

What Does a Superintendent Do, Anyway?

BY MARK V. JOYCE

I don't know about you, but I get asked that question often (perhaps too often!). My reaction generally comes in two forms. First of all, I wonder if the people who ask really care or if a detailed explanation will fall on a closed mind. Then I rethink my reaction, assume they do care, and explain my understanding of the important role that educational leaders play in the lives of children and society.

My 38 years of work in education includes 20-plus years as a school administrator. I've developed an evolving response to this question, a response that may be best summarized by the words of George Counts (1927): "As a fountain cannot out-produce its source, so an educational institution cannot outstrip the knowledge, good will and skill of its leaders." Let me explain.

The role of a skilled and knowledgeable educational leader of a school or school system cannot be overstated. These leaders are not only the ultimate guardians of the taxpayers' resources, they are the champions of children and educators in general.

Most people agree (when they think about it) that public education is a "public good," an overall essential value that promotes a positive community, a healthy economy, and a vibrant democracy. These facts are validated by independent studies by business leaders, sociologists, and even political candidates. As we all can see, there is no mistaking the important role of public education in our society. But what do school leaders have to do with this "public good," anyway? I submit, Everything!

The role of an educational leader in today's world can best be described as a chief executive officer (CEO) of one of the largest employers and service agencies in our economy. In another way, this leadership role can be practically compared to the old-time juggler on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, who was able to spin multiple plates on a stick simultaneously. For an educational leader, these plates include school finance, curriculum and instruction, communication and community relations, maintenance and capital improvement, personnel, general leadership, and student services.

In New Hampshire, this juggling is done by a New Hampshire school administrative unit (SAU), which provides professional educational leadership to a school system or systems. This specialized leadership work can be grouped into the seven major areas of responsibil-

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ity identified above and in which a myriad of complex legal and procedural roles and responsibilities reside. The following table illustrates a few of the major tasks on these seven plates:

General Leadership

- Acts as chief executive officer of school district and SAU (planner, evaluator, policy advisor, spokesperson, and more)
- Hearing officer and appeals judge for all disputes by students, employees, and citizens
- Legal representative of school district
- Manages school board relations and other leadership work

Curriculum and Instruction

- Leads the development, coordination, and evaluation of the “What” and “How” of schools
- Implements student assessment, district report cards, data analysis, school improvements, NCLB, AYP, and more
- Leads the accountability of the schools to mission, and more

Personnel Management

- Collective bargaining of all contracts, recruiting, hiring, and retention practices for all employees
- The deployment, supervision, and evaluation of all staff (the largest employer in virtually all NH communities)
- Professional development, training, orientation of staff, and more

Finance

- Development, implementation, and monitoring of the budget
- Maintains purchasing and control procedures, reporting and auditing of all expenditures
- Preparation for the annual school district meeting, and more

Student Services (the fastest growing area)

- Assures special education, 504, and attendance services and procedures
- Coordination of food service, transportation systems, and all contracts
- Implementation of behavior management, safety systems, and more

Communications and Community Relations

- Acts as “minister” of education
- Builds effective linkages to the community
- Provides accountability, information, newsletters and educational opportunities to the community
- Policy development, revision, and more

Maintenance and Capital Improvement

- Creates, manages, and plans for the largest properties in most communities
- Long-term planning for facilities needs, population projections, capital improvement, etc.
- Maintenance and care of all facilities and grounds

An educational leader, like a juggler, never has the satisfaction of spinning one plate before stopping to begin another. Rather, the work of an SAU or school administrator involves the constant balancing of these competing responsibilities. These services are not always visible to the public and, in fact, sometimes go unnoticed (especially if they are done well).

In the past, the finance area was regarded as the most critical area of responsibility; however, the advent of new laws, regulations, and expectations generated by public and regulatory agencies has caused an increased area of exposure/risk (financial and otherwise) for the school organization, the employers, the students, and the community in general.

Current research again proves what many have believed: that school-district-level leadership matters and has a significant impact on the learning of students. In the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) project, led by McREL president and CEO J. Timothy Waters and McREL senior fellow Robert J. Marzano, a strong, statistically significant relationship (a positive correlation of .24) was found between district leadership and student achievement (McREL, 2006).

Educational leadership teams, including superintendents, assistant superintendents, business managers, special education directors, and their staffs join together to meet these challenges every day. I would submit that they meet these complex needs in a very cost efficient manner.

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Current analyses of school district expenditures, nationally as well as in New Hampshire, tell us that less than 3 percent is spent on system-level administration when one eliminates school board and legal expenses. This is a very conservative expenditure on the system leadership when compared to other intensive businesses or agencies, especially when we consider that 80-plus percent of total school budgets is spent on salaries of and benefits for people.

The business of education is a uniquely human service (people) business. In fact, in a recent study by the Educational Research Service (2008), the ratio of school administrators per employee supervised in education is significantly higher than in all other comparisons at 15.2 to one. Among other findings:

- Only the health care and special assistance industries reports roughly similar staffing patterns, with 11.7 people supervised per executive or administrator.
- In transportation, there are about 10 staff members per supervisor.
- In the construction industry, there are just under seven workers for every executive or manager.
- The average ratio throughout all manufacturing industries is 5.6 to 1.
- In information work (including newspaper, publishing, Internet publishing, Internet service providers, libraries, data processing, etc.), the ratio is 3.6 to 1, which is less than one-fourth the 15.2 staff members for each administrator and supervisor in public schools.

Data indicate that when judged by similar management staffing practices in business and industry, K–12 education is not too heavy. But are these comparisons valid? The US Bureau of Labor Statistics believes they are and uses them in compiling official government reports.

In closing, school administrators provide an essential and cost efficient benefit for not only students, staff, and schools, but perhaps most importantly for taxpayers and children.

References

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