming more prevalent in the town of Beltonville, as well as a new proliferation of government-subsidized housing.

The BISD consists of four elementary schools, two middle schools, one junior–senior high school, one comprehensive high school, and one early college program housed at Beltonville Community and Technical College.

Belton Junior–Senior high school merged into one school 3 years ago. Both schools are located geographically on the same site.

The citizens of Belton support their public schools via local property taxes.

A school tax levy has not passed within the last 5 years because of the loss of several textile-based manufacturing jobs and the closing of one of the big three auto makers' plants located in the northeast section of Beltonville. Given the economic downturn over the past 5 years and shift in demographics, the parent community continues to remain very active. In its earlier history, the BISD was recognized both statewide and nationally for its outstanding athletic and academic programs. The district has not been recognized for the past 3 years, and many believe it is due to the town's changing demographics. The mayor and town council is concerned regarding how this may affect attracting local businesses to the town of Beltonville and has called on the school board for changes.

The Belton Independent School Board is comprised of seven members. Five members are European American to include three men and two women. One board member is an African American male and the other is a Hispanic female. All members of the board have maintained their residents and businesses within the Belton community for more than 20 years. The board members decided to name an “outsider” as the superintendent,

believing this would provide a platform for a renewed commitment to the district's recently adopted vision, "Striving, Achieving, Excelling: 100% of Belton students at/or above grade level by 2010." At his or her appointment, the student reader was reminded that his or her goal as the new superintendent was to bring Freedom Junior–Senior High School and the BISD to national prominence.

Superintendent

Prior to the student reader's appointment as superintendent, the district was led by Dr. Frederick Tyson. Under his leadership, BISD experienced 15 years of great academic and athletic growth. He was considered Belton's greatest superintendent and one of the state's most progressive educators. He was at the forefront of social justice and championed the causes of equality and equity for all. He was responsible for hiring Dr. Victoria Page, the state's principal of the year back to BISD where she began her career. He did so because she embodied the very ideas he championed.

Prior to her returning, Dr. Page was principal extraordinaire at Starmount High School, located 30 miles east of BISD. She gained a national reputation for her commitment to education and for leading one of the nation's top high schools. Under her leadership, Starmount High received the U.S. Department of Education's Presidential High School of Excellence award.

Also during this time, under the direction of Dr. Tyson, the school board passed the following Discrimination-Free Zone Policy:

It is the policy of the BISD to maintain a learning environment that is free from harassment, bullying, and discrimination. This includes, but is not limited to, harassment, bullying, and discrimination based on an individual's real or perceived race, color, sex, religion, creed, political belief, age, national origin, linguistic and language differences, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, socioeconomic status, height, weight, physical characteristics, marital status, parental status, or disability. The Board prohibits any and all forms of harassment because of those differences.

It shall be a violation of this policy for any student, teacher, administrator, or other school personnel to harass, bully, or discriminate against any person based on any of the differences listed above. It shall also be a violation of this policy for any teacher, administrator, or other school personnel to tolerate such harassment, bullying, or discrimination of any person by a student, teacher, administrator, other school personnel, or by any third parties subject to supervision and control of the BISD (Guilford County Schools, 2006).

Many members within the district's communities viewed these acts by Dr. Tyson as legacy builders. Dr. Tyson retired after 35 years in the field of education and relocated to the Pacific Northwest. However, prior to his departure he lobbied the school board to name Dr. Page as Belton's next superintendent.

Principal

Dr. Page began her teaching career at Freedom Junior–Senior High School and has served in various teaching and administrative positions in neighboring school districts for the past 20 years. She has spent the last 4 years as the principal and just recently announced her plans to leave at the end of this school term to become the superintendent of a neighboring school district. The pressures of serving as the principal of Freedom were beginning to show, and it had nothing to do with the school and the students. Dr. Page believes after providing stability for the past 3 years it is time for her to retire. She has recommended Mr. T. Javier Cruz for the principalship. Mr. Cruz has served as a biology teacher and girl's varsity soccer coach at Freedom. He is now completing his fourth year as assistant principal at Freedom. Dr. Page believes Mr. Cruz provides agency for all students as a transformative leader and is an advocate for social justice.

Table 1
Percentage of Student Body by Race/Ethnicity

White	25%
African American	23%
Hispanic	20%
Lebanese	15%
Palestinian	13%
American Indian, Asian, and Multiracial	4%

Assistant Principal

For the past 8 years, Mr. Cruz, known to the students as “Coach TJ,” has been a Freedom faculty member. He is originally from the Dominican Republic and speaks Spanish, French, and English fluently. Mr. Cruz was adopted when he was 11 years old by two professors on research in the Dominican Republic. He became a US citizen on his 18th birthday. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in biology from an Ivy League school and decided to be a teacher instead of a doctor. He received his Masters of Arts in school administration from a major research university in the Midwest and moved to Belton when his parents retired from higher education.

Table 2
Percentage of Student Population Enrolled in Special Programs

LEP	32%
AG	12%
Title one remedial reading	55%
EC (special education)	28%

Note: LEP = limited English proficiency; AG = academically gifted; EC = exceptional children.

Mr. Cruz started teaching at Freedom when the demographics began to change. He taught biology for 4 years and coached the girl’s varsity soccer team to three state championships. Mr. Cruz is widely known by members of the Hispanic community as “El Professor.” He is considered a local hero after the news media videotaped him bringing about a truce in one of the most violent gang wars in Belton to date. He gave up coaching to become the assistant principal 4 years ago because he wanted to make a difference. Mr. Cruz is currently enrolled in a PhD program at the local state university that emphasizes educational leadership and social justice.

The Issues

Demographics. Freedom is comprised of 1,725 students in Grades 7 through 12 and 82 faculty and staff members (see Tables 1 & 3 for percentages of student body and faculty/staff by race and/or ethnicity and Table 2 for percentage of students enrolled in special programs). According to federal poverty level income guidelines, 68% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. The administrative team consists of the principal, assistant principal, three guidance counselors, and a dean of students for each grade level. There are 55 teachers providing traditional instruction for Freedom; 35% of them have been placed on action plans to improve their performance over the past 3 years.

There are 65 educators, which include teachers, administrators, and counselors.

There are 17 support staff members, to include secretarial, custodial, and instructional support (see Table 4 for percentage of classified staff by race/ethnicity).

Table 3
Percentage of Certified Faculty by Race/Ethnicity

White	80%
African Americans	10%
Hispanic	6%
Other (Asian, American Indian)	4%

Table 4
Percentage of Classified Staff by Race/Ethnicity

White	75%
African Americans	20%
Hispanic	5%

Table 5
Testing Data per Grade Level in the Core Areas

Grade	Reading (%)	Math (%)	Science (%)	Civics (%)	Writing (%)
Grade 7	30	43	21	29	11
Grade 8	47	59	33	42	27
Grade 9	20	31	44	15	29
Grade 10	67	51	78	81	49
Grade 11	52	45	61	58	72
Grade 12	73	68	55	83	46

The students like the majority of youth today identify with the latest music genre, more specifically Hip Hop, the latest fashions, more specifically Hip Hop gear, and the latest form of communication including Apple iPods and cellular phones.

Testing data. When it comes to academics, Freedom has not met adequate yearly progress (AYP) under the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act for the past 2 years, and, according to data from the State Department of Education (SDE), Freedom did not reach 85% mastery as set by the state in the core academic areas: reading, math, science, civics, and writing (see Table 5 for testing data per grade level in the core areas).

Freedom has become “the problem school” or “the ghetto” according to members of the community. At the last school board meeting, parents voiced their concerns regarding rumors that Freedom was going to be closed at the end of the academic year because students had not met the state testing requirements in reading, math, science, civics, or writing. Many parents want to know who will replace Dr. Page as the principal of Freedom.

It has been rumored that Freedom is in its current academic situation because the former superintendent and board members could not agree on instructional resources, and many of the board members lobbied to fully support the early college program at Beltonville Community and Technical College. The Hispanic community

has begun a campaign to express their support for Mr. Cruz. They believe he has the ability to unify the various fragmented student and parent communities of Freedom, Dr. Page concurs.

Cultural wars. Currently there are two Hispanic and two African American gangs located in Beltonville, and Mr. Cruz has served as a mediator and gang liaison for those students at Freedom who are members of the Latin Gangs. Dr. Page is aware of this and applauds the efforts of Mr. Cruz. Dr. Page has asked a group of African American pastors of the local churches to work with the two African American gangs, but very little has come about. The Black churches in Beltonville have been very supportive in mentoring Freedom students over the years but are at a loss for how to deal with the gangs.

Also with the present global conflict in the Middle East, the Lebanese and Palestinian students are fighting at least 3 times a week. The students continue to say their civil rights are being violated by “the Zionists.” They are not allowed to pray during the day and feel that this is an attack on Islam and their religious freedom. Dr. Page, because of her commitment to the rights of students and their first amendment, on several occasions provided a classroom that points toward Mecca to allow the students to pray; however, many faculty members complain that this disrupts the instructional day.

Student social networking Internet site. Megan Hudson, a senior and star forward on the girl’s soccer, happens to have one of the most popular social networking Internet sites at Freedom. A cloudy video appeared on Megan’s home page that has the entire town of Beltonville talking. The video is not clear however—it appears to be Mr. Cruz with Scott Page, Dr. Page’s son who happens to be a civil rights attorney and also the attorney for BISD. It is speculated the video clip is from a Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, and Transgendered (GLBT) Pride parade held in Washington, DC. Many of the students do not believe its “Coach TJ” on the video. Neither Dr. Page nor Mr. Cruz has made any comments. The parents of the students of Freedom are divided along racial and ethnic lines regarding the video. Some are calling for Mr. Cruz’s resignation whereas some others are calling for him to be named the principal of Freedom. The local media has shown the video on the evening news and justified doing so by claiming the rights to the video were sold to them by Mr. and Mrs. Taylor Hudson, the parents of Megan Hudson who currently serve as the co-presidents of the Freedom, PTSA. It is rumored that the video clip was sold for \$10,000.

Teaching Notes

Freedom Conversation: Issues for Reflection and Application

This case takes a fresh look at educational leadership, and the qualities of democratic educational leadership, in an age when the democratic promise of public education is “at risk” of being abandoned, forgotten, and emptied of meaning (Carlson & Gause, 2007). It navigates the multiple sociocultural and political issues a superintendent and/or principal might experience regarding demographic and cultural change. It is designed to assist students in developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to navigate the micropolitical environments that exist in learning communities. It is multilayered and can be used in courses for the principalship, community relations, policy, ethics, and/or the superintendency, as well as courses in the foundations of education and leadership.

The United States is now more racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse than ever. Urbanization and immigration are key contributors to population growth and shifts, and the Southeast is a significant part of this change. North Carolina has the fastest growing Latino population in the nation (Johnson, 2002; Kitchen, 2004), as well as growing amounts of Asians and African Americans. In recent years, many school districts across the southeastern part of the United States have experienced a surge of students who have limited English skills. Educators are scrambling to determine how to serve different types of students and families given demographic shifts, while many families are in new places trying to adjust to unfamiliar school systems.

Educational researchers are increasingly acknowledging the need to improve the practice of school leaders to meet the needs of underserved student communities (Brunner, 2000; Cambron-McCabe & Harvey, 1997; Cordeiro, 1999; Dantley, 2003; Furman & Merz, 1996; Grogan, 1999; Koschoreck, 1999; Larson & Ovando,

2001; Marshall, 1997; Parker & Shapiro, 1992; Skrla, Reyes, & Scheurich, 2000). Educational leadership preparation programs across the United States are experiencing a realignment of its curriculum; however what we teach is still insufficient to adequately prepare school leaders and administrators to work in this politically complex and multicultural learning environment (Lopez, 2003; Parker & Shapiro, 1992; Young & Laible, 2000).

This case should be used to challenge graduate students in educational leadership preparation programs' beliefs, values, and ideology regarding social justice and democratic education. Students in leadership preparation programs should be concerned with the technical aspects of school administration, as well as creating meaningful social justice-oriented learning communities which speaks to the promise of democracy.

Carlson and Gause (2007) asserts,

In its most radical terms this promise has been that public education can provide the basis for an informed, engaged citizenry, fully capable of their own self-governance, and armed with forms of critical consciousness that allow them to question the commonsense beliefs embedded in political speech and popular culture texts. Beyond this, the democratic promise of public education has been about "leveling the playing field" so that people are not held back, disadvantaged, or discriminated against by class, gender, race, sexual orientation, or other markers of difference and identity. This requires that public education be at the forefront in fighting entrenched systems of domination and oppression, and the institutional structures and commonsense beliefs that support them. (p. ix)

To teach, learn, and lead democratically requires the individual to engage in problem-posing and critiquing taken-for-granted narratives of power and privilege. Critical change occurs with significant self-sacrifice, potential alienation/rejection, and costly consequences. As educators, we must do justice to the larger social/public responsibility of our positions, and we must exercise courage in making educational changes for social justice (Marshall & Oliva, 2006).

Reflective Case Questions

Facilitating a Vision of Learning

Questions under Set #1 as applied to the case are linked to Standard 1 as developed by the Interstate Licensure School Standard Council (ISSLC) stating:

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a school or district vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 1996, p. 10)

1. What qualities do superintendents need to reimagine schools for the 21st century?
2. How is positional authority and democratic leadership represented?
3. As superintendent, how would you implement the district's vision?
4. As superintendent, how would you communicate a vision of learning for all students within the district and community?
5. What are the major conflicts within the organizational culture of Belton School District?
6. If you were the superintendent, how would you negotiate the various subcultures present in your school district?

Instructional Leadership: Advocacy/Agency

Questions under Set #2 as applied to the case are linked to Standard 2 as developed by the ISSLC stating:

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth. (CCSSO, 1996, p. 12)

1. How are the values of equity and social justice, democracy, caring, and meaningful learning reflected (or denied) in the culture of Freedom?
2. What measures could the superintendent use to assess the culture and climate of the schools and/or district?
3. What initiatives would you implement at Freedom high school to address the needs of the faculty and students regarding academic success?

Community Relations

Questions under Set #3 as applied to the case are linked to Standard 4 as developed by the ISSLC stating:

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources. (CCSSO, 1996, p. 16)

1. What are the responsibilities of the superintendent/principal in collaborating with families and community members in the development of a meaningful learning community?
2. If you were the superintendent/principal, what course of action would you take to respond to the diverse community of the school/district?
3. How might you capitalize on the diversity of the school community to improve school programs and the needs of the students?
4. What role does the parent community play in the development of a successful school environment?

Cultural Context: Micropolitical Dimensions of Leadership

Questions under Set #4 as applied to the case are linked to Standard 6 as developed by the ISSLC stating:

A school administrator is an educational leader who has the knowledge and skills to promote the success of all students by understanding and responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural contexts. (CCSSO, 1996, p. 20)

1. How are the values of equity, democracy, and social justice reflected in Belton school district and/or Freedom?
2. What social and cultural forces are at work within the city of Bentonville, and how do these forces impact Freedom Junior–Senior High?
3. Given the “tenets” of the sociocultural implications of No Child Left Behind and state regulations, how might the intersections of race, class, and gender “inform” the leadership practice of the superintendent, principal, and assistant principal?
4. As superintendent, would you hire T. Javier Cruz as the new principal of Freedom?

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