

“The Principal Story” PBS Documentary Highlights Tough Job of Today’s Principals; Raises Questions About How District Can Support School Leaders

Well-trained, quality leaders who can clarify goals and ensure that everyone in an organization has the support and authority to reach those goals are essential to success in all walks of life, including the world of education..



Research finds that there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a strong leader. While classroom instruction is of primary importance, leadership – or the lack of it – can determine whether good ideas or practices in a single classroom spread systemwide so that all children benefit.

Given this country’s national commitment to help every child be a successful learner, the importance of having high-quality leaders in all schools is greater than ever. To help raise awareness about the need for strong school leadership and the roles school districts, policymakers and others play in supporting effective leaders, [The Wallace Foundation](#) commissioned a film documentary, “[The Principal Story](#),” and a related outreach campaign.

This hour-long documentary follows two school leaders – novice principal Tresa D. Dunbar of Henry H. Nash Elementary School in Chicago and veteran principal Kerry Purcell of Harvard Park Elementary School in Springfield, Ill. – throughout a school year. The film chronicles the challenges these principals—and principals across the nation—face in turning around low-performing public schools and raising student achievement, especially in high-poverty communities.

“Too many media stories tell us public education is failing,” says Simon Kilmurry, executive director of American Documentary/P.O.V. “The national PBS broadcast of “**The Principal Story**” tells us another story: that despite myriad challenges, the vast majority of school leaders strive to do their utmost for their teachers, students and families, with a dedication that is unrecognized by most of us.”

The film also highlights how districts can support principals. For example, in one scene, area administrators conduct a “walk through” of Dunbar’s school and offer guidance

about improving instruction. Dunbar describes the process as “valuable,” but adds that “as a school on probation, I need so much more help.” She explains that she needs additional support to address critical challenges students face outside school.

“**The Principal Story**” outreach campaign, in which AASA is participating, also includes local events hosted by public television stations around the country. School and district leaders, teachers, parents, students and the public meet for small- and large-group viewings and facilitated conversations about leaders as drivers of school improvement and student achievement.

Supplemental videos and accompanying discussion guides will assist in these outreach and professional development efforts. For example, four videos feature innovative leadership programs in Atlanta, New York City, Louisville (Ky.) and Oregon.

Another video, “Leadership Matters,” will, we hope, spark conversation among district and state officials to focus on policy solutions that can improve training and on-the-job support for principals. As Education Trust President Kati Haycock states, “In these tough economic times, it would be very easy for districts to say, ‘Sure, I know school leadership is important, but I just can’t afford to do that now.’ My response to that is: You can’t afford not to.”

The Role of Districts in Supporting High-Quality School Leaders

To sustain and broaden gains in student achievement, we cannot stop at developing better school leaders; we also must strengthen leadership systemwide. The long-term success of principals requires supportive, skilled leaders at all levels of public education – especially at the district level.

Once upon a time, principals were managers of buildings, budgets and buses. As “The Principal Story” illustrates, today’s school leaders are much more than that. They also must be instructional leaders, able to develop teacher and school capacity to improve education outcomes for all students. Districts must put new programs and policies in place to support principal effectiveness.

For nearly a decade, The Wallace Foundation has commissioned research and collaborated with selected states and districts to support and share effective ideas and practices to strengthen education leadership. The results of this work suggests four core elements of policy that largely determine the quality of school leadership and the environment in which school leaders will succeed or fail. They are:

- **Effective preparation and selection** that will ensure leaders have the skills needed to lead specific schools and districts. High-quality preparation programs select recruits purposely and emphasize curricula focused on instructional leadership and school improvement, active and student-centered learning experiences that integrate theory and practice, formalized mentoring and vigorous internships.

- **Ongoing support** for school leaders, including high-quality mentoring for new principals and professional development for all principals to promote career-long growth in line with the evolving needs of schools and districts.
- **High-quality assessments** that give principals feedback they can use to improve their effectiveness as instructional leaders. New research suggests that effective assessments reinforce the organization’s core goals, are considered an ongoing process for professional growth and are consistently applied and tested for fairness.
- **Improved data access and use** by schools and districts. Districts and states should not only provide principals with useful data, but also train them to collect their own data. For example, in “The Principal Story,” teachers at Harvard Park tested students every month to find out how many words they could read per minute. The principal and teachers then used that information to make timely decisions to guide instruction, rather than waiting to receive achievement data from the district or state.

“**The Principal Story**’ provides an opportunity to see the real story of being a principal and to ask ourselves, what should that story be if we care about improving kids’ learning?” says Richard Laine, The Wallace Foundation’s director of education. “We invite district and other education leaders to use the film and support material available on our website as a springboard for discussion about the critical ways they can and must support principals.”

“**The Principal Story**,” produced by Nomadic Pictures, will be broadcast on Sept. 15, at 10 p.m. EST, as part of PBS’ P.O.V. series (check P.O.V. for local listings – www.pbs.org/pov). To order the full documentary, view supplemental materials or organize a viewing in your area, visit www.wallacefoundation.org/principalstory. For more information and research about education leadership, visit The Wallace Foundation’s Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

Weekly Issues: Board-Superintendent Communication



BY WILLIAM A. CLARK

Clark is superintendent of the Milton School District in Milton Pennsylvania.

Regular communication is the key to building and maintaining a good relationship with your school board. One simple but powerful way to do this is to give board members weekly updates about district events as well as relevant local, state, and national issues in education.

Producing the weekly update can be as simple as keeping notes about issues that should be brought to the board's attention—whether it's recognition of a student or a legal problem—and sending an e-mail to all board members on Friday afternoon apprising them of the week's most important events.

Here is an example of the kinds of issues that might be covered in the weekly e-mail.

1. Transportation Interviews – The time for the transportation interviews has been changed to 5:30 p.m. The management team will interview one candidate for ½ hour while the board interviews the other; they will then switch. Pizza and refreshments will be provided.
2. Board Retreat – I have been approached by a couple of board members who are interested in a board retreat. If you are interested, please let me know.
3. AASA Conference – I will be attending the national superintendents conference, leaving at 6:15 a.m. on 2/17 and returning at 6:30 p.m. on 2/22. If any problems arise, Brian S. and Deb M. will be able to field questions or address issues that require immediate attention. Or, you can call the office and talk to Brenda. She will be able to get a hold of me.
4. PSA/Board/Family – The board dinner at JFB will be April 22 at 6:00 p.m. Please RSVP to Brenda or me.
5. IU Workshop – Anyone interested in the IU board workshop on April 8 at 6:00 – 8:30 on the topic "Operating Successfully as a Team of 10," let me know as soon as possible. The district must RSVP by April 1.
6. Phone Conference – As part of my AASA Governing Board position, I was invited to participate in a phone conference with Education Secretary Duncan. More than 500 individuals participated in a phone conversation about the economic stimulus package that President Obama proposed and its impact on education.
7. Auto Shop – At the meeting with the finance committee, a request by the new auto shop instructor to update tools for the Auto Shop was discussed. For this

- to happen, funds will be transferred from the Capital Reserve Fund in the amount of \$19,877.43. The amount discussed at the committee meeting was \$15,000. The original request was \$25,000. This item will be placed on the agenda for approval at the Feb. 17 meeting. An itemized list of items will be available for review at the board meeting.
8. Here is my schedule for the coming week:
- Monday**
Sodom School Committee
6:00 Negotiations Mtg.
 - Tuesday**
AASA Governing Board Mtg.
 - Wednesday**
AASA Governing Board Mtg.
 - Thursday**
AASA Conference
 - Friday**
AASA Conference

Note that the bullet points are concise. This serves two purposes. First, it gives board members a quick snapshot of the most important information. They are thus more likely to read it. Second, the brief statements provide minimal details to avoid divulging too much about what may be a sensitive topic.

For example, if a teacher discipline matter was discussed during the week, the superintendent might share: “High school staff discipline issue arose concerning an alleged DUI. Details will be discussed the next time we get together as a group in Executive Session.” This is enough to inform the board of an issue; any member who wants more details before the meeting can contact the superintendent directly. Similarly, if board members have information or expertise to lend in a specific area mentioned in the weekly update, they can contact the superintendent.

These weekly updates decrease micromanaging by the board and increase understanding of the issues and challenges the superintendent encounters during a typical week.

Before sending out the weekly update, the superintendent might invite fellow cabinet members to review the items to ensure the accuracy of the statements and to add any additional information they believe should be covered.

When e-mailing the update, the superintendent might want to copy the confidential secretary. This keeps the secretary aware of the issues, incidents and upcoming meetings so if a board members calls the superintendent regarding the items, the secretary will be able to field questions or respond in an appropriate manner.

Knowing what issues the superintendent confronts on a daily basis—both large and small—gives the board an opportunity to stay abreast of what’s going on in the district

and be more effective representatives for their constituents. Open lines of communication between the superintendent and board allow a free flow of information that leads to a more effective school district.

Getting Control of the Message: The Superintendent as News Editor



BY PAUL M. HEWITT

Hewitt is assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Arkansas.

In his book, *Leadership Jazz*, Max DuPree (1992) states, "I learned that if you are a leader and you're not sick and tired of communicating, you probably aren't doing a good enough job" (p. 100). Communication is something everyone talks about but few people really do, or know how to approach.

For a few years between my retirement from the superintendency and my venture into the world of academia, I worked as a superintendent search consultant with seven districts. This proved to be one of the most enlightening learning experiences of my career. It was through this experience that I realized that superintendents need a new paradigm for communication.

Here are some of the lessons I learned about what it takes to be an effective communicator as well as some strategies for moving into the realm of controlling and communicating the message using 21st Century media.

Visibility and Understanding

As part of the search process, I tried to get a better understanding of the school district culture and define the challenges inherent to the district. I held open meetings at every school site and office to gain teacher input and give people a voice in the search process. At these meetings, I asked two questions:

1. What are the qualities and abilities you'd like to see in a new superintendent?
2. What are the biggest challenges you believe the new superintendent will face when he or she arrives?

It didn't matter whether the school district was large or small, urban or rural, the vast majority of teachers gave the same answers. They wanted a superintendent who was visible and who understood the pressures and challenges they faced every day. In other words, teachers wanted superintendents who were visible and empathetic.

In reality, superintendents **are** aware of and empathetic to the challenges teachers face, but in a large urban school district with 50 or more schools, it is impossible for the superintendent to travel to every school on a regular basis. A superintendent may visit school "A," but the teachers at the other schools don't know this and assume the superintendent is disconnected.

What do you do when you want to be visible but you can't be everywhere at one time?

Start a blog.

A blog, shorthand for web log, is a way of communicating through your website. Ask your technology staff to set up the district web page to include a place where you can share your daily reflections via a blog. Make it prominent on the home page so people can just click and read.

What do you write about? Tell people what you did today. For example: "Today I visited First Street Elementary School and had the wonderful opportunity to visit 12 classrooms. I saw teachers valiantly teaching large classes of full of students from diverse cultures, most of whom speak a language other than English at home. The First Street teachers were exceptional in the way they differentiated instruction and gave a tremendous effort to ensure all students will learn."

Talk about meetings you attended and issues that were addressed, while maintaining confidentiality, of course. Each blog may take you 10 minutes to type; maintaining it is definitely not a major time demand. So, what's the result?

Almost every teacher in the district will check the superintendent's blog each night. The teacher at South Street School will know that the superintendent saw first-hand the challenges she faces. Ask the IT technician to include a counter on the website so you know how many times people view your blog. You'll be amazed, I am sure.

Through this medium, you are able to control the message and frame your own image while providing valuable information. However, take great care in your choice of words and topics; a poorly worded message or an item that should have been left out could generate controversy rather than support.

Message Control

During one district's superintendent search process I came across a newspaper whose coverage of the school district was incredibly negative. Articles were slanted and editorials were critical of anything the school board or administration did. There was no

way a school district or new superintendent could have a positive image in that community given the newspaper's negativity.

The school district would never move forward and the superintendent could never be successful as long as the local paper had total media control. My advice to the new superintendent was to transform his web page into a newspaper and take control of the message.

According to The Pew Research Center for People and the Press (2006), 31% of Americans got their news on line in 2006. A study by the same group two years later found that 37% of Americans were now getting their news on line. This reflects an increase of 6% in fewer than two years with on-line readership expected to continue to grow.

If the local newspaper is the only source of school news, the public gets one side of the story—a biased and uncontrolled message with nothing to balance it.

How do you turn your district's home page into a newspaper? How do you ensure the public gets your message?

Involve your journalism teachers and students in developing the home page into a source of news about what's going on in your district. In addition to your blog and the announcements about special programs, significant dates and other information your parents and community should know about, be sure to include a feature focused on high school sports.

In most school districts, the local newspaper reporter only covers the big games. The story is printed the next day or even several days later. However, a student reporter will be at every game and post the results to the home page immediately.

In many small communities, the primary reason people read a local paper is for high school sports. If the school district home page displays sports news with a lot of names and pictures, the home page will quickly become the number one news source for most families. No matter what the news, event, or activity, the home page "newspaper" from the school district will always be able to get the message out first. Parents, relatives, and other sports fans will check your postings before they go to bed on game night. In essence, the home page will scoop the local newspaper every time.

The addition of feature articles about events in the schools and feature articles about policy issues in the district will provide the public with a timely and well rounded news source. Through this medium, the public will be able to hear what's good about your schools and the positive things that are happening every day.

Create Your Image

Communication is critical, and getting out a positive message is well within the superintendent's control. Set up a blog and let the staff and community know what you do as an education leader. Convert your district web page into your own newspaper and give your school district the positive image it deserves.

As a new superintendent, you will set a high standard for positive communication with your community. What could be more positive? If the superintendent doesn't get the word out, someone else will. Great communication is only a click away.

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Contact Us

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The American Association of School Administrators is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders across the United States.