Book Review

School Leadership for Authentic Family and Community Partnerships:Research for Transforming Practice

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The dominant model for school improvement can be characterized briefly as follows. Teams of educators with hand-picked parents and other community members decide which priorities their respective schools will emphasize. Typically, these priorities are bracketed by the regular school day and fall within the school's boundaries. The dominant model, thus, can be described as "walled-in," building-centered, and professionally-controlled (Lawson, 2010a).

Notwithstanding this model's benefits, when school improvement is walled-in, family and community opportunities and resources for learning, healthy development, and school success are walled-out. In brief, when educators rely on this model, they inadvertently place themselves in a double bind. They are held accountable for student learning and performance even as their influence and control over students' time use remains limited.

How can educators gain more influence and control over students' time, taking advantage of out-of-school time and utilizing relevant family and community resources for learning, healthy development, and success in school? One answer is to form school-family-community partnerships, using them to develop expanded models of school improvement.

Some partnership models target vulnerable populations, e.g., students not served effectively by conventional, stand-alone schools, especially in challenging places. These special partnership models are oriented toward social and economic justice. Their development hinges on principals ready, willing, and able to serve as social justice (also known as transformational) leaders.

Susan Auerbach's (2012) edited book is structured to advance such a social justice agenda via authentic partnerships. The book also provides special chapters

focused on the social justice leadership they require. She claims that partnerships are needed to address equity challenges associated with schools serving low-income youngsters and their families, especially populations of color and others who are marginalized and oppressed (p. 5).

However, this partnership agenda is not limited to these schools and their surrounding communities. "There is a place for promoting authentic partnerships in all school communities, regardless of demographics, as a moral obligation of leadership" (Auerbach, 2012, p. 5). By implication, rural schools and their communities are candidates for this genus of partnerships even though they get short shrift in this book.

So, what is an authentic partnership? "Authentic partnerships are defined as respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups that value relationship building, dialogue across difference, and sharing power in pursuit of common purpose in socially just, democratic schools" (Auerbach, 2012, p. 5). This social justice leadership for authentic partnerships is "a destination toward which leaders and their schools should strive" (p. 40).

To clarify partnership-leadership requirements, Auerbach outlines a partnership-leadership continuum. To showcase the special features of authentic partnerships and social justice leadership, Auerbach presents three other leadership frameworks. They are: (1) leadership characteristics that prevent partnerships; (2) leadership that encourages nominal partnerships; and, (3) leadership for traditional partnerships. This easy-to-appreciate framework is one of the strengths of the book.

Auerbach claims that the benefit system accompanying authentic partnerships are not merely school-centered. Families and community groups also will benefit as

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authentic is cultivated, relational trust is developed, and norms of reciprocity and resource exchanges become commonplace. In these ways and others, authentic partnerships have the potential to animate participatory democracy, resulting in more equitable and socially just schools and ultimately benefiting society writ large.

Potential is one thing. Realizing it is a different matter. Auerbach knows this, and so she emphasizes that the benefits hinge on socially just, transformative leadership. The other chapters (14 overall) are structured accordingly.

Carolyn Riehl's chapter in the first section of the book provides a strong foundation. She provides a cogent summary of past-present school leadership research, emphasizing an enduring emphasis of management for smooth organizational functioning as a springboard for advocacy for genuine leadership. She then identifies future directions for leadership practice and research associated with partnerships.

Several of the other chapters are authored by school leaders who have done this important work "on the ground." These chapters provide compelling stories, while other chapters provide academic-analytic essays.

These other chapters are organized in three sections. Each has a designated heading that announces the chapter focus. Three chapters focus on partnership leadership "across difference involving race, class, culture and power" with the assumption that race-ethnicity (Latino, African-American, Native American), class, and power differentials matter. A second section focuses on partnership leadership via policy and program development—with a justifiable emphasis on the import of policy for partnerships. The third emphasizes emergent challenges for partnership leadership with each chapter emphasizing one or more priorities.

The aforementioned synopsis, unavoidably selective and limited, is both descriptive and appreciative. Appreciation is grounded on the part in the claim that partnerships and other innovative school configurations and operations are needed in response to, and in anticipation of, rapid and dramatic social change. To wit: The fastest segments of the child population under age five represent families served least effectively by mainstream schools as well as public health and social services (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011).

What's more, seismic population changes are underway in most rural communities. To wit: An out-migration of families whose children have succeeded in schools often is accompanied by incoming families with comparatively lower levels of education and whose first language is not English. Meanwhile, many families who remained have done so because parents are hard-to-employ, in part because they are challenged by poverty and its correlates.

Walled-in, building-centered and professionally-controlled school improvement models are not likely to succeed under these circumstances. In intervention language, these models are necessary, but insufficient to achieve desirable outcomes. In this perspective, Auerbach and her authors are on solid ground in their recommendations because partnerships are needed.

The question, then, is not whether partnerships and the expanded school improvement planning they facilitate are needed. The question is whether Auerbach and the other authors provide rural school and community leaders with a comprehensive, coherent, and feasible improvement planning framework. There is reason to wonder.

Beyond appealing, grand platitudes for all that social justice leadership for authentic partnership offers and entails, this book does not provide enough details about pivotal decisions, partnership decision-making structures and dynamics, and salient partnership requirements (e.g., infrastructures, school-family-community coordinators)—all under circumstances with endemic novelty, complexity, and uncertainty.

On top of these needs, the current neo-liberal policy environment emphasizes common core standards, authentic assessment and evidence-guided instruction, teacher accountability, and principals' accountability for making teachers accountable, which consumes huge amounts of these school leaders' time, attention, and energy. In brief, today's policy clearly reinforces walled-in, building-centered, and professionally-controlled improvement models. What incentives, rewards, and opportunity structures should school and community leaders look for and develop in this sub-optimal policy environment? And where will these leaders find the required resources? What specific recommendations should rural leaders consider?

Rural leaders looking for specific answers will be disappointed. It is noteworthy that the keyword "rural" is not in the subject index. Where "rural schools" are mentioned (e.g., Auerbach, 2012, p. 5, 29), the reference is quick, and the analysis is superficial. This oversight is curious, given the main aims and core claims of this book, and also given the sweeping population shifts underway in rural communities, especially ones with multiple challenges. Surely, rural schools, no less than urban and inner ring suburban schools, merit social justice leadership for authentic partnerships.

Other gaps are evident. For example, the school-family-community partnership literature is growing, and so is a companion literature for expanded school improvement models sometimes framed and named as "comprehensive systems of learning supports" (Lawson, 2010a). A keynote feature of the best models is a focus on partnerships developed with an immediate and direct connection with schools' core technology and primary mission—learning and academic achievement. Partnerships, thus, focus on classrooms, especially supports for teachers in tandem

students' academic/classroom, school and community engagement.

Increasingly, partnerships only begin with learning and academic achievement. Whole child, healthy development is a shared priority for families, communities, and schools. In rural communities, this priority is framed by recognition, whether implicit or explicit, that schools are anchor institutions. Put differently, schools and the partnerships they enjoy are child and youth development hubs and family support centers. Toward this end, partnerships include organizational relationships with health and social service agencies, youth development organizations, out-of-school time learning providers, child care agencies, and, in the best examples, school-and-work and school-to-work partnerships. Many of these kinds of horizontal, inter-organizational partnerships are not featured in Auerbach's book.

There is another omission. Harboring a growing number of these horizontal partnerships are newly-minted vertical configurations variously called P-16 (preschool to the undergraduate college degree) and Cradle-to-Career Partnerships (McGrath, Donovan, Schaier-Peleg, & Van Buskirk, 2005; Lawson, 2010b). Operating under the mantra of "all one system," they are predicated on the practical necessity for advanced competence (often referenced as 21st Century Knowledge and Skills), competence typically gained in postsecondary education, including career and technical education.

One component is education-as-human-capital development for jobs and careers in the new economy, which gets short shrift in Auerbach's book. The other is education for democracy with recognition of new citizenship demands in fast-changing, information age, global societies. The two kinds of justice—social and economic—go hand-in-hand, highlighting the importance of more equitable outcomes from education and schooling, especially better life chances for family systems typically excluded from postsecondary education, associated jobs and careers, and the individual and family well-being associated with both.

In the same vein, alternative models for schooling and school improvement in the USA (and worldwide) receive scant attention. Alternatives known variously as community schools, community learning centers, extended schools, multi-service schools, and university-assisted/connected schools are growing rapidly in diverse parts of the world (Lawson, 2010a). All such models have partnerships as core components. All require a new generation of leaders and, beyond the people called leaders, new structures and operational processes for leadership.

In fact, the case can be made that these partnership-driven school and educational configurations are not merely new organizational alliances. Rather, they are harbingers for new institutional designs for schooling and education overall. They involve new organizational boundaries and boundary relationships. Additionally, these new designs require genuine collaboration among educators, health/social service providers, young people and their families, and both private and public sector leaders (Claiborne & Lawson, 2005). They also necessitate policy change, including policy integration (health policy, social policy, economic policy).

Where policy and leadership facilitators are concerned, it is noteworthy that the newly-revised Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards are important policy and practice facilitators. Standard 4 explicitly prioritizes competence with families and communities, and Standard 6 frames companion priorities. In the same vein, both National Principals Associations (elementary and secondary) are advancing fresh designs for leadership, schooling, and learning, including a much-needed priority for expanded learning during out-of-school time, implicating partnerships. This book would be stronger if it referenced these developments.

Partnership cautions also were needed because partnerships are not a panacea. Flawed partnerships have the potential to incubate school improvement and leadership problems. With Murphy's Law as a guide (if something can go wrong, it will), it is important to anticipate partnership formation and operation problems and human errors. In brief, partnership-oriented trouble-shooting guides are needed, including checklists, lessons learned, strategies for addressing and preventing obstacles, how to adjust when barriers arise, and proactive leadership strategies. This book would have been strengthened by such a chapter.

While Auerbach and the other authors rightly emphasize the need for research-driven partnerships and research-supported leadership for them, the partnership arena overall is home to a major paradox. Increasingly, policy leaders and partnership funders recommend and require leaders and other participants to demonstrate that they are implementing research-supported models and strategies, and with fidelity. All such initiatives are praiseworthy and long overdue.

Paradoxically, leaders and participants are rarely obliged to consult and use the research on partnerships and related social formations such as coalitions, alliances, and community mobilizations directed at civic capacity (Mitra, Frick, & Movit, 2008). Relevant research and scholarship are broadly interdisciplinary, posing access and intelligibility challenges and so reviewers must struggle to find coherence, agreement, and practical relevance.

Five important directives can be gleaned from this literature. First, partnerships are interventions. Increasingly, partnership interventions are directed at organizational and policy systems, including their boundaries; their structures and operations; their rules, roles, relationships, responsibilities, and resources; and their outcome priorities

and attendant accountability systems. As with all manner of interventions, two pivotal questions are salient: (1) If a particular kind of partnership (as intervention) is the solution, what is the problem to be solved or the need to be met? (2) To what extent does the intervention (with its empirical and theoretical warrants) fit or correspond to the need or problem? Typically answers to both questions require solid data, recommending that all partnership decision-making be(come) data-informed. Data-informed decision-making in complex partnerships is itself a leadership priority involving schools, district offices, and relevant community and family partners.

The second directive draws on other requirements for research rigor, especially construct specification and validation. The main question: How are the relevant constructs operationally defined? The priority here is for specifications regarding what the priority is (e.g., the core, non-negotiable features of a partnership); and, also, what it is not. The advocacy literature provides a dizzying menu of alternatives, starting with partnership, but also including alternatives such as alliances, coalitions, community organizing, neighborhood mobilization, and collaborations. Reviewers are further befuddled when these constructs are used interchangeably. Auerbach follows suit when she defines authentic partnerships as involving "alliances" (pp. 5).

Research, policy, and practice improvements hinge on construct specification. For example, one might reserve "partnership" for relationships among organizations, while reserving the family of c-words (communication, consultation, coordination, and collaboration—each strictly defined as interventions) for relationships among people. You can have one (e.g., new working relationships among organizations) without the other (e.g., new working relationships among people). In the end, you need both, and their institutionalization and sustainability are facilitated by formal memoranda of understanding (for partnerships involving established systems) and also by brokered agreements (manifested in bills of rights, formal decision-making protocols, and codes of conduct) in new working relationship among educators, young people, parents and neighborhood leaders.

The third directive is to draw on such solid definitions by specifying the unit(s) of analysis. In actual work on the ground, this entails specifying the target system (as a unit of analysis) and then using data and other resources to decide on the specific intervention or intervention system (e.g., a partnership as one unit of analysis). Examples of potential targets include policies; inter-organizational relationships; organizations such as schools and school district offices; professions; inter-professional relationships; entire cities or towns, especially their civic capacity; neighborhoods, especially their collective efficacy for children; parents;

families; businesses; and governments. Partnerships, alliances, coalitions, service integration initiatives, youth leadership initiatives, and inter-professional collaborations (strictly defined) are among the intervention alternatives available to facilitate improvements in these targets. To reiterate: The key is to specify the unit(s) of analysis on the way to aligning the targeted improvement priority with the research-supported, theoretically-sound intervention(s).

This framework enables a critical reading of the several chapters in this book. As with a seeming majority of books, journal articles, and practice guides in this general partnership arena, what need to be separate units of analysis typically are conflated. For example: Partnership is conflated with alliance, and then collaboration (and the adjective collaborative) are conflated with partnership. Parent is conflated with family (with no mention of "family system); and then both parent and family are conflated with the home. Community group is conflated with community agency or organization. Involvement is conflated with engagement. New relationships among organizations are conflated with new relationships among people. Community organizing models for school improvement are conflated with multi-component community partnership improvement models. Leaders as people are conflated with leadership functions, structures, and processes. This is not a formula for success.

The fourth directive concerns partnership leadership. It starts with the instructive and inspirational accounts provided in this book, but also emphasizes cautions regarding overly-ambitious role prescriptions for principals and superintendents. To reiterate, in the current policy environment, principals are struggling to do all that is required for new requirements involving the common core standards, teacher supervision and evaluation, new district and state data reporting requirements, and others on a growing list.

In this context, important lessons learned can be derived from more mature partnership initiatives. One lesson learned is that leadership is both a function and an activity. Another is that no one person can do it all, alone. More concretely, one or more partnership coordinators are appointed and deployed. In smaller schools, one person performs this role and often is called the school-family-community coordinator, or service coordinator, or resource coordinator. School social workers often are deployed for this work, functioning like an assistant principal.

In large schools, several key coordinators may be deployed in a comprehensive system of learning and partnership supports. To wit: One or more person may be charged with organizing and mobilizing parents and families, while others take charge of learning during out-of-school time, others work with health and social service agencies, and still others connect with youth development agencies,

neighborhood organizations, and businesses. Increasingly, and especially in Title 1 schools, parents are employed and receive training for this coordinative work, and they are especially valuable when they possess both cultural competence and language proficiencies for communicating with and engaging culturally-diverse families.

Arguably, the very best of these coordinative systems target firm connections with classrooms, supporting teachers and students alike in the shared quest for high quality teaching and learning. Reporting to the principal, the key people sharing leadership roles and responsibilities are part of a comprehensive, multi-faceted leadership system.

Firmly grounded in the structure and governance of each school, the district has its own umbrella-like, leadership structures. District leadership structures and processes are designed to align, coordinate, and maximize the potential of school-owned and –operated resources even as community and family-based resources are coordinated and maximized in tandem. More than a superintendent can do, a district level coordinator-leader is a practical necessity for intra-district (vertical) alignment and district-community (horizontal) coordination. Such is the nature of a leadership infrastructure for advanced school-family-community partnerships.

The fifth and final directive: Partnership leaders increasingly are responsible, indeed accountable, for developing research-supported logic models. In many circles, these models are known (for better and worse) as the partnership's theory of action or its theory of change (Lawson, Claiborne, Hardiman, Austin, & Surko, 2007). Here too, intervention logic is manifest because a theory of action or theory of change specifies how schools and communities, via partnerships, will progress from today's sub-optimal status and outcomes to an improved state of affairs.

In other words, a partnership's theory of change maps the way from "here" (today) to "there" (a better, more ideal future). Informed by data and proceeding with evaluation-driven, continuous quality improvement mechanisms, partnership leadership systems progressing with explicit, testable theories of change proceed with due recognition that past-present knowledge and intervention development remain incomplete. Indeed, these partnerships routinely incubate innovations. Simultaneously, they generate knowledge and understanding for scale-up and also for use in leadership preparation programs. Auerbach and her chapter authors doubtless have much to offer on all such counts. Others can seize the opportunity.

The timing is right. Grounded in the long-standing structural inequities associated with schooling in America, outcome inequalities not only remain, but may be increasing. Place-based outcome disparities (education, health, mental health, employment) are especially important. Too many parts of rural America are examples of places with interacting outcome disparities. Too formidable for schools to address alone, solid, strategic, and sustainable partnerships and the genuine collaboration they facilitate are important solutions.

Because Auerbach's book promotes and advances this agenda, it is an important contribution. On the other hand, no current book, including this one, provides all of the requisite details. On the heels of this criticism, it also needs to be said that every book focused on partnerships and their complex change agendas is destined to be selective and therefore limited.

One implication is that books alone are not the answer to improvement planning in rural America. Special research-and-development oriented school-family-community partnerships are needed, and so are networks among them formed to inform policy development and change. Consistent with Auerbach's main claim, all such partnerships will hinge on a new generation of school and district leaders who know how to optimize partnerships, develop the requisite infrastructure, garner new resources, and develop cross-boundary coordination and bridging mechanisms.

Professional education programs for school and district leaders will need to be redesigned accordingly; and with a companion requirement. Partnerships between schools, colleges, and departments of education and rural school-family-community partnerships are needed. Founded on needs for simultaneous renewal and improvement, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers working together will be positioned to gain the now-missing knowledge and understanding regarding all that is uniquely rural and what is not. Such is the shared agenda that lies ahead, and funders from several sectors are encouraged to adopt and support it.

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