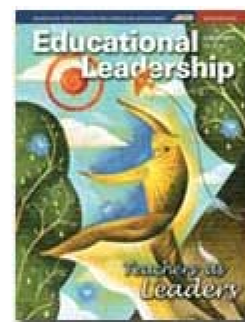
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

September 2007 | Volume **65** | Number **1**
Teachers as Leaders Pages 60-63

Real Principals Listen

A principal evolves from viewing teachers as "instruments" to valuing teachers as leaders.

Eric Glover


September 2007

In a climate thick with education mandates, many teachers fear that their chances to influence decisions about their profession are eroding. Principals must find ways to change that perception so that teachers see that, at least in their own schools, their voices are heard and their risk taking makes a difference. My experience as a principal has taught me that engaging in honest conversation with teachers can break through the self-limiting perceptions that keep teachers silent—and can provide an opening for teacher leadership.

When Momentum Met Skepticism

In 1999, I began my first year as principal of Aspen School, one of five K–6 elementary schools in the Los Alamos, New Mexico, district. I was an experienced principal with a reputation as a mover and shaker. I was eager to move the school forward in the district's effort to base instruction and assessment on curriculum standards. However, inspired by my studies toward a doctoral degree, I was also beginning to reflect on my beliefs about leadership and to visualize a different kind of relationship between principals and teachers.

At a meeting in the fall, I asked teachers to brainstorm what Aspen would look like once we became a standards-based school. It quickly became clear to me that teachers were not sold on this notion. Teachers reported strong objections to the plans for conversion to standards—plans previously presented by hired experts. Concerned that the plans packed in too many standards to address effectively, the teachers argued for prioritizing standards. Realizing that a core issue would be student assessment, they wanted to create their own assessments rather than use commercial tests. One teacher quipped, "Just as soon as we figure out what a reform is about, the district moves on to another reform."

The Power of Dialogue

After experiencing a good deal of frustration regarding how and to what end I could lead this faculty, I discovered an article by communications consultant William Isaacs called "Dialogic Leadership" (1999a). Isaacs identified a set of practices that reflected how I wanted to interact with the teachers. I hoped to engage teachers in conversations that would affect their teaching and draw them out as leaders. Over the next four years, their teaching indeed changed, but, more important, my leadership was transformed in ways I could not have imagined.

Isaacs (1999b) identified three powerful conversational practices in organizations: *debate, dialogue*, and *open discussion*. Debate (which Isaacs also called "unproductive defensiveness") often limits teacher empowerment. Unfortunately, principals often unknowingly use this style of

interaction. The other two practices, *dialogue* and *open discussion*, are much more likely to generate the teacher leadership that is essential for creating changes in schools.

As participants in a conversation take turns listening and speaking, they unconsciously choose whether to dialogue, discuss, or debate. If participants choose to suspend individual opinions and remain open to hearing what other speakers think, they engage in reflective dialogue, which allows new thinking and ideas to emerge. Ideally, people develop a shared understanding of the possibilities generated. If people choose to openly examine the correctness of opposing assumptions on a given issue, problem, or possibility, they engage in open discussion. Discussion can lead to deep analysis as participants question their own and others' views. Participants become tough on the issues but gentle with one another.

Unfortunately, debate—in which each participant argues his or her position against others' positions—is the more common pattern in organizations. Each side competes to win, with each person focusing on listening to the other participants only to identify flaws in their presentation. Progress is seldom made, and the conversation ends where it begins. If there is a power differential—such as between principal and teachers—there is usually little competition: The participant with the most power wins.

Isaacs recognized the importance of leadership in generating more open communication. He suggests four conversational practices that contribute to both dialogue and discussion: deep listening, respecting others, suspending assumptions, and voicing personal truths. By infusing these practices into conversations, a leader can bring out the best in others—and coax out leadership potential.

Putting It into Practice

Deep listening was, for me, the most difficult practice to learn. The idea is to actively try to understand how a speaker views and understands the topic under discussion. As a principal, I had little experience following teachers as they developed and presented their ideas. I was used to listening for ideas and suggestions that agreed with what *I* wanted to do, not tuning in to questions, concerns, and fears that teachers might express. As a consequence, important ideas and fears seldom surfaced. Because I had authority over teachers, the moment I stopped listening and began to speak, dialogue and discussion ended.

Instead, I learned to respect teachers' views as legitimate so that I could listen to the sense in what they were saying and recognize their words as expressions of their understanding of the truth. I learned to set my opinions and assumptions aside so that they would not interfere with my truly hearing what teachers were saying. Finally, I learned to present my opinions to teachers as an expression of my personal, subjective truth rather than objective fact. I hoped that in modeling these behaviors I would give teachers license to try them as well. We all learned to, as Isaacs puts it, “balance advocacy and inquiry.”

After reading works on dialogue and discussion, I plunged in, inviting the entire faculty to a voluntary “open conversation” session. I asked those who wanted to attend to read Isaacs's article on dialogic leadership and proposed that we use his four dialogic practices as ground rules for the conversation. No formal topics were set for discussion.

I began the session by reading this statement from Linda Darling-Hammond (1988): “The professional teacher in common parlance, is one who does things right rather than one who does the right things” (p. 61). I asked my colleagues what this statement meant to each of them. The conversation started with one teacher saying, “Doing right things is following the rules.” Another added, “Doing the right thing comes from doing what your values tell you to do.” Throughout this meeting, I forced myself to listen. I recorded our conversation and e-

mailed copies of the transcript to the faculty.

Eventually, all our meetings and interactions as a faculty came to have a dialogic quality. Aspen teachers also began to view standards less as something handed down from "experts" and more as a set of goals open to teachers' interpretation. Together, we prioritized the state's grade-level standards into categories of *essential, important*, and *less important* (or *fluff* as one teacher labeled them). Other schools in the district eventually accepted this classification scheme.

Teachers came to view my role as principal differently. Although teachers recognized my authority for making decisions, they also recognized their individual and group responsibilities to inform my decisions. Teachers' freedom—and responsibility—to share concerns, fears, support, or objections regarding any direction our school was taking became a given. We operated on five assumptions:

- We all aimed to create the best learning opportunities for each student.
- Our differences enabled us to unearth and examine new possibilities.
- We were all more successful when learning together.
- Each of us had a moral responsibility for the entire school.
- We considered it professional, responsible, and safe to express—or change—an opinion.

Taking Growth Down a Treacherous Road

My journey was not over, however. I had learned to value teachers' ideas and expertise at least as much as the ideas and knowledge of experts and district supervisors. But this shift in perception was tested in the 2001–02 school year when I volunteered to lead our district's 3rd grade teachers in the creation of a standards-based report card.

One of the most treacherous roads a district can travel is redesigning report cards. The previous year, another principal had led a district-level committee of 1st and 2nd grade teachers in creating a standards-based report card. The product of this committee's work became the first report card to be used districtwide. Teachers across the district disliked the report card and resented the mandate to use it.

Previous report cards had reported student progress using +, , and other symbols to indicate levels of progress. The standards-based card was several pages long, with each mark based on a specific assessment, which teachers considered redundant and distrustful of their expertise. It used the letters *B* to mean beginning to work on a standard, *D* to mean beginning to develop some proficiency on the standard, and *P* to mean having reached proficiency. A *D* thus indicated a greater level of performance than a *B*. This confused parents and gave them the impression that a standards-based curriculum did not encourage excellence. Letters in the local press and testimonials at school board meetings reflected parents' concern that reporting on students' mastery of standards represented a shift away from providing challenging individual instruction. Teachers had received the brunt of parents' dissatisfaction.

I decided to involve all of the districts' 16 3rd grade teachers in the process of creating the new 3rd grade report card and negotiated a few days of release time for them to work on the project. I sensed that if we designed a report card that teachers found valuable, parents would be satisfied because they trusted the teachers.

At our first meeting, teachers were surprised that we were not going to just apply the recently created 1st and 2nd grade report card format to the 3rd grade curriculum. I explained that I hoped to develop a report card that would meet their needs in reporting student progress and

that my role was to represent their interests to the central office. After three meetings of the full group and numerous subgroup meetings, we developed a draft report card that was very different from what the central office anticipated. This draft report card listed only essential standards and was thus substantially shorter than the 1st and 2nd grade report cards. It used symbols such as + and to indicate progress toward standards.

I presented this draft report card to the school board. It received a very a cool reception. Later, at a closed-door meeting with central office and school administrators, I found myself defending this report card, clearly engaging in unproductive debate.

I arranged for another meeting. At this meeting, I focused on listening, respecting, and suspending my opinions so that I could understand the thinking of these administrators. At first, they voiced strong objections to the 3rd grade teachers' draft report card. But, amazingly, as they began to feel heard, objections gave way to questions about why the 3rd grade teachers developed this kind of instrument. Throughout a series of meetings, I represented the opinions of teachers to administrators and the opinions of administrators to teachers. During this period, the 3rd grade teachers met frequently with their respective principals and with one another so that a common understanding emerged.

Eventually, we crafted a 3rd grade report card that met the needs of all groups. The district's 1st and 2nd grade teachers then asked to revise their report card using the 3rd grade format. The following year, 1st and 2nd grade teachers revamped their card using the format, and 4th grade teachers also developed a new report card. Teachers and parents widely accepted all four report cards.

As a school leader, I evolved from being a principal who viewed teachers as instruments to achieve policy outcomes into a leader who values teacher knowledge and encourages teacher leadership. The conversations I had with Aspen teachers, the district's 3rd grade teachers, and district administrators contributed to all of us growing together. These dialogues gave each of us incentives to challenge our own obstructive beliefs—and to successfully challenge others' beliefs as well.

In my current role teaching others to serve as school principals, I help these aspiring leaders recognize that good teachers change practice when they perceive that the change will advance their main goal: facilitating student learning. A key part of a principal's moral responsibility is exploring the possibilities for change with teachers, enlisting fellow administrators in supporting teacher initiatives, and mediating on behalf of teachers to reduce the negative effects of unproductive external directives. Real leadership challenges the leader before it challenges others. It begins with listening.

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Eric Glover is Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at East Tennessee State University; 439-423-7566; glovere@etsu.edu.

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