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**The Age of Standards: Implications for Effective Leadership
(Chapter Seven of The Art and Science of Leading: What Effective
Administrators Understand)**

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SEVEN

The Age of Standards

Implications for Effective Leadership

Gary Sehorn

A BIGGER STAGE

Everything changes, and since change is a given in education, effective leaders recognize and adapt to shifting contexts, including national standards, which are a part of the leadership gestalt.

The recent ascendancy of standards provides challenges and opportunities that tap both the art and the science of leadership. Essentially, what has happened is that building-level administrators are now doing their work on a bigger stage with new actors and forces beyond the traditional circles. School leaders must be skillfully and artfully engaged with these actors and forces to practice effective leadership.

THE SHIFTING LOCUS OF CONTROL

Before the triumph of national standards and the testing and accountability systems that mushroomed in their wake, local schools were at the center of the thinking concerning school excellence. The term “site based” was preeminent, and the expectation was that each school could do great things for students based on local decisions about what best suited the students and the community.

There were policy and resource parameters, but the locus of control was the school, and in the middle of that work was the principal. Significant mandates from beyond the school were rare, and district leadership

could often either ignore or give short shrift to such expectations. That allowed school administrators to maintain a robust view of the whole child and, in working with teachers and support staff, the whole person.

That has changed and for good reason. There were thin spots and gaps in the site-based world. Groups of students—especially minority and low-income students—were not successful, and those failures were often hidden in large, well-regarded, middle-class schools. High expectations were not held for all students, and there were inequities of opportunity everywhere.

Programs such as Effective Schooling and other school improvement processes were unsuccessful in assisting administrators, schools, teachers, and stakeholders in many communities to address those inequities; those pervasive problems helped fuel the standards and accountability movement. The noble root of this recent reform effort is a mission to address these very concerns. Governmental action at the state and federal levels targeted at this work has been joined by powerful advocacy organizations. The challenge for school leaders is to deftly work with this expanded circle of power outside the school so the systemic focus can remain at the local level.

ADMINISTRATORS AS TRANSLATORS AND INTERPRETERS

Effective leaders in the current context leverage the expanded external mandates, expectations, and resources to support meaningful and sustainable change. Administrators have always had to translate, prioritize, and interpret. The difference today is that this work must now include messages, mandates, and expectations from more sources and with much more specificity and accountability, so this work has increased in complexity.

Successful small-district superintendents routinely provide this kind of filtering, sorting, and framing, in part because they don't have layers of specialized program leaders with whom to share the work. Effective principals have always done this too, especially in larger districts. Principals serve as "gatekeepers" and "translators" of mandates and initiatives of various stripes that come from the district office and elsewhere. Enhancing and sharpening this skill is now of particular importance for school leadership.

Sometimes this means saying no on behalf of the school, even when a yes would please the powers above and the powers beyond the district. Administrators routinely say no in ways that are often unnoticed but that are essential for schools to operate. Anyone taking the time to catalog all the state statutes and regulations that apply to the operation of schools, plus all that district policy requires, and piling on the stacks of expectations from district programs and initiatives would clearly see that princi-

pals simply cannot lead “by the book” and merely focus on “fidelity” of implementation.

FIDELITY AND SCHOOL MISSION

The new actors who have inserted themselves into the work of school improvement often enter the school in the form of grants. Just like federal and state grant programs, these dollars come with specific expectations to be followed with fidelity to assure local educators don't stray from the approved script. In many cases, the fidelity demanded is complete obedience, and school administrators are expected to assume the role of compliance officer.

At times, the political reality is that a school must go along with an outside set of expectations. In those cases, the wise leader works to adapt the new requirement as much as possible and minimize the negative effect.

For example, consider a situation whereby a new grant opportunity from a private foundation comes to a principal's desk. District leadership strongly encourages schools to apply. Wise leaders consider the specific programmatic elements of the grant to determine whether it is aligned to the core mission of the school. The essential question is: “Does this resource help us achieve our goals?” Then come the artful questions about the politics of the expectation, the timelines, and the match between the grant's demands and the school staff. The essential questions here: “Are we in a position to say no? Are we equipped to fold this grant into our work without disruption?”

SCHOOLING AS A MARKETPLACE

The standards and accountability era has also approached students and parents as customers in a large marketplace of schooling where choice is envisioned as the fairy dust that will help children soar to success. Provisions for school choice are often woven into the fabric of grant funding and educational policies. Directed by mandates on how to improve and prodded by a marketplace competition, local schools are expected to rouse from complacency and dramatically improve learning for students.

Central to this market view of education is popular opinion concerning individual schools, just as customers rate local restaurants. Schools have always sought to maintain a positive image in the community, but the reality of school choice in various forms puts added expectations on the principal to actively manage and advertise a positive image.

Typically schools are in the media when test scores are reported, and school-to-school comparisons are the focus. This implies that the “better” schools can be determined by those test scores. However, the mission and

motivation of most educators is rooted in a much broader definition of success for children. Most teachers appreciate that students come to school with unique intellectual, creative, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual needs and aspirations that are all aspects of "success" and cannot be compartmentalized or reduced to test scores. *That gestalt is at the core of teaching, and it anchors the school's moral mission.* It offers the light by which school administrators must lead, wisely recognizing the reality of test scores, school marketing, and comparisons, but maintaining professional space for teachers.

DEFINING SUCCESS

To achieve this, school administrators have to develop and maintain a robust definition of student success that reflects the school's moral mission. While not ignoring the public reporting of test scores and school comparisons, local schools must craft more demanding and comprehensive accountability indicators that honor the whole child, tap into community values, and rally local stakeholders.

Rather than looking to federal directives, state policy, or powerful national foundations, school leadership must recenter on the local community, which can be a deep well of support for the school.

This significant challenge calls for principals to engage with their local school communities in dynamic ways. Top-down changes typically bypass the local community, especially when that community is poor and majority-minority.

In many locations, the chasm between communities and their local schools has widened as the standards and accountability movement has grown. However, local communities have the most riding on the success of their children, and even distressed neighborhoods are storehouses of assets to be identified, valued, and braided into the mission and programming of the local school.

A deep irony is confirmed annually by the Gallup-Kaplan survey: the closer parents and community members are to their local school, the better they like it; the further away, the more media messages and pervasive narratives of failure and danger take over. This accounts for Americans' support of national and state policy efforts to "fix" terrible, failing schools *out there*, meanwhile worrying that *their* local schools are being distracted or damaged by all those meddling outsiders and excessive testing.

COMMUNITIES AS FULL PARTNERS

The rich engagement with the local community advocated here also assumes a different approach to vision. One of the essential qualities of a

successful leader has been the ability to cast a vision and engage others in the pursuit of that vision. In the site-based era, vision work was local and, especially at the elementary and middle levels, generally took into account the whole child. In the standards and accountability era, vision has often become a muddled concept featuring an external locus of control and subservience to the national test score obsession.

In the current context, it is the duty of the principal to foster the development of the school as a powerful, moral, *whole* community, create space for teachers and staff to be the professionals they are called to be, and simultaneously honor parents and patrons as full partners in service to the *whole* child. Administrators must lead an ongoing conversation with local communities using their leadership skills, knowledge, and strategies. That conversation must feature humble listening that uncovers local assets and aspirations and fosters robust collaboration. That conversation provides a process to define and refine a local consensus understanding of "success."

Such a definition must account for external mandates, but it will be grounded in the local community. Even so, it is the principal's moral duty throughout the conversation to assure that the inequities that lurk at the door seeking advantage for some at the expense of others are confronted boldly. Commitment to the common good is always the responsibility of the school leader.

Deep, ongoing community partnerships as described here may not lead to a spiffy vision-based banner hanging in the school entryway, but it will yield a living, powerful, commonly held moral mission. Such a vision has tremendous power to guide collaborative work that is understood by all to be the joint responsibility of the community and its school.

CREATING SPACE FOR THE ART AND SCIENCE OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

This approach requires leadership that is skilled in occasionally tacking against the prevailing winds, using the energy of current realities rather than fighting them directly, to maintain the space to do the collaboration, learning, and growing at the heart of principals' work as instructional leaders.

Thomas Sergiovanni used the term "building in canvas" to describe the leadership practice of presenting a public institutional face to district leadership and the larger community that meets the legitimate expectations of those beyond the school walls. The phrase is a reference to a strategy employed by the Allies in World War II. Using wood and canvas, mock planes and tanks gave the Germans an inflated impression of Allied strength.

In schools, the goal is to comply with the legitimate needs of the governing authority while making room for the school community to keep focused on the core mission. Often, this is all about translation. How does a leader help the organization receive an external mandate that cannot be ignored and recast it, with integrity, as an aspect of the local school's mission and vision?

Leadership is a gestalt that is both art and science. Standards, testing, and the accountability systems so prominent in the media today are part of the science of leadership. So are influential nongovernmental change agents. Understanding the interconnections among all these forces and applying essential leadership skills and knowledge to reestablish the local school as the locus of control is part of the art of leadership, and it is here that all the ingredients of leadership (as described in other chapters in this book) are required and in evidence: the intuitive and the formal preparation and experience. This interconnection should be included as part of the vision (chapter 6, Instructional Leadership) and the strategic plan (chapter 13, Goals: Planning, Organizational, Individual).

Administrators who fail to intentionally lead at the boundary where the local school and the wider world meet will struggle to lead in the school, according to the model presented in the other chapters of this book. When all of those ingredients are in evidence, it allows an administrator to successfully answer the question the new, larger stage of school leadership poses: "How does an effective administrator ensure the 'whole child' success of all students (including meeting standards) while navigating a world driven by external/outside forces?"