

The Urban Superintendent: Creating Great Schools While Surviving on the Job



Report of a
Colliquium for Former Urban Superintendents

Council of the Great City Schools



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FDR never had a good day. He became president while the nation was in its worst economic depression. Before it ended, we were plunged into World War II. The war was still underway when FDR died. He never had a good day. Yet he is remembered as one of this country's and world's greatest leaders. Leaders make their own good days. Now is the time to lead, no matter how tempting it might be to wait for better times.

Peter C. Hutchinson

Former superintendent, Minneapolis Public Schools

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Executive Summary

When it comes to difficult challenges in public administration, the task of overseeing a large urban school system ranks right up there with the responsibilities of police chiefs, city managers, and public transit directors. Toil, turmoil and turnover are the lot in life of the urban superintendent. Passage of the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation in 2002 promises to add to traditional pressures a new emphasis on leading learning.

Gleaned from the experience of successful former superintendents, here are several pieces of advice to help guide new superintendents and those in training.

Understand that the Context Has Changed

Urban public schools face a new and ambitious agenda. It is one that sets high expectations by insisting that all students can learn and no child can be left behind. It requires superintendents to act as leaders of learning, dedicated to eliminating the achievement gap and developing a sense of urgency about that task within the district. It requires superintendents to become connoisseurs of data that can be used to drive the accountability discussion. In the end, it also asks superintendents to step outside traditional roles to worry about school readiness and how students spend their time when they are not in school.

Focus on How You Can Thrive on the Job

New superintendents can survive and even thrive if they follow a few simple rules. Before taking the job, do what you have to do to set yourself up for success. Get a head start on the job, if you can, so that you can land running. Then work to create the conditions that will let you and your board function as a team. Neither you nor the board can succeed if you cannot work together. Reach out to your unions to create win-win situations. The relationship may not be cordial all the time, but it must become a professional relationship so that you can work with each other. Engage your community. It's a lot easier to get the community to go along with something it has already agreed to than it is to get its approval for some-

thing that just lands in its lap. Finally, insist on courtesy within the district up and down the line. The Golden Rule is good advice in life generally — and it works pretty well in schools too.

Preserve Your Sanity and Sense of Self

It's not selfish to say, put yourself first. Unless you can preserve your sense of self, you cannot do what you went into education to do – help all children learn at high levels. To put your district's children first, you may have to put yourself first. Otherwise you are no good to them. So, worry about maintaining your sense of self. Understand your strengths and weaknesses. Think about your values. Don't take any of it personally. And get up on the balcony every once in a while with people you trust to get your bearings and renew your commitment. You'll find all of these efforts time well spent.

Lead Your Organization and Lead Learning

You have a district to lead. And in that district are children for whose education you are responsible. When all of the throat clearing has ended and the theory has worn thin, what are you going to do? How are you going to lead this district? And how are you going to see to it that your students learn?

You must make sure that you have the major management elements required in any organization in place within your district – good people, data, systems for delivery, logistics, communications, and evaluation. And you need to understand that leadership is a process not a destination.

You also have to dedicate yourself to being a leader of learning. This means being *visible in the classrooms* of your district. This report suggests several ways to accomplish that. Find the time to establish yourself as a true learning leader and you are well on your way to success.

Richard C. Wallace, Jr.

Matthew W. Prophet

Carl L. Cohn

Neal Schmidt

Peter Hutchinson

Norbert Schuerman

David Mahan

Ruth L. Scott

Bertha Pendleton

Rosa Smith

Lee Etta Powell

Octavio Visiedo

Introduction

When it comes to difficult challenges in public administration, the task of overseeing a large urban school system ranks right up there with the positions held down by police chiefs, city managers, and public transit directors. Urban school superintendents are often responsible for a system that enrolls more students than the state university, serves more meals than the local convention hall, transports more people than the city's bus service, and does more to provide a preliminary diagnosis of everything from playground scrapes to seizures than most local emergency rooms. It's little wonder that many urban districts are among the largest employers in their communities.

The very complexity of these organizations explains why toil, turmoil and turnover are the lot in life of the urban superintendent. The conventional wisdom that superintendents turn over every two years probably overstates the case, but newspapers around the country continually report on unsatisfactory terminations of superintendents' employment. Sometimes it's a budget crisis that precipitates the rupture. Often, it's a disagreement with the union that undoes the incumbent. Too frequently, it's a clash with a board member or a faction of the board over micromanagement of the district. What's striking is how infrequently superintendents are fired, or even asked to move on when their contracts expire, because they haven't done what they were hired to do: improve student achievement.

Passage of the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation in 2002 promises to change the latter dynamic. It will add to traditional pressures a new emphasis on leading learning. Now, every school and school district receiving funds under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the venerable federal program to help low-achieving students in districts with a lot of students living in poverty, will be expected to do more. They will be asked to demonstrate satisfactory performance on assessments administered in each grade, from three through ten. Each of these schools and districts will also be required to demonstrate that no gap exists between performance of students from different racial, ethnic, or socio-

economic backgrounds. Moreover, each school will be required to demonstrate satisfactory progress from year to year, and on the part of each disadvantaged group.

The penalties for institutional failure in this new accountability-driven system are substantial, ranging from state takeover to being required to divert funds to parents to pay for tutoring. As the new law kicks into effect in the 2002-2003 school year, preliminary indications reveal that up to 85% of schools receiving federal funds are unable to meet the legislation's stringent new requirements.

Against that backdrop, the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh and the Wallace Funds thought it would be helpful to get some advice from people who have been through the wringer of the urban superintendency. What was sought, in a sense, were the insights of veterans of urban school wars. How did they view the position? What was their experience with the job? How did they manage to keep the internal friction between boards and unions at a tolerable level? Meanwhile, what did they do about improving student learning? If, during their tenures, they had been faced with the accountability pressures superintendents encounter today, what would they have done?

In pulling the group together, Richard C. Wallace, Jr., former Pittsburgh superintendent, noted that a number of issues challenge school leaders as they work to increase student achievement. They range from the imperative to raise expectations for the performance of urban students by developing a sense of urgency about the need to improve student learning and demanding academic rigor across the curriculum, to responding to financial challenges of reduced state funding by engaging philanthropic organizations and public support. In between these broad issues, superintendents also have to contend with difficult boards, principal and teacher shortages, and the need to develop the skills of both principals and teachers in responding to state standards, alignment of curriculum, assessment and standards. All of these issues, of course, contribute to another challenge facing urban schools: the need to improve stability in the superintendency itself.

To address these multiple challenges, the Wallace Funds supported an effort to bring together an invitational list of about a dozen former urban superintendents. Most had left their positions a decade or

more ago. A few were relatively new to retirement. Most were eager to share the lessons of their tenure. Their hope was that their experience could help in two ways. First, it would provide some general guidance to help superintendents thrive and survive in this demanding leadership position. And second, it would help improve preparation programs for new superintendents. This monograph captures the highlights of a fascinating discussion.

Chapter 1

The Context for Leading Learning

It's tempting for professional schools to ignore the human element in business, public management, or educational leadership, but the reality is that leadership is as much an art as a science. Although craft, technique, and theory can improve managerial performance, at root what matters in transforming any large enterprise are the face-to-face interactions that shape the organization's direction and culture. At no time is this more true than when the organization enters a crisis of confidence. Urban public schools have entered just such a crisis.

Today's educational emergency corresponds to the dilemma facing American auto makers a generation ago. The goal posts have been moved, suggested Alan Lesgold, dean of the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education. Once satisfied putting together automobiles for an American public that would buy a new car every 3-5 years, America's Big Three found itself fighting for survival against an onslaught of high-quality imports, easily able to last a decade or more. Suddenly, the main task of corporate leaders became one of transforming a complacent culture that judged itself on quantity and scale into one that understood quality as job number one.

The parallels to urban schools are striking. Content for a long time to provide a conveyor belt on which students could travel to a diploma after twelve years amidst a cornucopia of educational options, urban schools now find themselves fighting for their lives in an environment emphasizing accountability, assessment and choice. And the challenge facing school leaders is that of convincing a complacent school culture that continuing business-as-usual courts disaster. The new mark of effective urban schools must become extraordinarily high levels of student achievement. No student can be left behind.

Leading Learning

In this context, urban superintendents have to begin thinking of themselves not simply as public managers or administrators, but as leaders of learning. Political pressures, employee demands and even community interests can frequently be about everything but the welfare of district students, said David Mahan, former St. Louis school leader. Time, the leader's most valuable asset, can easily be consumed in the cauldron of special interest pleading that is the typical urban district. While these pressures can drive the superintendent to worry about practically everything before attending to students and their achievement, effective superintendents will find ways to keep student achievement, the main thing, the number one issue on their agenda. Superintendents must become the chief advocates for learning in their districts.

Ten Rules for the Road for the Urban Superintendent

Much of the discussion at the colloquium could be summarized in ten "rules of the road" to guide a new urban superintendent:

1. The "main thing" is to maintain student achievement as the primary objective, i.e., never take your eyes off learning.
2. The most important element of the "main thing" is belief in students.
3. If what you are doing does not improve what happens in classrooms between teachers and students, it is probably not worth doing.
4. Accountability means making a year's worth of difference in the life of every student, every year.
5. It doesn't matter what you decide, you're wrong! Conflict is the price you pay for leadership.
6. Don't take it personally. Remember, if you wrestle with pigs, you get dirty and the pig has fun.
7. Listen to the people around you. They can keep you from falling flat on your face.
8. Leaders make their own good days. When leaders create real value for citizens, the public will respond enthusiastically.
9. Making permanent change means changing the things that are permanent.
10. All leaders are in transition, whether they succeed or fail. If they succeed, they leave because they have permanently changed things for the better.

Advocates for learning should define themselves as instructional leaders. One excellent practice involves visiting schools, speaking with principals and teachers, and observing students as a means of focusing attention on student learning, suggested Dick Wallace. Another involves focusing laser-like on the quality of leadership within individual schools, delegating the learning function, in effect, building-by-building to principals. A third approach, suggested Bertha Pendleton, former San Diego superintendent, would be to place a district's most effective teachers, whether junior or senior, in the schools that need them most. Symbolism is significant; superintendents shouldn't ignore it. Following a single student's schedule for a day can be instructive. It reveals the superintendent's interest in the day-to-day life of the school. And nothing more loudly announces the importance of learning than demoting principals or administrators on the basis of unsatisfactory student achievement. Leading learning can mean a lot of things. And sometimes it will require every one of the strategies outlined above.

Achievement Gap. Regardless of how the federal *No Child Left Behind* legislation develops, urban public schools will sooner or later be judged on their ability to close the achievement gap. The gap is often defined in racial terms, since so many minority students are from low-income families, but the gap is more likely to be a consequence of income and social class than of race or ethnicity. Regardless of how it is defined, it is clear that the tested academic performance of minority and low-income students lags far behind their majority peers. What is particularly troubling is that after decades of success in closing the gap between the 1960s and 1980s, it began to widen again during the 1990s.

A genuine commitment to multiculturalism within the district may help close this gap, argued Norbert Schuermann, former Omaha superintendent. Even if it contributed little to closing the gap, the commitment should be made, he said, pointing out that racism and prejudice are alive and well in the United States. While communities continue to (literally) fence themselves off from each other on the basis of race and income, schools have an obligation to teach all children about the values of getting along. Today's white students will grow to maturity in a United States in which white Americans will be less than 50 percent of the population. Although cumulatively, today's "minority groups" will add up to a majority sometime around 2040, African-American, Hispanic, Asian and other minority students will also have to go outside their

own immediate communities to make their way in the world. Schools must transmit the value of other cultures to all the nation's students, concluded Schuermann.

It also needs to be said that multiculturalism, unfortunately, is still controversial among some elements of some communities in the United States. Language needs to be used carefully, argued Matthew Prophet, a former military general who became one of the first "non-traditional" superintendents in the United States a generation ago and ended his school career in Portland, Oregon. Get the language right the first time or find that you will be endlessly tied up over this issue for years to come, agreed Schuermann. Multiculturalism does not mean different programs for different students. It means sensitivity to difference coupled with high expectations for performance on the part of all.

The Achievement Gap

After 40 years of federal encouragement, the achievement gap has not been closed. Wishful thinking is not going to close it in the next twelve, either.

1. Here's the deal educators need to insist on around the achievement gap. We'll do our part, but you need to do yours. We can do it, but the resources need to be put in place to get it done.
2. The resources include: equalizing funds within districts, developing out-of-school community assets, and improving early education programming.
3. We will insist that the board must provide inordinate amounts of resources to students with the greatest need.
4. We will create a "no excuses" mentality within the district by infusing a sense of urgency about this issue within the district. Specifically, we will improve the level of expectations for poor and minority children and we will use data to drive the discussion about the achievement gap.
5. We will communicate the sense of urgency by insisting that race and class are the ignored 800-pound gorillas in our schools and by putting the best principals and teachers in the schools that need them the most.
6. As part of the effort to close the achievement gap, we will also hold families and the community accountable. The best predictor of a student's performance is not race, income, or parental education. It is whether the child comes to school. We cannot educate children who are not there.
7. We will identify outstanding schools, teachers and principals, and when we catch them doing something right, we will celebrate it.

With respect to the achievement gap, one very troubling reality is that most of the progress that has been made to date has been restricted to elementary school students. Progress at that middle-school level is spotty at best, and non-existent at the high school level.

The challenge for superintendents here is dynamic and direct, noted Dick Wallace. Effective superintendents will infuse their districts with a passion for closing the achievement gap. The first essential step is to put the issue on the table. District insiders must understand that closing the gap is a priority for the superintendent. The next is to define the gap and use data to illuminate it. Dick Wallace's advice on this was clear: As superintendent, you must establish high expectations for student performance, while communicating to your district staff your intention to hold staff accountable for meeting these expectations. Developing a sense of urgency around these issues and or your absolute commitment to ending the achievement gap is critical, he said.

Denial of course is commonplace, in schools as elsewhere, according to Peter Hutchinson, former Minneapolis superintendent. Apparently "successful" school districts like to rely on "average" test score results as evidence that the achievement gap is someone else's problem. Yet, even "successful" districts are likely to find themselves surprised when "averages" are pulled apart by school, income and ethnicity. Invariably they will find that the "averages" conceal almost as much as they reveal.

Finally, superintendents can learn a lot by getting out and looking around at what other districts are doing. Large city districts such as Charlotte-Mecklenberg, Houston, and Sacramento have recently reported impressive gains at the elementary level in closing the achievement gap. New and experienced superintendents would be well advised to look into how this success was achieved.*

Use Data to Drive the Discussion

Properly framed, good data can help drive both discussions and decisions about student achievement. It's highly unlikely that anyone would be talking in concrete and specific ways about the achievement

*See *Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement* (MDRC for the Council of the Great City Schools, 2002)

gap if the data revealing this challenge were not so compelling. Data development and usage represents one way, therefore, to put the issue on the table and assess how well things are going.

Most educators are familiar with the general concept of data usage as a tool for understanding school performance. They are likely to have spent a career dealing relatively comfortably with displays of

State Standards, Assessment & *No Child Left Behind*

A transformation of education is already under way, pressured by public demand and political responses. It is one that is moving from the acceptance of good intentions to insistence on performance. Among the major drivers, the new *No Child Left Behind* legislation. You might want to keep in mind the following features of this legislation and appropriate district responses:

1. *No Child Left Behind* is a coalition of forces from the Left and the Right designed to force action and improve performance.
2. The best response is a coherent district plan designed to raise achievement across the board and for all disadvantaged groups.
3. You must insist that local curriculum be aligned with state standards, and you must insist to the state that its assessments be aligned with the standards. (Recent analysis suggests that just 9 or 10 states have well-aligned systems.)
4. You will fail unless you yourself become a sophisticated connoisseur of data and assessment results. And you will fail also if you do not provide the infrastructure that permits principals and teachers to understand and use the data to improve instruction. You must pay attention to this issue.
5. While the specter of federal scrutiny and sanctions may spur your response, the performance of the students in your district will depend on what you and your people do, not what the federal government does.
6. Here's a definition of success you might use: students will be equipped to enroll in a four-year college when they graduate, if that's what they choose.
7. Here's another: at least one year of improvement per student for each year of attendance. And more than a year for students who start out at the bottom of the achievement curve.
8. Develop a system to monitor progress. Each year over 12 years, you'll be expected to progress one-twelfth of the way.
9. Don't get bogged down in reasons why this won't work. Urban school leaders should be doing this regardless of federal pressure.
10. Take a very pro-active stance while moving forward. As you make progress, celebrate it. That way, when you see the implementation problems that will inevitably arise, you'll be in a position to complain about it and demand a response.

data about achievement levels, by subject and grade, for the general population. What the colloquium superintendents suggested was the necessity of going far beyond the tried-and-true and the familiar.

Superintendents who want to build great schools, in which all children learn, will use data as a critical element in their reform strategy. And they will need to improve the data they collect and how they interpret it.

Let's face it, said Hutchinson, most districts are up to their necks in data and test scores. It comes from a hodge-podge of local and standardized tests, and state-mandated assessments. But often, these results aren't related to the curriculum and rarely do they tell parents (or teachers or administrators) very much about how students are progressing, or even what they're learning. In brief, most districts are producing a lot of data, but very little useful information, he said. And it must be added, most principals and teachers do not know how to interpret the data they receive from state assessment programs. Too often it sits, sometimes unopened, on shelves because they do not know what to make of it and have received no assistance in interpreting it.

For the most part, the data provides snapshots of average performance at particular schools, "beauty rankings" in Hutchinson's phrase, that are more related to socio-economic status than anything else. Even with the beauty rankings, it is impossible to tell whether students at so-called top schools are really getting a year's worth of learning, from a year's worth of teaching, for their year's worth of attendance.

At a minimum, suggested Hutchinson, as the group nodded in agreement, accountability has to mean making a year's worth of difference in the life of every student in the school. If that goal could be reached, student achievement is likely to jump forward dramatically. For students who start behind local averages, he noted, accountability has to mean producing more than a year's worth of improvement for each year enrolled.

But that's just a start. For the emerging demands of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation require that differences in educational attainment be eliminated. For students at the bottom of the educational barrel, this may mean closing the achievement gap at rates three to four times faster than they have ever been closed before.

Accountability Under “No Child Left Behind”

The reality is that data usage is not an option. Sweeping accountability changes are contained in the *No Child Left Behind* legislation. By requiring the nation's schools to describe their success in terms of what each student accomplishes, these provisions entirely modify the federal government's role in kindergarten through grade twelve. The legislation defines an accountable system as one involving several things:

- ? States create their own standards for what a child should know and learn for all grades. Standards must be developed in math and reading immediately, and for science by the 2005-2006 school year.
- ? With standards in place, states must test every student's progress toward those standards by using tests aligned with them. Beginning in the 2002-2003 school year, schools must administer tests in each of three grade spans: grades 3-5, grades 6-8, and grades 9-10 in all schools.
- ? Beginning in the 2005-2006 school year, tests must be administered every year in grades 3 through 8, in math and reading. Beginning in the 2007-2008 school year, science achievement must also be tested.
- ? Each state, school district, and school will be expected to make adequate yearly progress toward meeting state standards. This progress will be measured for all students by sorting test results for those who are economically disadvantaged, from racial or ethnic minority groups, have disabilities, or have limited English proficiency.
- ? School and district performance will be publicly reported in district and state report cards. Individual school results will be on the district report cards.

- ? If the district or school continually fails to make adequate progress toward the standards, then they will be held accountable, required to implement corrective efforts ranging from financing tutoring for students, paying for students to attend other schools, or takeover.

As these provisions are implemented in the course of the next several years, educational practice will be transformed. Test results will be reported by economic background, by race and ethnicity, and by English proficiency and disability. Measuring progress by subgroups will demonstrate not only progress in improving overall student performance, but also the narrowing of the gap between disadvantaged students

Coming to Grips with NCLB and “Adequate Yearly Progress”

As a new superintendent, you have quite a challenge ahead of you as you come to grips with the accountability provisions of *No Child Left Behind*. Never before in the history of American education have school leaders been called on to fulfill these functions. Perhaps they should have been, but they were not, and you are unlikely to have been well prepared for them. Where to start?

You will be expected to speak authoritatively about the difference between performance tests, achievement tests, and aptitude tests. The language of “criterion-referenced” and “norm-referenced” test items should be second nature to you. And naturally, you will be familiar with the strengths and weaknesses of machine-scored versus hand-scored test items (and their financial implications). Does that all sound too much? Turn to websites such as those maintained by the Educational Testing Service (www.ets.org/testing/glossary.html) and ACHIEVE (www.achieve.org) to get a handle on the distinctions.

Now you’ll need to know which tests are most appropriate under which circumstances. (The reality is that your state education agency will define the assessments you use, but you need to know enough about these assessments to understand their effect within your community.) Try to avoid getting trapped in a situation in which one test (that might be perfectly appropriate for a specific purpose) is asked to do double or triple duty. Tests that are perfectly acceptable for program evaluation purposes may be entirely inappropriate for making judgments about individual students. You might want to turn to groups such as Fair Test (www.fairtest.org) to learn more about these distinctions.

Finally, get accustomed to the idea that one of the most arcane and significant features of *No Child Left Behind* is the requirement for “adequate yearly progress.” You will be expected to close the achievement gap between all groups in your district over 12 years. Your district must establish separate baselines for both reading and math, using 2001-2002 data, for each demographic group. The starting point will be the percentage of students in the state’s lowest-achieving demographic group who are proficient — or in the school at the 20th percentile of the state’s schools, whichever is higher. If 15% of your migrant students are proficient in reading, but 25% of the students are proficient in the school at the 20th percentile, the reading baseline for your district will be 25%. Then you will be asked to raise the bar in equal increments over a twelve-year period, with increases measured every two or three years. You’ll have to raise the bar at least five times, and perhaps twelve. *And you will have to raise the bar, wherever it is set, for each demographic cluster.* You won’t be able to hide behind the false security of district-wide averages. You can learn more about these requirements and how to implement them from your state education agency.

and others. And schools will be held accountable for lack of progress in either of these areas. As the US Department of Education observes, failure will have no place to hide.

Professional Development for Principals & Teachers

If student achievement is to become the “main thing,” a lot of work needs to be done to improve principal and teacher preparation. Institutions of higher education have badly let down their colleagues in K-12 education in this whole arena. New partnerships for developing leaders and advocates of learning need to be developed, similar to programs now underway involving Toledo and the University of Toledo, Santa Monica and California State University at Northridge. If colleges and universities do not respond, large districts can proceed on their own. LA Unified has created its own mentoring programs to “grow their own” principals and guide promising candidates into programs to obtain credentials. Pittsburgh decades ago pioneered a similar approach with a principals academy, a program to develop principals as instructional leaders with summer institutes and 40 hours of programming a year.

Here are some suggestions for how to proceed to make principals instructional leaders

1. Make instructional leadership as much a priority for principals as it is for you as superintendent.
2. You must elevate the perception of the principal’s role as a leader, invest time and resources in developing internal capacity for instructional leadership, and model a new behavior of reflection and discussion around learning.
3. At the same time, you need to be on top of anticipated widespread teacher shortages, particularly in critical areas such as math, science, and special education.
4. You need to get very aggressive with local institutions of higher education about their principal and teacher preparation programs. If they’re not good enough, say so. Entering partnerships with local colleges and universities is a sensible way to ensure you get what you are looking for.
5. Large urban districts can draw on many intellectual and financial resources to create the school equivalent of teaching hospitals as a way of developing principals and teachers. You should explore possibilities such as that.
6. One way to underscore your commitment to instructional leadership is to participate in principals meetings while insisting they focus on instruction.
7. You and your principals should also participate in teacher staff development efforts, periodically. Your participation drives home your support of these efforts.
8. Unless the principal makes student achievement the “main thing,” building by building, you are unlikely to succeed. Ensure that principals are walking the walk as well as talking the talk by building a focus on achievement into the criteria your district uses to select principals.
9. Build demand for high-quality evaluation based on outcomes into the system. Evaluations should focus on results and best practice in terms of student achievement. As long as evaluations deal with outcomes, peer review is the best way to proceed.
10. Create a “principals advisory group” and a “teachers advisory group” to stay in touch with their thinking and to keep the student achievement in focus.
11. Find ways to get into classrooms, and encourage principals to do the same so that you can ask students: What are you learning? Why is it important? How do you know when you’ve done good work?

Start Young. Well-informed people have long understood that what happens early in life reverberates throughout a young person's education. The National Education Goals developed in 1989 under the leadership of President George H.W. Bush and the Governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, recognized this reality. They defined the first goal as "school readiness," the necessity of ensuring that all children reach school ready to learn.

The common-sense instinct to worry about experience early in life has received powerful support in the last decade from medical science. Research on early development reveals the enormous plasticity of the human brain in the first years of life, noted Neil Schmidt, formerly head of Santa Monica Unified schools. This is the period when brain tissue grows, the cerebral cortex is "wired," cognition develops, and speech and the capacity to manipulate language grows and matures. In short, many of the major tools children employ in learning are well along in their development before they step through the school door. Yet it is clear many children enter school already far in advance of their classmates, said Schmidt. Research indicates, for example, that a child of the college-educated begins kindergarten with a working vocabulary of perhaps 20,000 words, he said, compared with just 5,000 for the children of high school dropouts.

The old adage has it that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." If schools are to succeed, they need to start worrying about early childhood learning and development, according to colloquium attendees. At a minimum, they should be advocates for programs like Head Start that serve infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers, said Schmidt. More than that they should be actively aligning their own kindergarten activities with local pre-school efforts so that schools are "ready" when the children arrive. The potential benefit is easy to define. Most children start life equally equipped to learn and grow. Preventing an achievement gap from developing is likely to be easier than fixing it after-the-fact.

The Other 92%. In the 1980s, researcher Joan Bergstrom at Wheelock College in Boston reported a finding that people had trouble accepting. From birth through age 18, Bergstrom said, nearly 80% of a student's waking time is spent outside school. Schools were never intended to do it all, and can't

do it all by themselves, she concluded. By 1991, Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander pointed to 92% of the time students spend out of school (waking and sleeping) as an important asset in the school reform agenda. He and former President Bush advocated a community-reinforcement element to school reform as part of their “America 2000” strategy. Like the national goal of school readiness, America 2000 has disappeared from the public radar screen.

Superintendents cannot afford to let it disappear from theirs. Without giving an inch on the need for schools to be accountable, superintendents need to push communities to be more accountable as well. Recreation opportunities and community centers are important elements of community health. Superintendents should support these local manifestations of community support for the future of children and families. Obtaining community support for after-school learning opportunities is essential. Community groups can really make a difference, underscoring, particularly for high school youth, the connections between learning and earning a living.

In a sense what will be required here is a commitment to bridging the curriculum between the school and the curriculum of home and neighborhood, noted Schmidt. Finding ways to help school personnel access the richness of students’ experience outside school ... providing incentives to encourage staff to live in the community ... empowering parents to become more knowledgeable about the system ... and developing reciprocal relationships so that community centers, voluntary organizations, libraries and churches become part of the community’s educational fabric — all of these activities, he argued, can help make sure that no child is left behind outside school either. The goal is no small order. It should be to weave together the neighborhood’s fabric so that good schools are able to work with caring families in strong and healthy communities.

The Context: An Ambitious Agenda

The context, then, lays out an ambitious agenda. It is one that sets high expectations by insisting that all students can learn and no child can be left behind. It requires superintendents to act as leaders of learning, dedicated to eliminating the achievement gap and developing a sense of urgency about that task

within the district. This agenda requires superintendents to become connoisseurs of data that can be used to drive the discussion so that the emerging accountability provisions of *No Child Left Behind* do not catch the district unawares. In the end, this agenda also asks superintendents to step outside their school role to worry about school readiness and how students spend their time outside school.

In the face of those demands, how do superintendents thrive on the job? And, assuming they pass that threshold test, how do they preserve their own sanity and sense of self?

Chapter 2

Thriving on the Job

High levels of turnover among superintendents make the case in a compelling fashion: this is a job that can chew people up and spit them out in an unpleasant and very public fashion. Even superintendents who retire gracefully on their own schedule acknowledge that criticism and painful personal attack come with the territory. The challenge is how to learn from the attacks, without being destroyed by them.

The issue goes beyond mere survival. The outcome must be seen as the ability to *thrive* on the job, insisted the former superintendent of schools in Columbus, Rosa Smith. That is to say, superintendents should worry about establishing the conditions under which they will be able to prosper as leaders of learning.

There are no tried-and-true guarantees for the survival of any superintendent. But below are five key lessons distilled from the experience of the leadership veterans at this colloquium:

- ? Set yourself up early for success, not failure.
- ? Create the conditions under which you and the board can unite as a team.
- ? Try to establish win-win situations with unions and their members
- ? Engage your community
- ? Insist on respect and courtesy for everyone, up and down the line.

Set Yourself up Early for Success

It's surprising how many people arrive in a new superintendent's chair without knowing very much about what they've signed on for. Non-traditional superintendents, people from outside education, may consider the position akin to that of a corporate CEO and they are very quickly disabused. Even educational insiders may move into a new district without understanding it very well.

The District. Arriving in a new community without understanding the dynamics of the educational system you are expected to lead is self-destructive. You need to understand both the system and your new community, according to Matthew Prophet. You owe nothing less to yourself, your family, and the students and parents you represent. So, the first rule here is that you need to know what you're getting into before accepting the job, said Prophet, rattling off a few of first questions potential superintendents should be asking of their new districts.

What does student achievement look like in the district? How does that break down by school? How about neighborhoods and population sub-groups within the district? Have there been any contentious meetings or hearings in recent years about bilingual education? Who's on which side and what are the arguments? How about programs for gifted and talent students or Advanced Placement? How do district politics shape up over these issues? Those questions are just the first ones. There are many others. What's the history of voter responses to bond requests? What is the financial situation in terms of local and state support? Does that look to be fairly stable, or can we today foresee budget cuts in the next couple of years?

Is the district operating under any court orders regarding desegregation or services for students with disabilities? How many court cases are pending and how significant are they? How frequently have superintendents turned over in this district in the last decade? What about union-board relationships? Is there a history of acrimony and work actions in this district? Or is this a district with fairly good relations with its unions? Have good management-union relations come at the cost of management prerogatives?

You need to know where the bodies lie before you put your own on the line, is the essential message, according to Octavio Visiedo, former Miami-Dade school leader. The number of potential questions is endless. Part of your own test for whether you're ready for the superintendency should be your ability to ask the right ones.

The Board. Next, a whole series of questions have to be asked about the board, suggested Ruth Scott, former leader of Toledo public schools, and Lee Etta Powell, who once led the Cincinnati district.

Is this a board that makes decisions by consensus? Or is it badly divided, with 4-3 or 3-2 votes the norm instead of the exception? Is this a board that requires a lot of care and feeding? Does it have its own budget for travel? How is that allocated? What about office space and supporting staff? Do board members draw a salary (or stipends dependent on attending meetings)? What about automobiles and credit cards? Board perks can tell you a lot about how the board functions. The questions outlined above

School Finance 101

As the colloquium met, several districts across the country were reporting accounting meltdowns as budget holes developed, apparently unexpectedly. Mishandling the budget is one of the surest ways to grease the skids for a superintendent's exit. Here are some ideas for getting a handle on district finances:

1. Regular, annual, external audits are not an irritation, but a potential career-saver.
2. In addition to audits, superintendents also require a financial analysis that explores how money is used, how much is receive by formula and how much is "soft," and how much is committed (and to what) and how much is discretionary.
3. If you don't understand budgeting get a tutor or go back to school. You can never be confident that you are on top of issues in your district unless you have a full and complete grasp of the budget. Without such an understanding, you are not in command of your district, your budget director is.
4. Worry about increasing the financial literacy of your board members. For a very high proportion of board members, the most complicated financial issue they have ever previously dealt with is their household budget.
5. Checks and balances are basic. Separate people need to approve and write checks. And it's always a good idea to require two signatures on any check. Even in the non-profit world, money has a remarkable habit of disappearing unless people keep their eyes on it.
6. The odds-and-ends of district finance create huge headaches. Establish procedures to monitor schools independent activity funds. And discourage board/staff use of district credit cards.
7. While you need to understand the budget, you should stay out of the details. It's typically hundreds of pages of detail. What you need to grasp is broad strategy and a sense of the budget options available to you to influence student achievement..
8. It's a good idea to allocate a minimum of 1% to 2% of the budget for professional development.
9. The budget needs to reflect district priorities and it also needs to reflect yours.
10. So if you are interested in a particular theme related to student achievement, see to it that this theme is funded at the outset, not left to find support after everything else has been financed.

promise to reveal a lot about the board you will be working with. If you don't like the answers, you need to ask yourself if you're going to be happy working with this group of people.

District Audit. At all costs, don't put yourself in a position of accepting the blame for problems you inherited, is a key admonition from Rosa Smith. You don't want to learn three months into your tenure that the district's books are a mess and staff need to be furloughed. If people have been ignoring an "elephant lying in the middle of the room," you need to insist it be dealt with. If the elephant is noticed on your watch, you will be the scapegoat. It won't make any difference that the problem was ten years in the making, first stretching out for a nap when you were enrolled in graduate school 1,000 miles away. Someone has to take the blame. The board that has been asleep at the switch for ten years is an unlikely candidate. The former superintendent is fishing in Baja. And there you sit.

To give yourself the best shot at succeeding, said Smith, you want to insist that a condition of your taking the position is that the district undergo a thorough educational and financial audit to identify the problems in place the day before you assumed office. The clear understanding to be established with the board and community is the following: you and the board are to be held accountable for fixing problems that are identified in this audit, but everyone should understand that these are problems you inherited and did not create.

One useful by-product of the audit approach is likely to be your ability to apply pressure on the board and community to clean up the elephants lying around. Most superintendents would prefer not to bring big problems up in a public way. But these audit issues identify problems for which you are not responsible. You want them fixed. You have every reason to demand action while bringing them to the public's attention.

A Head Start. If you can, negotiate a three-month head start on the job, urged Smith. This sounds like a tall order, but it is not. Other successful superintendents have done it, so the precedent exists. Then, too, superintendents are in a seller's market today. Turnover is high; salaries rarely match the

responsibilities imposed on superintendents. During the courtship phase of the relationship, you are in a position to ask for several things that will give you the best chance of success.

One of the things you should request is time to learn about the district, think about its challenges, and prepare yourself for your new responsibilities, she argued. This time is well-spent, for you, the district, and its students. It is during this period, for example, that you can examine the district's challenges without the responsibility of responding to them immediately. One of the benefits, pointed out Dick Wallace, is the opportunity to evaluate members of the leadership team you have inherited. As a new superintendent, you probably need to make some changes in top management. That's a lot easier to do before you start than it is three months into your appointment.

By financing your time as a consultant, for perhaps three months in advance of taking the job, the board virtually insures that you land running when you step into the superintendent's office. This strategy can pay big dividends, both in your initial entry and your long-term success. Ideally, the audit you also negotiated with your contract is underway at the same time, providing you with a roadmap and an agenda on your first day in the office.

Forge a Team that Includes You and the Board

It's a true but distressing reality, according to Carl Cohn, recently retired after a decade of success leading the schools of Long Beach, California. Too many board-superintendent relationships are characterized by acrimony and contention. The situation does not have to be that way. In fact, most board members share the same goal as most superintendents. They want to succeed and to do their best to help all children learn. They may not understand what's involved with that. Conditions within the district may have deteriorated to the point that individual board members, having forgotten the difference between policy and management, between oversight and meddling, are seriously micro-managing district operations. But most of them want to do the right thing. And the right thing for boards is the task of creating a vision, establishing goals, and setting policy; it is not meddling in the details of district administration or micromanaging schools.

The secret to your success here is finding some way to unite with the board, said Cohn, so that together the central office and board members can come to see themselves as a team.

Board-Superintendent Relationships

The relationships between the board and the superintendent will make or break you. Pay attention to this relationship. Don't assume that lack of friction is good news. Problems can sneak up on you out of the blue. Below are some ideas for managing and nurturing a good relationship with your board:

1. Regular workshops to address policy and provide on-going evaluation to the superintendent can be career savers.
2. When you are hired, get the ground rules of your relationship established in writing with the board from the word go. This should include the formal terms of your evaluation.
3. Ideally, you should get the board to agree on its priorities early in your tenure. Use research, data, needs assessment, and focus groups to help the board agree on priorities. Then use those priorities as the touchstone against which you assess board request for staff work. If a request is unrelated to the priorities, you have to say so.
4. NEVER side with any segment of the board, or cut deals with individuals or groups. This kind of behavior will inevitably cause resentment and come back to haunt you. In the same vein, stay out of board elections.
5. Be careful of board perquisites (staff, salary, automobiles, chauffeurs and the like). They may prove your downfall. It's unwise to pick a fight with individuals or the entire board over perks. This is an area where you should work with the board chair to make sure everything is handled appropriately and professionally.
6. If you discover during employment interviews that the board has its own staff, find another position. A secretary for the board is defensible. Other than that, the only person with direct access to the board should be the auditor. Professional staff and policy analysts of any kind reporting to the board, full or part time, are just an invitation to meddling and micromanagement.
7. Take a good look also if you are offered a job by a badly divided board. No matter what the members say, if they can't agree on you, they are likely to continue to fight through you once you arrive.
8. Don't negotiate your own contract. Leave that up to your lawyer or agent.
9. Board members have a legitimate interest in constituent service. Distinguish between meddling and service. You can help yourself here by:
 - a) providing good constituent service in exchange for freedom from meddling;
 - b) educating board members on key learning and curriculum issues; and
 - c) responding to board members' requests for help consistent with policy and procedure.
10. A basic rule is no surprises – and that's a rule that applies in both directions.
11. Insist that all staffing issues, including hiring and firing of principals, are your responsibility. You can't give this fundamental management role away to the board.
12. Develop a conflict of interest policy to protect the board and senior staff members from themselves.
13. Empower the board to succeed by helping members make policy, address constituent concerns, and run a perpetual campaign in support of the schools.

Cohn and the Long Beach board provided one useful way to approach this. They arranged for regular and frequent “workshops” at which the central office and the board could get out of the hothouse of district decisionmaking to (1) explore long-term district issues and (2) provide closed-session formative evaluations of the superintendent’s performance.

This approach demands a lot of courage. It asks that you put yourself under the board microscope on perhaps a quarterly basis. But the level of trust that it engenders pays big dividends in Cohn’s view. The Long Beach workshops were held around agendas jointly developed by central office senior staff and members of the board. The agendas inevitably revolved around issues that might have important policy ramifications for the district. Over time, these workshops became the glue that held the superintendent and board together, as they jointly sponsored initiatives on school uniforms, abolishing social promotion, creating partnerships with higher education, and encouraging single-gender educational programs.

A second benefit cannot be ignored, either, noted Cohn. When annual evaluations are very high stakes, everyone dreads them, both the superintendent and the board. But the quarterly mini-evaluations encouraged in the process above, helped identify potential problems when they were developing, not when they’d become full-blown crises. And the recurring nature of these mini-evaluations meant that an issue identified, say in January, could be re-examined in April. If resolved, that was the end of something that might have blown up into a major source of contention in an annual evaluation.

In turn, this produced another, unexpected benefit in Long Beach. Because policy development was under consideration regularly and evaluation issues were off the table, the kind of posturing that characterizes many board meetings evaporated. Board meetings became trustee-like, business affairs, that lasted for less than an hour. The result was that the superintendent and staff understood that, with the exception of the time set aside for quarterly meetings, they were free on a day-to-day basis to worry about monitoring student achievement. Days, nights and weekends spent responding to board demands from the last meeting while prepared for the next were a thing of the past.

If you can, create a team with your board. You will never regret it. It will be the key to your success.

Create Win-Win Situations with the Union

Be open also to the possibility of working collaboratively and powerfully with your union and its members, suggested Hutchinson. That sounds Polly Ann-ish to many administrators, but frequently it is possible. If it is not possible, you still have to understand that your unions may be powerful stakeholders

Unions and Bargaining

Many urban districts are involved in a complex network of union relationship, involving teachers, administrators, trade and service employees. Many of these unions are active in school board elections. In addition, the number of small districts in many states means that the views of small locals have a disproportionate impact on state education policy, and on urban school administration. Here is the fruit of decades of experience from the urban front lines:

1. Get legal advice in negotiating and administering contracts. The superintendent NEVER sits at the negotiating table. That is a task for staff and attorneys.
2. Try to obtain a uniform negotiating calendar, unless you're prepared to have the district endlessly tied up in negotiations, union by union.
3. Encourage collaboration around the "main thing" – student achievement. Ideally, the contract becomes a living document that adjusts and changes continually as understanding of student achievement evolves.
4. Make the contract the instrument for advancing student learning. If it isn't in the contract, it's not really the "main thing."
5. Think of negotiating as a problem-solving mechanism, not a source of conflict. Ideally, it should be a perpetual tool for problem solving.
6. Keep language about the calendar out of the contract. It's likely to be too restrictive. Also make sure that you don't agree to "non-economic" provisions that turn out to have a financial impact.
7. Find ways around problems. No union representative will give up his or her position on seniority. Insist that the superintendent has the right to assign personnel for the good of the district and handle assignments on an "exception" basis if need be. Unions have an interest in good schools, too.
7. Leaders and members are different constituencies. Often the leader is out ahead of members on key educational issues. In the same vein, you should inform all teachers of changes in the contract. That way you define the change, not a bargaining or building representative.
8. Work with the board chair to have one spokesperson for the board's position during negotiations. You can't negotiate if the board is a Tower of Babel.
9. Keep up to speed on what's happening with union reform. Some of the most progressive ideas about how to advance the learning are coming from union leaders themselves.
10. Watch out for union-board relationships. It's not a good sign if the union knows of the board's position before you do.
11. Remember that the contract is the union's "sacred text." If it isn't in the contract, it's not important.

in your district and you have to find win-win situations so that everyone gets at least some of what they want. “Looking back,” said Scott, “communication with the union was critically important to our success.” During her tenure at Toledo, Scott was nationally respected for her success in dealing with unions. “Eliciting effective and continuous communication with unions is every bit as important as communication with board members, staff and parents,” she said. She also noted that most fair-sized urban districts have several unions to deal with – representing teachers, food-service and maintenance workers, and bus-drivers to name the most obvious. It’s a good idea to try to obtain a uniform calendar for contract negotiations, she suggested, otherwise you wind up endlessly running through negotiating cycles.

You must reach out to your unions, confirmed Dick Wallace, citing successful experiences as superintendent with a recalcitrant union (Fitchburg, Massachusetts) and forward-looking union leadership (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania).

Here’s a very straightforward insight into union-management relations. During the colloquium, the participants agreed that permanent change involves changing things that are permanent. (See “Rules of the Road,” Chapter 1). For the union, the contract is a sort of “sacred text,” noted Hutchinson. Unless changes that you as superintendent want to put in place become embedded in the contract, nothing has changed. Or at least, nothing has been changed permanently. The union may behave differently. Its members may share the same goal you hold — and they may even hold you in high esteem. But the minute you leave, or the minute you alienate the union or its members over some other issue, the change that you have negotiated with a handshake can easily evaporate into thin air.

So it’s advisable to negotiate change with the union through the contract. Once embedded in the contract, Hutchinson pointed out, your reform imperative becomes part of the union agenda. Here’s how that worked in Minneapolis. Following a bitter dispute with the union (ultimately settled in arbitration, with the arbitrator going down the line on every issue in the union’s favor) Hutchinson and the union head got together. Each understood the district could not function with management and the teaching force at each other’s throats. Each also shared a vision — a commitment to the idea that all children could and should

learn. Everyone — students, parents, teachers, board members, taxpayers and administrators — would win if that vision could be realized.

The Minneapolis district's entire strategic thinking was poured into that next contract, said Hutchinson. The mission...parameters for successful teaching ... definition of a successful school ... concepts of a successful district ... and the accountability framework. If it was important it went into the new contract, including the initial framework for a connection between performance and compensation.

The contract, a “sacred text,” outlasts superintendents. It is there long after the board has turned over and the union president has retired. It endures administrative fiat, educational fads, and even changes in state and federal law. If you, as a new superintendent, want permanent change, understand that the contract is not necessarily the evil and nefarious thing you may be inclined to think it is. It can be our friend.

Engage Your Community

Communication is one of the critical skills a superintendent must possess. Listening is a big part of that, agreed Lee Etta Powell and Ruth Scott. As David Mahan put it, the public is desperate to put their ideas and concerns before district leaders. People urgently want you to listen to what they think, said Mahan. Sometimes they don't expect you to do anything about it, but they do expect you to listen.

Listen, listen, listen — advice from Norbert Schuermann — is good advice for any aspiring superintendent. So too is the response from Bertha Pendleton: Communicate, communicate, communicate.

A lot of district communication these days is understood as public engagement, noted Pendleton. Ideally this is a process in which parents and the public come together with district leadership to define the district's agenda. Public engagement is not a process of persuading local citizens that the district is right, it's a process of helping the public come to public judgment about the issues facing the district. In the end, this means the public is more likely to support district initiatives, said Dick Wallace. If you expect people to share your agenda, you have to let them in on the takeoffs as well as the landings, as a former US Senator, the late Arthur Vandenberg, once put it.

This public (and therefore political) aspect of the job requires a different set of skills from those taught in most graduate schools of education. Here the superintendent requires the patience of a city council member, the detailed knowledge of the local budget czar, and a hide as tough as the police chief's. Holding community conversations is frequently difficult, but they are important tools for promoting understanding, support, and a sense of shared responsibility for district goals.

Dealing with the press and the media around public issues also requires a new set of skills, noted Dick Wallace. Here you have to initiate, not respond, and you have to be as willing to accept criticism and share bad news as you are to issue press releases about awards or glowing reports on student achievement. You will find that reporters will respect you if you respect their intelligence and don't try to pretend there are no problems. It's not wise to try to con the press or the media. Sooner or later the truth always catches up. If you want credit for a student's superior performance, you have to be willing to shoulder the responsibility for another student's failure.

Nor it is wise to lash out or criticize the press or media, no matter how irritating or irresponsible you consider their coverage. The rule of thumb to follow here is longstanding and crystal clear, "Never pick fights with people who buy ink by the barrel."

Insist on Respect

In a huge and complex multicultural society such as the United States, building respect among people from different backgrounds is a never-ending responsibility of the schools. This is behavior that needs to be modeled by district leaders, insisted Schuermann.

You really should treat everyone in the organization with the same respect, courtesy and friendliness you apply to the most powerful people in the district. Schools are no place for the culture of the "hired hand," he said.

Apart from the value to students and the general public of modeling respect, this behavior is likely to pay other dividends. People who are treated well are unlikely to accept at face value the gossip and

rumor that pervade every urban district central office. Far from it. Many are likely to reject outlandish claims about your behavior or intentions with a phrase something like, “That doesn’t sound like the superintendent I know.”

Here’s another potential benefit. There are a lot of personal agendas in play, simultaneously, in any fair sized urban district. The need for confidentiality is also important and the number of people who can keep a confidence are few and far between. In such an environment, one always finds a lot of people with complaints. These people are likely to go to the board and the media before they find their way to your door. Try to keep that kind of behavior to a minimum by treating everyone with respect. People who feel their contributions are valued are less likely to strike out at you than those who feel their views did not receive a respectful hearing. In this context, you cannot afford to let big gaps develop between what you say and what you do. Words have meaning. If you make a commitment, keep it.

Advice to Thrive On

These five guidelines, then, constitute advice that new (and experienced) superintendents can survive and even thrive on. Before taking the job, do what you have to do to set yourself up for success. Get a head start on the job, if you can, so that you can land running. Then work to create the conditions that will let you and your board function as a team. Neither you nor the board can succeed if you cannot work together. Reach out to your unions to create win-win situations. The relationship may not be cordial all the time, but it must become a professional relationship so that you can work together. Engage your community. It’s a lot easier to get the community to go along with something it has already agreed to than it is to get its approval for something that just lands in its lap. Finally, insist on courtesy within the district up and down the line. The Golden Rule is good advice in life generally — and it works pretty well in schools too.

Responding to all these imperatives is likely to be demanding. The colloquium next turned its attention to what you need to do to maintain your sense of sanity.

Chapter 3

Preserving Sanity and Sense of Self

Because of the highly public and often politicized nature of the job, the work of the superintendent can often be emotionally quite painful. It's very difficult to be attacked in public. If your children are enrolled in schools in your district, you and your spouse may find yourselves having to deal with snide comments directed at your children as a way to get at you. You have to make your own health a priority. (If you don't, why should anyone else worry about it?) You need to monitor your own mental and emotional health. You need to be cognizant of the fact that emotional stress may wear you down physically. And you need to make time for sleep, rest, family and friends, and the reinvigoration of your spirit through rest and recreation.

Maintaining a Sense of Self

One of the bedrock pieces of advice to come out of this colloquium came from Rosa Smith. It goes back to Shakespeare: Know yourself. To thine own self, be true. Given the demands of this job, and the very high level of stress it imposes on leaders, superintendents must be strong individuals. This is not a position for the faint of heart. It will not sit well with people still struggling to sort out their values.

Knowing oneself and one's strengths and weaknesses is essential. Nobody is perfect. No ideal superintendent exists. But at some gut level, superintendents must understand what they stand for and how they are likely to respond to stress. They should also understand their own personal biases. A superintendent inclined to blame students for failure is unlikely to be an ideal leader in a district with a lot of vulnerable children, noted Smith. And a superintendent who likes to scapegoat teachers may find it hard to inspire their trust. Ideally, a superintendent will welcome challenge and respond to it. If he or she heads for the hills when unexpected surprises develop, then that superintendent needs to find people who can shore up that weakness. Make no mistake about it, stress, unexpected surprises and downright unpleasantness go with the territory.

Ask yourself what you believe in. What are your values? What do you believe about learning? Asking these questions is critically important to maintaining your sense of self. Unless you know your core beliefs and values, you really can't be in a good position to defend them. So you have to understand your core purpose in doing this work.

Don't be guilty of false modesty. Given what you're doing, you could obviously be doing something else and probably making a lot more money. So why are you doing this? Once you have a better fix on that, you'll be in a position to draw a line in the sand. There are a lot of different ways to accomplish your purposes. Sometimes you'll find that the way you prefer is blocked for one reason or another and you're going to have to make some compromises about how you approach your goals, and perhaps the timing of the goals themselves. But you can't be true to yourself and abandon those goals. That's why asking yourself what you believe in is so central. You need to know what values and beliefs are important enough for you to risk losing the position you hold. Actually, if you don't know that, then every problem as it develops potentially threatens your position.

Don't make it personal, urged Smith. Nothing will destroy a superintendent's confidence faster than assuming that what appear to be very personal attacks are, in fact, personal. In politicized situations, opponents have a tendency to personalize their attacks. In reality, most of the time they are not personally hostile to the incumbent. It's the policies the incumbent is following that generate the hostility. Understand that. If you weren't sitting in that chair, they'd be attacking someone else. *It has nothing to do with you.*

In *Leading With No Easy Answers*, leadership expert Ronald Heifetz speaks of the value of "critical friends" and of the need to "leave the dance floor" occasionally to "get up on the balcony." Both are solid pieces of advice. Following them may not save you, but you will never go wrong taking this advice. You must find ways to get trusted and diverse feedback. The world of school administration is littered with the wreckage of superintendents who believed the sycophants and yes-men who can be found in every organization.

Of course you need people who will support you. But you also need at least one person who will be willing to fly in the face of those urging you on, by telling you when you are making a mistake. Here your challenge is two-fold. First, find this critical friend, who may or may not be in your organization. He or she might be an aide, a long-time administrator in the district, or a mentor or professional colleague with whom you regularly check in. Having found this person, you have to have the good sense to listen to what he or she says. That doesn't mean you have to accept the advice. But you can't dismiss it out of hand.

Next, get up on the balcony periodically, said Smith. Think of the district as a crowded dance floor. The music starts and you're required to dance. If you are on the floor, you have to keep time. Different partners come and go. The melodies change. One moment you can relax into a waltz; the next you're expected to throw yourself into a spirited tango. There's a swirl of other dancers around you. You find it very hard to keep track of what's going on.

Now leave the floor. Go up on the balcony and look down at the scene below. Suddenly, the rhythm of the floor is crystal clear. The patterns make sense. You can see who's dancing with whom, who avoids which partners, and which dancers enjoy certain dances and sit others out. You have a much better sense of the big picture.

As a superintendent, you have to find ways to keep your eye on the big picture. Periodically, find some way to leave the floor and go up on the balcony. It might be a regular retreat, of the sort Cohn organized with the Long Beach board. It might be some sort of regular learning opportunity that provides a lot of support. Ideally, you'll find a way to unburden yourself and learn from trusted colleagues. However you do it, you must find some way to leave the intensity of the day-to-day interactions of the district. That's how you can keep your focus on leading learning and what that means for the children in your charge.

Other Strategies for Dealing with Stress

Apart from leaving the floor to go up on the balcony, you should also remember some other tried-and-true methods of minimizing personal stress. First, as Hutchinson put it, get used to the idea that whatever you decide, you're wrong! Should I close school this morning because it's beginning to snow and the forecast indicates a possibility it will get worse? Yes, according to many parents worried about their children's safety. Who are you kidding, say others, already on the way to work. Should we offer extended day services, for fees, to help parents in the workforce? Yes, say parents desperate for affordable and safe day care. Over my dead body, may be the response of several self-appointed defenders of "family values."

In a big district, enrolling tens of thousands of students, whatever you decide will offend someone. Don't let the criticism slow you down, agreed Schuermann. Do the right thing and move on. Otherwise you will be immobilized.

Next, it may take the patience of Job, but while critics are busy personalizing their attacks on you, you must take care to focus on issues, not people. No matter how ugly things get, your responsibility is to stick to substance and issues. The public needs to understand that your priorities are high-quality education, children's safety, and responsible administration of the public's business. The nay-sayers will say what they have to, regardless of what you do. Don't get down in the mud with them. Norbert Schuermann's advice on this was short and sweet, "When you wrestle with a pig, the pig has fun and you get dirty." In a lot of ways, what you need to understand is that conflict is the price you pay for leadership.

Finally, the colloquium came back again to the idea of shoring up weak spots and building on strengths. You have a lot of strengths. That's why you're where you are. Play to them. At the same time, you're human. You have some weak spots. It's your responsibility to shore them up. You don't have to be a legal expert, an assessment guru, or the best communicator in the district. Sure, it would help if you were. But what you have to do as a leader is ensure that those talents are available in abundance in the district – and available to you at the drop of a hat.

Put Yourself First

It's not selfish to say, put yourself first. Unless you can preserve your sense of self, you cannot do what you went into education to do – help all children learn at high levels. To put your district's children first in your list of policy priorities, you have to put yourself first. Otherwise you are no good to them. So, worry about maintaining your sense of self. Understand your strengths and weaknesses. Think about your values. Don't take any of it personally. And get up on the balcony every once in a while with people you trust to get your bearings and renew your commitment.

You'll find all of these efforts time well spent.

Chapter 4

Two Strategies: Summing It All Up

In the end, however, neither surviving on the job nor maintaining your own internal balance will necessarily get the job done. You have a district to lead. And in that district are children for whose education you are responsible. When all of the throat clearing has ended and the theory has worn thin, what are you going to do? How are you going to lead this district? And how are you going to see to it that your students learn?

Two distinct strategies offered at the colloquium address the two dimensions of leadership and student learning.

Organizational Leadership

“A long time ago in the military, I learned that seven elements define what is needed to lead any organization,” said Matt Prophet. The organization makes no difference – a military unit, a corporate division, a non-profit or government entity, or a school system. The same seven elements must be in place if any leader is to be successful in shaping and directing his organization. As a school leader, you should be worrying about these seven organizational elements as well:

- ? You must have the right people. You can’t do it all yourself. So you need good people in key leadership roles, at the district and school levels.
- ? You must have access to data about your system’s performance. Otherwise you are probably operating in the dark and don’t really understand your organization’s own strengths and weaknesses.
- ? You need an effective delivery system. Having the right people or good ideas doesn’t do you much good if you can’t deliver what you set out to provide.

- ? Logistical systems are essential. Getting the bits and pieces of the organization moved around and where they need to be when they're required is often the difference between success and failure.
- ? You need a communications system. You need to be able to communicate effectively both within the organization and beyond it. Without such a system, you are unable to effect what goes on in your organization or communicate its needs and accomplishments outside the system.
- ? You absolutely have to have a methodology for evaluating the first five elements above. This may well be the area of greatest organizational weakness, both in and out of schools. Everyone understands the importance of people and communications systems; fewer realize how important it is to evaluate every aspect of organizational operations.
- ? Finally, you need to understand that leadership success is a process not a destination. You must endlessly recycle your understandings developed during the evaluation throughout the first five elements above, engaging in what organizational theorists have lately come to call "continuous improvement" across every facet of organizational life.

While this list lacks the complexity and detail of many educational theories, it possesses the elegance and virtue of simplicity. You don't have to be charismatic to lead your district. But if you are going to lead it effectively, you should be worrying relentlessly about the short list above.

Leading Learning

Still, the organizational leadership issues beg the question of leadership to what ends and for which purposes? Here, the answer is straightforward, according to Dick Wallace. School superintendents (and school principals) must become leaders of learning. What this implies, whatever the size of the district you lead, is that you are the district's instructional leader.

This means that you will become *visible in the classrooms* of the district, a leader who engages students, teachers, principals, supervisors, and subject-matter specialists in classroom observations, and discussions about teaching, learning, assessment, and curriculum. It means that the wise superintendent

will take the time to become reasonably expert on emerging state standards and the assessment instruments associated with them.

Here are ten general guidelines about what that means in practice:

- ? Become a visible presence in your district's classrooms.
- ? During classroom visits, focus on student work, instructional techniques, and student engagement in learning.
- ? Develop and implement a long-range plan for the professional development of your principals as instructional leaders. They can become your front line.
- ? At the same time, develop and implement a long-range plan for the professional development of your teachers. They probably weren't ruined in whatever school of education they attended, but they certainly learned nothing about standards-based teaching, learning and assessment.
- ? Encourage district-wide study groups on teaching and learning, formal training for principals and teachers around the district's instructional model, and skill training and coaching of principals to help them become instructional leaders in their own right.
- ? Make instructional leadership your priority and allocate the time needed for it. Spend at least two to three hours a week over two to three days visiting schools.
- ? On the days you plan to visit schools, do not go to the office until you have completed your school visits. Otherwise you will never get out of the office as its demands and "emergency" phone calls consume you.
- ? Teaching and learning must become the focus of your instructional leadership. You pursue this focus through instructional classroom "walkthroughs" that focus on student work and student engagement with the material.
- ? What you want to know on the walk through is: What are you learning? Why is it important? How do you know when you have done good work?

? You don't need a huge budget to exercise instructional leadership. What you really need is commitment. Save yourself some money. Stop wasting it on one-day "in-service" drive-through workshops. Apply the savings to the agenda above.

So there it is. In a nutshell, if the colloquium had to be summed up it would be made up of five big pieces of advice. Understand the context in which you are expected to become a leader of learning. Establish the conditions so that you can thrive on the job, working comfortably with your board, unions and members of the general public. Worry about putting yourself first so that you can maintain a sense of sanity and self. And, take to heart the elements of organizational leadership laid out in this chapter. Finally, if you follow the general guidelines for instructional leadership outlined above, you can't go far wrong.