

Cultivating Leadership Autonomy for Complex Times

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We are in a moment of opportunity. The struggle over who controls the future of America’s public schools may come down to a matter of trust.

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During a speech in August, President Biden described the world as being at an *inflection point*, defining it as an abrupt turn off an established path without the means to get back on track:

“The world is changing and not because of leaders, but because of fundamental changes like global warming and artificial intelligence. We’re seeing changes ... across the world in fundamental ways. And so, we better get going on what we’re going to do about it, both in foreign policy and domestic policy.”

He asked the audience to name a part of the world that looks like it did 10 years ago or will look the same 10 years into the future. Encouraging his audience to see these changes as “enormous opportunities,” he stated, “[W]e stands at an inflection point, an inflection point in history, where the

choices we make now are going to shape the direction of our world for decades to come. The world has changed.”

Those leading today’s schools understand inflection points—their challenges and opportunities. School leaders guided by informed visions understand that their students’ futures will be radically different than those of past generations. Graduates will need the skills to adapt and innovate, as will the educators preparing them. Such adaptation and innovation will require leaders to develop cultures of learning and collaboration within and across their schools. It will be imperative to foster educators’ initiative and autonomy, as well as their knowledge and skills. This will also require trust.

Fullan has defined educational change as the implementation of intensive multidimensional action sustained over several years that alters the climate and culture of schools while building capacity and ownership

among stakeholders. What impedes multidimensional action is a revolving door of leaders. They enter with promises of innovation or transformation often in reaction to external influencers who have ignored or underestimated the root causes of problems or the complexities within the system and its community. Such transient leaders, impatient for results, compound system failures by piling on more superficial solutions, adding stress to systemic, structural, and cultural fissures.

Yet, patient system leaders understand these impediments. Their work, then, becomes the fortification of the capacity and autonomy of building leaders and educators at the school level.

This is where change is made and sustained. Those who stay in the system and outlast transient leadership while coping with the maelstroms of inevitable inflection points provide the greatest potential to have profound and lasting effects on the school's climate, culture, and success with students. Fullan calls for the implementation of intensive multidimensional action sustained over several years. Equipping those leading the schools and classrooms with both capacity and autonomy is paramount for such sustainability.

Today's school leaders face challenges on many fronts—culture wars, privatization, calls for parental rights, inequities, disruptive technologies, school security, disinformation, funding, and so much more. Alone, superintendents cannot manage these. They need educational leaders at the building level who can make independent decisions in the context of the broader system design that values a culture of continuous organizational learning.

In the fall issue of the *AASA Journal of Scholarship & Practice*, educators and researchers provide examples of ways to prepare leaders to do this work.

Steven Baule, a former superintendent, and Paige Peterson, an elementary teacher, both researchers at Winona State University in Minnesota, studied the relationship between teacher burnout and professional development. Providing literature on the emotional demands of teaching and ways in which professional development can provide formal and informal support, the authors emphasize the importance of collaboration, interaction, experimentation, consultation, and reflection to assist when encountering difficulties.

Terry Orr, the director of the doctoral program in educational leadership at Fordham University in New York City, in her study, “The Comparative Benefits and Outcomes of Enriched Internship Experiences,” offers evidence for the impact of a multi-cohort state-funded internship initiative: “Changing expectations for leadership interns as administrative support in schools appears to be fostering a more positive climate for districts to create quality internships and for building leaders to be receptive to using interns to complement their own work, enabling more robust experiences.”

In her commentary, “Designing Instructional Coaching: Suggestions for Supporting Teachers’ Professional Learning for the 21st Century,” Sara Woulfin, an associate professor of educational leadership and policy at the University of Texas at Austin, describes a coaching model that includes district leaders designing infrastructure for instructional reform and mediating coaching.

Her piece examines the landscape of coaching and summarizes the role of infrastructure and leadership in aiding coaching to function as a lever for systemic change: “We underscore coaches can work in caring, instructionally focused ways to accelerate teacher learning and support tailored instructional change meeting the needs of teachers, leaders, schools, and communities.”

Finally, former superintendent, Art Stellar, reviews David Berliner’s & Carl Hermann’s, 2022 book, *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy*. This series of essays from some of education’s leading thinkers provides perspectives on fifty years of reform efforts. One writer describes the lack of progress in addressing achievement gaps:

“What we have to show is the debris field of politicians’ magic bombs. None of the initiatives were well thought out or supported in time or money ... We might as well have measured the effects with a kaleidoscope ... We took a law that was designed to ensure equal opportunities for all, took away their resources, demanded even higher test

scores for impoverished schools and punished them for failing. And that’s our dirty little secret.” (p.13)

Education historian, Diane Ravitch, provides a brief but excellent history of public education, while critiquing the efforts of “fake school reformers,” such as Walton, Gates, Koch, etc., wealthy members of the elite. She writes that “... it is time to abandon the status quo of disruption and turmoil. It is time to reimagine our public schools and to bring a fresh vision to planning for them” (p.28).

Part of that reimagining becomes the responsibility of the superintendents and their teams of building-level educators. If schools are, indeed, at multiple inflection points, and it is accepted that transformation in complex contexts requires Fullan’s sustained multi-dimensional actions, then a way forward comes through the development and facilitation of a professional learning culture that is designed to outlast transient leaders, survive disruptive and politically misguided reforms, and develop adaptable leaders who can balance their professional autonomy with an appreciation for a systemic strategic alignment.