The interplay of school district culture, decision making procedures, leadership behaviors, and staff development are key to effective school districts and effective schools.

Effective School Districts: Some Key Components

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Introduction

Educators seeking to better understand schools have noted that the quality of what happens in schools is determined to a large extent by the effectiveness of the school district (Leithwood, 1989; Rosenholz, 1989). In fact, there appear to be strong similarities between the characteristics of effective schools and the features of effective school districts (Murphy and Hallinger, 1990). They include attention being given to curriculum and instruction, strong instructional leadership, high levels of student achievement, and strong ties between policy and practice at all levels of the organization. The latter is referred to as "coherence" by Leithwood (1990, p. 74) and "tight linkages" by Coleman and LaRoque (1990, p. 26).

The Culture

The blueprint for instructional improvement, leadership attention, and policy making lies in the stated mission of the school district. That mission should focus on teaching and student learning, be the standard by which virtually all educational decisions are judged, lead to a feeling of unity, and be agreed upon by staff, parents, and the general community (Coleman and LaRoque, 1990; Isherwood and McConaghy, 1991; Taylor and Levin, 1991).

Despite assertions that the role of school board members in creating schools is vague and unclear (Danzberger, Carol, Cunningham, Kirst, McCloud and Usdan, 1987), it is more generally accepted that school board members do clearly influence school district culture. That role can be destructive if, as has happened, teachers are perceived by school board members as primarily concerned with getting more pay for less work (R.G. Townsend, 1990). Certainly trustees are advised to show trust and respect for their teaching staff if they expect a positive staff morale to develop and sincere application of district policy to occur (D. Townsend, 1987). Exactly how school board members are able to exhibit that trust and respect will vary somewhat from one community to another, but it is vital that school boards attempt to agree upon the importance of that task if

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they wish to promote positive schooling (McGonagill, 1987). School board members should also maintain public support by being responsive to community concerns and attempting to represent all segments of their society (Danzberger, et. al., 1987).

School boards are themselves significantly influenced by their districts' chief executive officers. Isherwood and McConaghy (1991) found that school superintendents generally see themselves as being responsible for facilitating the development of a district vision of education and for leading the system from where it is to where it wants to go. Earl and West (1991) go further to say that system administrators have a responsibility to strive to be truly inspirational in their district's journey from what is to what can be. On another level, it has been suggested that school superintendents be held responsible for achieving stakeholder agreement on a long-range strategy for attaining system-wide improvement goals. In this way they can minimize recent public perceptions that "district offices are out of control (Seashore Louis, 1989, p. 146) and not doing enough to cut district wide administrative costs despite declining enrollments in some districts and rising educational expenditures in most districts.

A positive school district culture is of great importance to teachers. It is a critical factor in how well they implement innovations and how effective they are (Fullan, 1982). In fact, unless there are good relationships among the teaching staff, optimal student achievement is unlikely to occur (Rosenholz, 1985). Those staff relationships should be free from threat and should include the perception that opportunities for career advancement are equitable for all, including women and minorities (Wyatt, 1991).

Therefore, it can be said that effective school districts are characterized by shared values and purpose, support, trust, collegiality, open communication, high morale, innovation, and flexibility. When this environment exists, it is possible for innovation and enthusiasm to exist among teachers of all types (Fullan, 1982; Hopfengardner and Leahy, 1988; Thompson and Cooley, 1986)), contrary to the suggestion that teachers tend to "peak out" (McLaughlin and Marsh, 1979, p. 84) after five to seven years of classroom teaching.

Deciding Together

Collaborative decision making is a main feature of effective school districts. Its benefits include increased ownership for change, "safer" participation by teachers, and increased efficiency (Brown, 1990; Burkett and Bowers, 1991; Coleman and LaRoque, 1990; Fullan, 1982).

These benefits are best realized when key participants in a school district understand the direct impact of their actions on what happens in individual schools (Danzberger, et. al., 1987; D. Townsend, 1987). For example, school board members and district administrators are well advised to develop a working understanding of how the making of policy and administration are both separate and, in some ways, overlapping (McGonagill, 1987).

The role of district administrators is also critical in effective decision making. It involves achieving the delicate balance between tightly linking district policy with action in schools (Coleman and LaRoque, 1990) and allowing school-based staff the freedom to modify district policy to fit the local school community (Isherwood and McConaghy, 1991; Loucks–Horsley, 1990; Seashore Louis, 1989). It includes knowing how to delegate authority, what expectations to have for staff members, how to trust, when to provide appropriate pressure and support (Earl and West, 1991), and when to involve others in goal setting (Rosenholz, 1989).

Another key decision making role is filled by classroom teachers, who should be involved in school district planning and goal-setting processes (Musella, 1989). If they are ignored "they have the potential to subvert the best intentions of any new policy" (D. Townsend, 1987, p. 4).

There are additional characteristics of decision making in effective school districts. School administrators have the option of participating in inservice sessions that help them develop long-range planning skills (Seashore Louis, 1989). Decisions are based on appropriate information, improvement plans are designed so that important implementation details are not excluded, time-lines are neither too short or too long, and teachers are not overloaded (Fullan, 1982; Levine, 1991).

Leadership

Conspicuously absent in the literature on the superintendency in effective school districts is a great deal of attention to the mechanical tasks inherent in the role: budgeting, scheduling, developing agendas, and report writing. Instead, the powerful leadership function of superintendents in promoting district effectiveness is highlighted. Outstanding superintendents are described as inspirational, able to inspire "belief, faith, and idealism" (Murphy, 1991, p. 509). Their jobs are seen as multifaceted (Danzberger, et. al., 1987) and they are viewed as exhibiting the high quality leadership they expected of principals (Rosenholz, 1989).

Effective superintendents champion the people with whom they work. They hold high expectations for their staffs, support them appropriately, promote the school leadership roles of school principals, expand the district leadership team, are persistent in striving for their vision of excellence, clearly articulate the relationships between new initiatives and the mission of the district, and ensure coherence between organizational goals and individual teacher goals (Earl and West, 1991; Leithwood, 1989; Taylor and Levine, 1991). They are consistently visible in schools, listen well, seek to create a district environment free from threat, and regularly communicate with stakeholder groups (Coleman and LaRoque, 1990). Effective district administrators also foster collaboration and shared responsibility for growth among teachers and school-based administrators (Isherwood and McConaghy, 1991).

Finally, superintendent support for people in excellent school districts in accompanied by the judicious use of power. They monitor district activities and are ready to intercede when things are not going well (Isherwood and McConaghy, 1991; Murphy, 1991). Levine (1991, p. 392) has termed this careful balance of collaboration and control as "directed autonomy."

Staff Development

A salient feature of effective school districts is a continuous staff development program teachers, administrators, and support staff (Fullan, 1982). Staff development initiatives are planned collaboratively, focus on school-based improvement goals, and are long-term (Coleman and LaRoque, 1990; D. Townsend, 1987). Moreover, staff development is promoted more than formal staff supervision and evaluation (Isherwood and McConaghy, 1991). Successful staff development in school districts that make a difference for students focus on instructional improvement issues, but are careful to avoid getting mired in overly elaborate training efforts before smaller-scale successes have been achieved (Levine, 1991).

Staff development in effective school districts is supported in several ways. First, school staffs are provided with substantial time during the school day for participation in staff development activities (Levine, 1991). District administrators support staff development by allowing for maximum teacher control at the school level (Rosenholz, 1989). Improvement efforts are supported when materials, methods, and strategies that have worked elsewhere are sought, considered, and creatively modified by planners (Levine, 1991). District and school administrators signal strong support for staff development programs by participating in them, planning for time at administrators' meetings and staff meetings for discussion of improvement thrusts, and using district monies to pay for materials and resource personnel (Coleman and LaRoque, 1990; Fullan, 1982; D. Townsend, 1987). In addition, school support should be considered equitable in the eyes of most district personnel (Isherwood and McConaghy, 1991).

Efforts to improve the system-wide quality of instruction are most fruitful when priorities are set and only a few new programs are introduced at once (Seashore Louis, 1989). That way efforts can be focused and overload avoided. Further, effective districts give teachers and principals sufficient time to develop new skills and acquire appropriate knowledge (Coleman and LaRoque, 1990).

Administrators and teachers in effective school districts are aware that staff development endeavors aimed at improving instruction need to include observation, practice, and feedback, plus significant coaching support once teachers return to their home classrooms and incorporating new skills into their regular teaching repertoire (Joyce and Showers, 1980, 1981, 1982). Similarly, school improvement drives that focus on improved school-level decision making, staff relations, or curriculum planning will likely require significant technical assistance from outside change agents (Levine, 1991), particularly in their early stages.

Finally, the leadership role of the school principal in staff development is recognized and supported in effective school districts. Principals clearly understand district-wide expectations and they are supported by their district as they try to reach them (Coleman and LaRoque, 1990). They have access to appropriate inservice activities that will help them better understand the change processes that their staffs undergo as they consistently try to improve instruction.

Conclusion

Clearly, there are important guidelines for school board members, administrators, and teachers in the literature on effective school districts. Close attention should be paid to the interplay of school district culture, decision making procedures, leadership behaviors, and staff development activities. This will increase the probability that curriculum and instruction will become a district priority, that formal and informal instructional leadership will be exhibited at all levels of the organization, that classroom practice will be closer to the intent of policy, and, significantly, that student learning will increase.

The challenge for educational leaders is to make it happen in their organization. To quote Warren Bennis (1989, p. 146): You can't learn it by (only) reading up on it, you've got to do it. the only real laboratory is the laboratory of leadership itself."

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