

TO: Friends of K-12 Education

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SUBJECT: School Improvement

The Problem is Power

When the Michigan Legislature passed Public Act 25 in the early 1990's, members "got it right." Teachers and parents should have an active role in academic governance. However, school systems are resistant to change and that includes empowering teachers and parents. We should recommit to empowering teachers and parents, but this time have strategies to accomplish the aims of P.A. 25.

Excessive power in schools remains at the top. It must be rebalanced. Author Seymour Sarason observes, "When political scientists have looked at schools, their descriptions and analyses have been centered on matters of policy and not on the uses and allocation of power...the failure to examine school systems in terms of the myriad of ways in which power suffuses them has rendered efforts at reform ineffective."

Teachers are not being lead, they are being managed. Larry Cuban states that if you are heavily managed from above, you will heavily manage those below you. He calls this phenomenon "the managerial imperative." Students suffer from being heavily managed. If teachers experience being lead with wise leadership, they will reflect that reality in their teaching.

I've written *Disregarded* to share my experiences as a teacher who passionately worked for school improvement. It opens with, "Larry stands sideways in the doorway, one foot in the room and the other in the hallway." Larry is a building principal and my boss and conflicted about school improvement. He has one foot in the room, where the school improvement team is meeting, and one foot pointed toward his office. At best, many administrators are ambivalent about the teacher's role in school improvement. The principal that followed Larry was not ambivalent. It was no one's business but his. He built a file of lies about the teacher heading the school improvement team, hoping to remove her from power and end her career.

Highly bureaucratic organizations are highly ineffective. My son managed a manufacturing facility that started as an empty building. Millions were invested to fill it with the latest equipment. Months after production began, the profit margin was -7%. Month after month the pressure built as countless measures were implemented to improve profits. As a last resort teams were formed and given broad responsibility, from ordering raw materials to billing and shipping product. Power was redistributed. Profit margins rose to +25%.

Commitment and passion wane from discouraging work experiences. One colleague quipped, "I feel like I'm on fire and then someone throws water on me." This atmosphere trickles down to students. I worked with two 8th grade girls who rotated into my class, their motivation already extinguished. After they started to show interest I asked them what the problem had been. "Well, Mr. Bender," said one of the girls, "I think we had lost hope." Bureaucracies produce stagnation, gridlock and hopelessness, even in students.

In my own experience, I transitioned from being an officer in the U.S. Army to a teaching position in a Michigan prison, then to public school teaching. In the Army I was treated with respect and given a great deal of responsibility. I experienced culture shock during the next two transitions, finding much less respect and responsibility in the prison setting and then, again, significantly less in a public school.

It is not unreasonable to claim that teachers and students are oppressed. However, the powerful may not realize that they are the oppressors. Robert W. Fuller, author of *Somebodies and Nobodies*, coined the term “rankism,” referring to power that oversteps appropriate levels. He didn’t know that excessive use of power existed until he stepped down from his position of university president and became a professor (teacher).

Conflicted Relationships

Student teacher journals document astonishment at discovering that numerous conflicted relationships exist in schools. They cite tense conditions among teachers and between teachers and administrators. It appears that no one knows how to handle conflict. Disputes can be mediated, but people within the organization need to be trained to facilitate discussion. Failure to successfully deal with conflict causes the organization to run on assumptions. Administrators deserve to know where teachers stand on an issue, but, out of fear, the real positions of teachers remain hidden.

Anxiety

Powerful bureaucracies plant fear in the hearts of the people who work in them. Sanctions are real and they reach far beyond their intended targets, discouraging behaviors essential for a healthy organization. Fear is at the root of self-defeating behavior. It kills risk-taking and learning. It spawns blame and scapegoating as well. Coercion must be removed in order for schools to improve.

Insulation

School systems seem impenetrable to the outsider, which often means parents and interested citizens. It is an accepted axiom that closed systems die and open systems are able to adapt to survive. School personnel can’t continue to reject offers of help and new ideas. As Saugatuck Public Schools sought a do or die millage vote, one citizen interviewed by a local television station remarked, “It’s not about the money; it’s about listening.”

Isolation

Repeatedly I have seen administrators purposely pit teachers against one another. Like Machiavelli, they know that a divided staff has little power. But power cannot be turned on and off. When solidarity is needed to meet an organizational challenge, everyone pays the price for the seeds of division planted earlier.

High Standards

Teachers with high standards attract parent phone calls. A common assumption is that the teacher must be doing something wrong. The political reality is that public relations trumps rigor. Few teachers retain their high standards after being repeatedly challenged by their boss.

What’s the Purpose of K-12 Schools?

The purpose of K-12 schools can’t be to prepare students for the future. I taught middle school computer science classes with eleven-year-old computers. Others teach with outdated texts and ancient paradigms. The purpose couldn’t be to solve our nation’s problems—no one else has. Why ask a fifth grade teacher and her thirty students to do so? The essential purpose of schools should be to foster the conditions that help teachers define themselves authentically and grow to their full potential. If we support teachers, the payback for students will be astounding. With teachers discovering the value of finding their true identities and life missions and feeling supported, they cannot help but pass these experiences along to students.

Collegiality

The formation of a community of learners in each building is paramount. The sharing of one's craft with others is the single most powerful behavior one can express toward the improvement of education. We have to create conditions where teachers have the opportunity and safety to talk about their craft. Communities have different interpersonal relationships than schools, yet, collegiality is best supported through communal norms. As relationships among adults go, so goes the success of the school.

Courage

Matters of the heart cannot be solved by mandate, but we are not left without recourse. The issues of power, fear, standards, isolation, division, resistance, conflict and collegiality can be addressed through the development of courage. How is this done? Courage comes from the development of an authentic identity. If we support teachers through the establishment of formation programs, their capacities will be more fully realized, positioning them to tackle the challenges they face.

What Remains to be Done

It is unlikely that those with responsibilities and power will readily relinquish their treasures without assistance, because sharing power is antithetical to power's role. It is equally unlikely that teachers will wake to their oppressed condition on their own or realize that their behaviors support the status quo. Interventions are required. Brazilian activist and educator Paulo Freire writes. "The central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?" Like Gandhi, Freire believes that those in power are caught in a straightjacket of their own, unable to liberate themselves or those they oppress. "This is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well."

By concentrating on the development of educators as authentic human beings, teachers will come to understand and value the growth process that they have experienced. They will undoubtedly pass this gift on to students. Finally, the timeless wisdom of "know thyself" shall infuse schools and students will transition into adulthood with a greater sense of their true identity, awareness of their talents, passions and missions and how they fit into the world. Teachers will use their authenticity to rebalance power, reestablishing teaching and learning to an appropriate place. Hope and movement will replace gridlock and despair.

Actions that Support this Vision

- 1) Create a large teacher formation program similar to The Courage to Teach established (in our own state!) by The Fetzer Institute of Kalamazoo. (Read *The Courage to Teach* by Parker J. Palmer.)
- 2) Create a cadre of individuals similar to the Army's Inspector General Office. The task of this group is to determine the true level of teacher empowerment by interviewing teachers in a given district. The group protects the confidentiality and safety of those interviewed so teachers are safe to describe the level of support they receive for doing school improvement. The IG has the power to admonish those withholding power and follow up to see that effective school improvement is taking place.
- 3) Organize the MDE in such a way that every Michigan teacher is not only aware but being influenced by a) the MDE's strong emphasis on researching best practice, b) the identification and development of a large number of master teachers who use best practice, and c) whose role is to support all teachers in obtaining and confidently using best practice.