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● You are here: Home > Transforming Education

Learning and Leading: Rethinking District-School Relationships

by George S. Perry, Jr. and Jennifer McDermott

We feel fortunate to work as partners with urban schools and districts committed to improving student achievement. In the places where we work, district, school and teacher leaders have been making progress in finding ways to help all students achieve at high levels. These leaders strive to know and to show that they are doing a good job in meeting the changing and increasing expectations associated with the effort to improve student achievement. They have learned much about the importance of various strategies, including:

- Having a single set of clear content standards to guide the development of curriculum and assessment
- Identifying targets for improvement in a few specific areas, such as in reading or math, and focusing attention and resources on the targets over time
- Asking hard questions about the students who are successful and those who are not
- Improving instruction through building teachers' knowledge and ability to reflect on their practice
- Determining what students know through continuous assessments, while recognizing that the assessments we have are not yet the assessments we need

These strategies – standards and curriculum, improvement targets, data, instruction, and assessment systems – are critical to improving student achievement. An important beginning step in the long road to improving schools is to identify improvement strategies. However, it is only a first step. Leaders recognize that the strategies are only as effective as the people using them. New strategies require new learning – learning to inform different ways of working. Successful leaders are those who build the capacity of everyone in the organization - parents, students, teachers, site and district administrators and system leaders – in knowing, understanding and using the strategies effectively. Leaders do so by being willing to redefine and rethink traditional roles, responsibilities and actions, and to embed learning at all levels. In this article, we consider some overarching issues in redefining and rethinking roles, and explore the struggles of one group, central office administrators responsible for supervising schools, who can be pivotal in building the capacity of people in the organization.

The call to redefine and to rethink organizations, and the roles, responsibilities and actions of people in them, is not news. Neither is the importance of creating organizations that learn from their experiences. What may be news is that districts and schools are not likely to be successful in the effort to increase student achievement in a standards-based educational system unless and until they redefine and rethink their organizations and create organizations in which learning about effective practice at all levels is at the center of their work. Much of the lack of progress, and in some cases a sense of failure and frustration, among districts, schools and the people in them comes from not recognizing that the game has changed. The traditional ways of operating schools and districts are a square peg that too many people are trying to force into the round hole of new expectations. It doesn't work. After a decade of effort, it is evident to many that it is not working. They just don't know why – or what to do about it.

We have learned the importance of intentionally and simultaneously engaging district, school and teacher leaders in redefining and rethinking organizations so that learning is at the center of their work. It comes as no surprise that support from the most senior leaders in the district – school board, superintendent, union leaders – is critical to improving schools and districts. We recognize that improving schools and districts requires that everyone in the organization lead and take

responsibility within their sphere of influence. In particular, we believe that there are certain roles within the organization that are well positioned for leading change and improvement. In our experience, those critical to implementing the effort are (1) central office administrators responsible for supervising schools, (2) principals and school leadership teams and (3) school-based professional development providers, often called site-based staff developers or academic coaches. These three groups are positioned in the organization to be able to lead others in thinking differently about implementing improvement strategies given the context and history of the organization. Their leadership is both symbolic, because those in the organization watch what they do as well as what they say, and practical, because they lead every day.

We turn our consideration to new roles for one group of leaders – central office administrators responsible for supervising schools, which we call school supervisors. School supervisors have an essential, yet often neglected, role in leading the effort to redesign and rethink the organization, and placing learning at the center. We have not seen a district that has been successful in leading and sustaining change that did not recognize the importance of these roles. School supervisors, whether they are assistant superintendents or directors, because of their proximity to the schools, are the ones who set expectations for the schools. Principals will respond to expectations, and if they are encouraged, they will seek help from those who supervise them. Principals value that which their supervisors value.

The leadership role of school supervisors in creating change and improvement may appear to be obvious. However, school supervisors struggle with their roles even in districts where the responsibilities are clear. Part of the explanation can be found in the inherent tension in the school supervisor's role in leading redesign and rethinking. School supervisors are often selected because they can be trusted to act and to give advice in ways consistent with the district's policies and practices – because they can be trusted to maintain and sustain the system. They are selected rarely because they are likely to think outside the box. Although consistency and reliability are important leadership attributes, they can work against redesign and rethinking. So, if the people in the organization who are expected to lead change have been chosen for their positions because they can best protect the system, supervisors are caught between two conflicting roles. We have known scores of

supervisors who have worked their way into positions only to find that the skills they bring are no longer the right ones. When they no longer feel that their knowledge and skills match the job, they react – sometimes negatively. Reorganizations, retirements and demotions result from frustrations shared by district leaders and supervisors who are trying to place round pegs in square holes. It does not need to be so.

Redesigning and rethinking to create learning is complex and difficult work in which the differences between perception and reality are not clear. In the best of situations, school supervisors receive support to understand that some fundamental relationships between central office and schools need to be rethought. Since relationships are not often clear, and habits of mind are resistant to change, the support might come in the form of a process of inquiry and reflection from a critical friend. The process of inquiry can be long. In order to quicken the pace, it is helpful to begin by looking at ways relationships are influenced by those within the organization. Our work suggests that school supervisors influence relationships in several ways. We offer a few ways, and examples of how these ways may lead to rethinking relationships.

School supervisors influence relationships by:

- **Clarifying expectations** – Action begins with the superintendent and the board articulating a clear vision of expectations for schools. However, expectations that seem to be clear are often not, and expectations are rarely questioned constructively. School supervisors create opportunities to clarify and to question.
- **Setting priorities** – School supervisors are the messengers of the vision, and their actions and interactions are consistent with the vision. Equally important, they stop doing, and requiring schools to do, those things that are not consistent with the vision.
- **Being consistent** – School supervisors insist all schools, across grade levels, be part of the vision – not just some schools.
- **Creating opportunities for communication** – In order to meet expectations, supervisors and school administrators need to learn together, and honest communication about "the good, the bad and the ugly" needs to be two-way.
- **Having authentic conversations** – The work of improving instruction takes place within schools and within classrooms. School supervisors and central office staff are in schools and in classrooms to observe and to be part of the work.
- **Collecting data** – Central office requests of schools are carefully

- considered and limited to minimal data that are essential to implementing the vision.
- **Modeling** – School supervisors model a "professional culture" of openness and seeking knowledge. Not jumping to answers and solutions and being able to deal with ambiguity are essential to learning.
 - **Planning** – Setting clear direction is essential to improvement, but because districts and schools are complex places with their own history and nuances, not many steps on the road to improvement can be predetermined. Supervisors know schools and encourage flexible planning that evolves, within guiding parameters, over time.
 - **Influencing culture** – To counter the natural competition that exists between schools, supervisors foster structures that provide for collaboration among school leaders and staff.
 - **Building accountability** – School supervisors develop explicit accountability systems targeting short-term indicators that contribute to long-term improvements.
 - **Supervising** – Administrator evaluation systems emphasize school improvement and individual professional growth, and provide opportunities for honest conversations.

Each of these ways that school supervisors influence relationships between the central office and schools is worthy of careful consideration. Each can be a starting point for rethinking all central office and school relationships. And each requires that school supervisors learn, along with district, school and teacher leaders, how the new relationship can be used effectively to raise achievement for all students.

How best to support school supervisors in redesigning and rethinking requires a sea change for many districts. It cannot be assumed that school supervisors will know which relationships will need to change, that they will know how to lead in rethinking relationships, or that they can do so without support. However, unless they are willing to lead the careful deliberation about these relationships, the relationships will remain unaltered, and the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to operate in fundamentally different ways will not be attained.

We are still at the early stages of learning how to help all children achieve to high levels. The paradigm shift in how schools and districts work to meet new and more challenging expectations has not yet occurred. The shift will require leadership and learning throughout the organization. How

leaders work to gain the knowledge, skills and understandings will be as important as the learning itself. It will require that leaders learn from others – other schools, other districts, colleagues, supervisors and those they supervise. It will require having honest conversations about what is known and not known, and a commitment to discovering the answers to complex questions. If we can create a system in which adults learn to work together to address the challenges, we will find the ways to help all children achieve.

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