

Superintendents of Learning

By Karen Pittman, March 2008

Superintendents rock! I've never started a column like this before, certainly not one about school administrators – the people whom youth workers frequently butt heads with over money, building space, bus schedules and even permission slips. But at a forum hosted by the American Association of School Administrators, I recently spent two days with 25 of the most enthusiastic public leaders I've ever met.

I was one of several “experts,” convened to talk to superintendents about expanding learning opportunities. I was prepared to be sympathetic if they came across as tired and cynical given the burdens of NCLB. I found myself among a group of leaders who, while admittedly having far more resources than those in the youth field, share many of our passions and frustrations.

“One of our problems is that we are overcome by standards and accountability data,” said one effusive “soup” early on in the discussions. “Requirements have been piled on in a way that has beaten the passion and love right out of us.” Eyes lowered and heads nodded at this statement. I thought about a Margaret Wheatley quote that I like: “We don't have to start with power, only with passion” (Wheatley, 2002). I lowered my eyes as well. It's truly sad when people with power get the passion beat out of them.

But their passion returned over the course of our discussions. These top education leaders watched videos of students falling asleep in classrooms and coming alive in youth programs. They told stories about how their own teachers looked forward to their after-school classes because this is where they felt most able to be inspired teachers. I have rarely been with a group of big system executives who were so open to learning and eager to “think outside of the box” while being dead-on accurate about the absolute need for them to perform well inside the box.

Don't get me wrong. I am not suggesting that the amount of trust-building, resource-sharing and regulation-shifting required to “blur the lines” at the building and district levels isn't sometimes daunting. Groups like Communities in Schools and the Coalition of Community Schools have made great strides in building the science of constructive line-blurring. I am suggesting that, youth work, as a field, needs to begin to think about superintendents as allies, not obstructionists.

Business as usual won't generate the changes needed to ensure success for America's students. It is not just that schools cannot do it all. It's that schools shouldn't try. The “soups” knew this. “We need to examine the belief system upon which we're currently running schools” concluded one work group.

The superintendents talked seriously about what it might mean to become “superintendents of learning” – orchestrators of a larger, true community-school effort to meet the needs of all students; increase academic achievement and promote youth development; re-energize students and staff and managers of a more responsive system. They identified a range of things that they would need to do to make the shift from superintendents of schools to superintendents of new, student-focused learning systems.

Reframe the challenge: Shift from thinking system reform to thinking child development. Position schools as the central but not only resource for learning, charged with identifying and connecting with the others in the community.

Re-envision the structures: Strengthen the connections for learning in school and out. Work with the range of actors that are invested in making learning happen – from libraries and museums to community organizations to workplaces.

Redefine the goals: Work with the community to create common, measurable expectations of what students really need to know and be able to do. Challenge the current No Child Left Behind accountability measures. Define success in ways that are real for parents, communities and employers.

Recalibrate the environment: Define the characteristics of the environments needed to support learning for all students wherever they are.

Rethink leadership: Invite others (such as mayors, business leaders) to take leadership, not supporting roles.

Understand their points of view. Learn to be transformers, not “copers”; conveners, not contractors; risk takers, not reactors.

Changing the conversation to be about children versus schools certainly requires a redefinition of leadership on the part of school administrators. But it also requires us to change. Let's drop the passionate underdog persona. The doors are opening. Let's not wait to be invited in individually. Our passion is clear, but we need to document and be conversant about our own collective power.

Skeptics will read this list as a recipe to expand superintendents' powers. I see it as a commitment to explore ways to expand responsibilities and, indirectly, to share resources.

For the foreseeable future, superintendents are likely to remain responsible for managing resources and results, given the fact that they run the biggest normative system focused on children. I, for one, was comforted to be with leaders who were willing to “change the way they do business” as we say at the Forum, not because they were hungry for more power but because they were looking to regain the passion that brought them into the business in the first place.

References:

Wheatley, Margaret. Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2002

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Karen Pittman is executive director of the Forum for Youth Investment.

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