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Still Waiting for Superman: The School Leaders We Need

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It might seem like the primary ingredient for school improvement hinges on superhero principals, but a more promising approach starts by recognizing that there are two halves to the leadership challenge.



Thirty years ago today, “A Nation at Risk” was released. A stern wake-up call, the seminal report offered a dour outlook on the quality of American education. “If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today,” the report bellowed, “we might well have viewed it as an act of war.”

Since then, in the midst of numerous and often heated debates on education policy and practice, the one thing we can all seem to agree

on is that our schools need to do better — a lot better. And while the recipe for educational excellence varies, we know that transforming middling and low-performing schools into excellent places of learning starts with terrific leadership. Perhaps that’s why it sometimes seems like the primary ingredient for school improvement hinges on a call for more superhero principals.

There are just two problems with that strategy. First, it turns out that superheroes are in short supply. Second, transformative leadership isn’t just about charisma and passion, but also about the skills that allow leaders to rethink routines, change cultures, and support great teaching.

A more promising approach to educational excellence starts by recognizing that there are two halves to the leadership challenge. One, we need to reform policies that keep good candidates out and that make it tough to effectively prepare and retain promising leaders.

For a look at what states can do, check out the recent report “Operating in the Dark” by the George W. Bush Institute. It points out that a disturbing number of states do not know if they are producing enough school leaders to meet their needs, much less the caliber of the leaders they have. And most states don’t demand enough of their approved principal training programs.

Second, it’s important to note that policy change alone isn’t enough. As one of us argues in the just-published book *Cage-Busting Leadership*, “Leaders have far more freedom to transform, reimagine, and invigorate teaching, learning, and schooling than is widely believed.” Whether it’s a question of smarter spending, increased efficiency in use of instructional time, or greater rigor in staff evaluations, principals can typically do more than they realize.

For instance, we need leaders who are better at using scarce talent. Fifty years ago, the majority of college-educated women had few opportunities beyond teaching. Today, leaders can no longer count on that natural pool of talent. Thus, it’s become vastly more important to be thoughtful about how principals recruit, retain, and deploy the talent they have. They should explore how to provide extra tutoring and mentoring by drawing upon retirees, Americorps volunteers, professionals, and online providers. There are terrific programs already in place — such as Boston-based Citizen Schools or Washington-based LearnZillion — that principals can look to for inspiration and assistance.

Consider Houston’s Alief Taylor High School, where many students were reading way behind grade level. Principal Walter Jackson knew his teachers had little expertise in teaching reading from a phonetic standpoint, so he filled reading vacancies with experienced elementary reading teachers. The move led his school to 90 percent proficiency on Texas’s reading assessment.

In New York, Kingston High School principal Adrian Manuel thought his students needed more one-on-one time with teachers, but the union contract prevented him from changing that. So he and the union steward figured out a way to extend the homeroom period from five minutes to fifteen.

Of course, principals can’t do it alone. They need the support of their superintendents, school boards, civic leaders, and state officials. First, it’s vital to address policies that restrict the supply of good principals and that exhibit little concern for job performance. State policymakers should expand educational leadership to a range of qualified training programs and then focus on monitoring performance.

Second, principals can get themselves into hot water when they upend familiar routines — even if they’re doing the right thing. Superintendents, school boards, and community leaders need to be clear that they are going to stand behind smart principals when the road is bumpy, and they need to honor and recognize problem-solvers.

Third, principals have been trained and nurtured in a bubble. Most have never worked outside K-12, and nearly all have gotten their leadership training in schools of education. They have little exposure to how leaders in other settings manage talent, squeeze budgets, or leverage accountability. School leaders need more opportunities to train with and learn from peers in other sectors.

Our schools can do a lot better. But to avoid lamenting unfulfilled expectations three more decades hence, it's imperative that we get the leaders we need and then equip them to succeed. This doesn't require superheroes, just smarts.

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