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Submitted to the Conference of the Home States for Excellent Teaching and School Administration - Volume 28, No. 2 Summer 2013

Featured Articles

**Leadership Focus**

**Preparing Superintendents for Executive Leadership: Combining Administrative, Instructional, and Political Leadership Theory with Real World Applications**

*by Ruben Olivarez*

Discusses the state of the superintendency and gives an overview of a dynamic three-year process of integrated academic coursework with a coordinated, sequenced series of field experiences.

**Student-Centered Learning Disrupts Industrial Practices of Traditional Schools**

*by Kathy Whitley*

Shares that although the development of student-centered learning requires a fundamental shift in how we organize schools, the benefits far outweigh the potential pitfalls.

**Moving from Data to Making a Difference**

*by Andrew Hegedus*

Presents views on the types of problems educators face and outlines key characteristics of a process that begins with collecting data and ends with evaluating progress.

**Data Reporting Tool for Schools (DaRTS): Following the Certification, Employment, and Retention of District Teachers**

*by Sherri Lowrey and Mona S. Winchburg*

Reports on a newly developed data resource tool for school districts that equips decision makers with timely and easily accessible information to assist in reaching both short- and long-term goals.

**Stand Up and Make a Difference**

*by Jeremy Wagner*

Emphasizes the need to stand up and make a difference in our profession by moving in the direction dreamed about when we took up the mantle of teaching, realizing that our students of today are the foundation upon which to build for the future.

**TSPRA Voice**

**Is It Our Story?**

*by Helen Williams*

Describes a systematic and strategic approach to use with every media request by asking three questions, and offers scenarios to illustrate how the decision-making process works.
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# TASA Summer Calendar

## July

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>9–11</td>
<td>AASA Legislative Advocacy Conference</td>
<td>Crystal Gateway Marriott, Arlington, VA</td>
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<tr>
<td>9–14</td>
<td>Urban Superintendents Association of America (USAA) Summer Academy</td>
<td>Hilton City Center Hotel, Milwaukee, WI</td>
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<tr>
<td>24–26</td>
<td>Building Learning Communities (BLC) Education Conference November Learning</td>
<td>Boston Park Plaza Hotel &amp; Towers, Boston MA</td>
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<tr>
<td>31–Aug. 1</td>
<td>First-time Superintendents’ Academy (Session 1 of 4)</td>
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## September

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<tr>
<td>12–13</td>
<td>TASA Future-Ready Superintendents’ Leadership Institute (Session 5 of 5)</td>
<td>DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Austin–University Area, Austin</td>
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<td>27–29</td>
<td>TASA/TASB Convention</td>
<td>Dallas Convention Center, Dallas</td>
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If you are reading this article, you are probably already a member of TASA. But I would urge you to find an administrator or aspiring administrator who is not yet a member and explain to them what TASA is all about. There are benefits in numbers, and Texas is all about being bigger and better.

---

Benefits in Numbers

“Leadership Championing Educational Excellence” is what the Texas Association of School Administrators is all about. Our state is blessed to have TASA helping school leaders throughout the state by fostering programs and activities that focus on leadership development; impacting laws, policies, and practices that will improve education; supporting and promoting research-based decision making; developing, retaining, and supporting highly qualified educational leaders; cultivating positive school climates in which quality education can thrive; enhancing the influence of and respect for educational leaders; recognizing diversity and building on commonalities; and serving as a catalyst for cooperative efforts. TASA not only leads Texas in these efforts but leads the nation as well.

Every two years school administrators are faced with deciphering new laws and regulations resulting from the most recent legislative session. Now is one of those times. Hot off the press are issues dealing with accountability, assessment, safety and security, and on...and on. HB 5 was the result of leadership at numerous levels coming together to do what is right for students. Parents across the state rose up against the over-reliance and over-emphasis on high-stakes testing. Legislators listened, and the result was a bill that reduces end-of-course exams for graduation from 15 to 5; creates rigorous and more flexible graduation plans allowing students to focus on the courses that most interest them and better prepare them for success in their chosen fields of study (or careers after high school); and eliminates the rule requiring end-of-course exams to count 15 percent of a student’s final course grade.

If you are reading this article, you are probably already a member of TASA. But I would urge you to find an administrator or aspiring administrator who is not yet a member and explain to them what TASA is all about. There are benefits in numbers, and Texas is all about being bigger and better.

It is an honor to serve in 2013–2014 as your TASA President. I look forward to working for the betterment of the organization and for the betterment of student education in Texas.

[Signature]
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Our School Transformation Efforts Continue!

IN 2011, GOVERNOR RICK PERRY SIGNED SB 1557 INTO LAW, establishing the Texas High Performance Schools Consortium to inform policymakers on methods for transforming Texas public schools by improving student learning, with a focus on digital learning, high-priority learning standards, multiple assessments, and community involvement.

That bill was the direct result of the work of a group of superintendents that came together in 2006 to create a new vision for public education, where schools are student-centered and students graduate future-ready. In September 2012, Commissioner Michael Williams selected 23 school districts to participate in the Consortium, representing a range of district types, sizes, and diverse student populations.

To provide space and flexibility for the ongoing work of these 23 school districts, HB 2824, authored by Representative Bennett Ratliff, was passed by the 83rd Legislature. Despite unanimous approval in both the Texas House and Senate, Governor Perry vetoed HB 2824—legislation that would have allowed the Consortium to more easily accomplish the goals initially outlined in Senate Bill 1557.

Even though the governor’s action may have slowed the work of the Consortium, the work will continue. We remain firm in our mission to advance the principles of the Visioning Institute.

The ongoing work of the Consortium, the regional consortia, and school and community leaders throughout the state has redirected the conversation about public education towards the transformation of Texas schools into places of learning where students are fully engaged, critical thinkers, and future-ready. You are an important part of this work.

TASA will continue to support school leaders in creating higher performing public schools through:

- Engagement of students in digital learning, with specific emphasis on the use of electronic textbooks and instructional materials, and courses offered through the Texas Virtual School Network
- Emphasis on learning standards that focus on high-priority standards
- Use of multiple assessments used to inform students, parents, districts, and charter schools on an ongoing basis concerning the extent to which learning is occurring
- Reliance on local control that enables communities and parents to be involved in the important decisions regarding the education of their children

This work continues to be the focus of our statewide conferences, in-depth leadership development academies, consultant services, and other learning opportunities planned throughout the coming year. We look forward to your participation in TASA programs during the coming year as we build upon recent actions of the Texas Legislature, including the passage of House Bill 5; the broad legislative support for HB 2824; and the unprecedented grassroots opposition to the over-reliance on standardized, high-stakes testing. Much work remains to be done if we are to achieve the necessary transformation of our public schools.

Johnny L. Veselka
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Preparing Superintendents for Executive Leadership:  

*Combining Administrative, Instructional, and Political Leadership Theory with Real World Applications*

by Ruben D. Olivarez

**Superintendency in a State of Crisis**

A study of a representative sample of school district superintendents nationwide was reported in 2010 by the American Association of School Administrators. This extensive report demonstrated that “The work portfolio of America’s superintendents is increasingly diverse, encompassing not only student achievement, but the diversification of student and staff populations, the explosion of technology, expanded expectations from the government, the school board and the community, and the globalization of society” (Kowalski, T., McCordis, R., Petersen, G., Young, I. and Ellerson, N., 2010).

In 2001, in a report by the Education Commission of the States, a survey of 175 superintendents judged nationally by their peers to be outstanding indicated that 71 percent agree that the superintendency is in a “state of crisis.” The demands impacting superintendents today are voluminous, including federal mandates to align local, state, and federal standards for teaching and learning; a constant public cry for transparency in all areas of decision making; policies dictating rigorous accountability at all levels of educational programming; business expectations for rapidly updated technological innovations; and advocacy cries for “evidence-based” instructional approaches with highly diverse student populations. These combined pressures result in rapid turnover in district leadership…even though research has indicated that superintendent longevity is linked to improvement in student achievement (Waters & Marzano, 2007).

A report by the Education Writers Association (Pardini, P. & Lewis, A., 2003) asserts that superintendents’ responses to this state of crisis must be multi-dimensional. While the popular and simple prescription is typically to institute strong instructional leadership, “district leaders also must effectively manage change in highly complex, politically charged, and often contentious system[s]. If they are to survive and thrive in their role as superintendents, they need to understand and be adept at the politics of these jobs” (p.6).

**Complex Problems Require Integrated Solutions**

The literature is clear in its conclusion that superintendent leadership responsibilities have grown in both scope and complexity. This complexity is borne out of new leadership and management demands brought on by a multitude of change forces facing our public schools. Among these are the increased diversity in student populations and the public expectation for alternative instructional delivery systems that address varied and complex student learning needs guaranteeing high school graduation and college readiness skills for all students.

Population growth in some urban and suburban centers, immigrant population growth, and urban migration away from the inner-city dramatically shift school membership and attendance patterns, causing campus closures, consolidations, reconstitutions, restructuring, and renewals. The realities of these social forces have changed community contexts and produced large-scale demands for school facilities planning, financing, and construction management delivery systems.
Other changes have added new dimensions to school district functions, which have magnified the traditional duties of the school superintendent. For example, a recent plethora of shocking national tragedies have highlighted the need for expanded safety and security systems for students and staff. With all of these increasing pressures to the role of executive educational leadership in public schools, experienced leaders are leaving the ranks and new leaders are emerging…but not necessarily in the numbers needed and not always adequately prepared to take up these challenges in an integrated and effective manner undergirded with the depth of experience and the multitude of skills of retiring leaders.

For these reasons—and many more—it is highly important for emerging leaders to be identified and prepared within the context of a well-designed executive educational leadership program. Such a program must provide a combination of (1) a critical, current, scholastic review of research and best clinical practices in effective educational leadership; (2) a highly structured practicum guided by a mentor relationship with an active, effective, successful, experienced executive educational leader; and (3) a rich and varied set of professional networking events. This innovative approach to preparing executive educational leaders is designed and delivered within the Department of Educational Administration at The University of Texas at Austin.

Equipping Emerging Executive Leaders with Skills to Meet the Crisis
The Cooperative Superintendency Program (CSP) has been structured to pair a dynamic course of study with a highly focused practicum, or internship, to guide doctoral-level students who are preparing to become tomorrow’s most capable school district leaders. The CSP is an integrated program in which future leaders are inspired under the joint mentorship and supervision of a respected, capable, practicing superintendent and a knowledgeable and experienced clinical professor. This dual-structured leadership instruction approach provides a depth of knowledge on current, research-based, professional leadership literature and individually planned skills and expertise in the clinical practice of educational leadership within today’s complex and fast-paced school district.

The mission of the CSP is to provide an intensive postgraduate-level preparation program for experienced and capable educators who aspire to become world-class educational executive leaders of urban, suburban, or rural public or charter school systems serving students from the levels of pre-kindergarten through the twelfth grade.

The program provides participants with the opportunity to obtain a doctoral or master’s degree qualifying them as educational leaders from a nationally recognized program of excellence. In addition, candidates entering the program who have not yet earned their state certificate as superintendents of education will complete all statutory requirements qualifying them to take the state exam and obtain such a certificate.

Overview of the Executive Educator Leadership Development Approach
The CSP includes a dynamic three-year process of integrated academic coursework with a coordinated, sequenced series of field experiences, or practicum, designed to provide expertise, knowledge, and skills needed to competently guide the complex school districts of today. Throughout the program, CSP students (or “fellows”) are constantly engaged in critical networking events as well.

The CSP system for preparing educational executive leaders has been developed, refined, and revised based on input from an external advisory group of active, respected superintendents who maintain state and national visibility in their careers of excellence. In addition, several internal studies have been conducted by the CSP program director, including a study of CSP student completion and progression rates over a ten-year period. This study resulted in several revisions, including realignment of research courses, front-loading them in the program so CSP fellows attain early research skill development. This revision of course sequence allows for continuous student progress monitoring focused on specialization paper and dissertation proposal development.

The CSP is designed as a challenging, collaborative, and invigorating experience for the candidates who are selected to participate. Immediately following a highly competitive assessment screening and admissions process, CSP fellows are involved in a very demanding and yet mutually supportive learning community and they engage in investigations of research-based practices that involve extensive synthesis, analysis, and application activities.

Scholarly Review of Contemporary Literature and Research
The course of study for CSP fellows is organized around a set of leadership responsibilities that public school superintendents must demonstrate with respect to 10 critical functions that collectively make up a school district’s functions, including (1) governance operations; (2) curriculum and instruction; (3) elementary and secondary campus operations; (4) instructional support services; (5) human resources; (6) administrative, finance, and business operations; (7) facilities planning and plant services; (8) accountability, information management, and technology services; (9) external and internal communications; and (10) operational support systems—safety and security, food services, and transportation. This comprehensive framework provides the basis for each student to individually self-assess specific growth areas, and to develop a personalized plan of field activities to develop and strengthen targeted skills in educational leadership.
One of the most prominent features in the program’s course sequence taken during the first year of the CSP program is a series of courses focusing on executive school district leadership knowledge and skills, including Advanced Administrative Theory and Practice, Instructional Leadership, and School Restructuring and Renewal. This intensive core of courses focuses on the most recent literature in the field of educational leadership dealing with issues pertinent to developing an integrated vision and acquiring the practical capacity necessary to coordinate and manage a very complex set of district functions as represented in Figure 1.

Supporting this specially designed core of courses, CSP Fellows complete a professionally solid complement of related coursework within a university department noted nationally for its excellence. Additional courses include the study of Educational Politics and Policy, Organizational Design and Behavior, Educational Economics and Financial Policy, and Social and Cultural Contexts of Education. Beyond these topics, CSP Fellows delve into studies on professional ethics and values, theoretical foundations for formal inquiry, and methods for conducting research that prepare them for a thorough understanding of educational research and program evaluation findings guiding the most contemporary models for school and instructional design, renewal, and innovation.

Mentor-Guided Practicum Informed by Current Research

At the outset of the program, each CSP fellow is assigned an active superintendent who serves as both a mentor and a field supervisor throughout the duration of the program. In addition, the internship is jointly supervised by an assigned university clinical professor and given oversight by the CSP program director. The field supervisor/mentor (i.e., acting superintendent) coordinates practical activities within school district events to provide the CSP fellow opportunities to practice and develop leadership activities in actual field settings. The carefully structured internship experience enables the participating field supervisor/mentor and CSP fellow to individually establish a professional bond that becomes the foundation for a successful clinical experience. The field supervisor/mentor provides guidance to the CSP fellow on-site at an assigned school district.

A university clinical professor is also assigned to each CSP fellow. The clinical professor observes the CSP fellow both in the university classroom setting and within the school district setting and provides consultation and written feedback for improvement of leadership skills. In addition, the clinical professor offers theoretical guidance based on contemporary professional literature and shares insights derived from relevant scholarly articles and pertinent, current research regarding issues encountered during field experiences.
Critical Networking for Constant Renewal

In addition to engaging in rigorous and scholarly coursework and experiencing a personalized, dual-mentored internship, emerging educational leaders must develop multiple professional networks. Linkages with state and federal educational leadership groups connect forming leaders with critical political information and avail them of collective power to shape shifting local, state, and federal policies impacting conditions under which educational programs must function. In addition, such professional bridges will establish future opportunities for professional renewal.

To these ends, CSP fellows are immersed in a series of professional networking experiences. They attend three major professional events, including a summer conference jointly sponsored by the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) and The University of Texas, and a fall convention sponsored by TASA jointly with the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB). CSP fellows participate in two additional conferences: the TASA Midwinter Conference and the American Association of School Administrators’ National Conference on Education. Another dimension of this networking experience is that CSP fellows participate in key meetings of the Texas Alliance of School Districts in preparation for and during the time that the Texas legislature is in session, observing sessions of legislative educational committee meetings when available, and attending deliberations of the State Board of Education.

Formulating a Personal Vision

In order to complete this highly integrated program and gain the credentials required to provide the demanding leadership needed in our public schools today, CSP participants complete a formal research study (i.e., treatise or dissertation). From this concentrated immersion in theory, practice, and networking with the most effective educational leaders available, each CSP fellow is expected to develop a personal vision to improve educational systems at the local, state, and national levels. Each new educational leader will create a personal mission that respects the diversity of the population served in today’s classrooms, and will form a clear sense of ethical values concerning the balance among the needs of students, parents, and community members as equal stakeholders with respect to the costs and benefits of educational decisions. While the CSP program is intensive and demanding, it is designed to prepare tomorrow’s school district leaders to attain the goal of stellar educational achievement using in-depth knowledge of current research on effective educational practices and well-honed professional leadership skills to meet today’s complex educational challenges.

Ruben D. Olivarez, Ph.D., is the L. D. Haskew Centennial Professor of Public School Administration and director of the Cooperative Superintendency Program, Department of Educational Administration, at The University of Texas at Austin.

References


Houston ISD Superintendent Dr. Terry Grier shares his experience with graduate students in UT’s Cooperative Superintendency Program, Cohort 23.
Student-Centered Learning

Disrupts Industrial Practices of Traditional Schools

by Kathi Whitley

THOUGH “DISRUPTION” HAS NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS (to destroy, interrupt, cause disorder or turmoil), a break from the norm doesn’t have to be a bad thing. And in this particular case, disruption is quite contrarily a very, very good thing.

It was on this premise that Arthur VanderVeen, Compass Learning’s vice president of business strategy and development, based his breakout session at the recent TASA Midwinter Conference in Austin.

In his presentation—“Open, Mobile, Social, Gaming… the New Learning Experience”—VanderVeen and two Austin-area educators—Carl Hooker, Eanes ISD director of instructional technology; and Steven Zipkes, principal, Manor New Technology High School—talked about how this new era of digital learning places students front and center in plotting and managing their own educations, which ultimately helps prepare them to compete in a globally connected world.

VanderVeen shared and endorsed the new learning standards outlined in TASA’s visioning document, Creating a New Vision for Public Education in Texas. The statement of principle reads, “The new digital environment demands new learning standards for students so that they will have the values and the capabilities to live, learn, and earn in a free society surrounded by a world that is truly global, connected, and increasingly competitive in scope and character.”

Some of the supporting premises in the visioning document emphasize that learning should be “profound,” enabling students to apply, synthesize, solve problems, and create knowledge; and that educators should cultivate students’ “multiple intelligences,” tap into their curiosity and imagination, enable them to not just be consumers of knowledge but creators of knowledge, and prepare them for the new digital era.

Developing student-centered learning and future-ready students, however, requires a fundamental shift in how we organize our schools, said VanderVeen.

• The curriculum needs to shift to include 21st century skills, service learning, character education, and college readiness.
• Learning time shifts to adjustable scheduling, anytime/anywhere learning, flexible attendance policies, and more extended day/year options.
• The physical location shifts to outside the classroom; open, collaborative work spaces; greater school choice; and virtual learning.
• Traditional relationships shift to teachers as tutors and coaches, and stronger parental and community engagement.
• Pedagogy shifts to mastery-based, self-paced, and personalization.
• And finally, assessments shift to 21st century competencies, performance-based, and multiple modalities.

In other words, said VanderVeen, “Everything in education gets flipped on its head.”

Certainly, this disruption is not without its challenges, but the benefits far outweigh the potential pitfalls. Countless positive educational outcomes have been linked to digital, student-centered learning, including
higher achievement in marginalized student populations; greater class participation; improved self-reflection and study skills among struggling students; and fewer behavioral problems.

Giving credence to VanderVeen’s remarks was Eanes ISD Director of Instructional Technology Carl Hooker, who shared some remarkable outcomes in his district, which includes parts of Austin as well as the municipalities of Rollingwood and Westlake Hills.

Even in the affluent district of Eanes, with nine exemplary schools and seemingly limitless financial support, Hooker said they continued to grapple with how to perpetuate the fascination with learning that their youngest students seemed to gradually lose. “Through year after year of traditional pedagogy and inflexible classroom structure, students’ wonderment just disappeared,” said Hooker. “We were gradually killing their curiosity and creativity. Additionally, we were graduating students who were coming back from college and work life to tell us how completely ill-prepared they were for our connected society.”

So in fall 2010, Eanes ISD launched an initiative called LEAP (Learning and Engaging through Access and Personalization) with just six iPads and an admirable aspiration to personalize learning for each student and increase access to technology.

By December 2012, the community consensus was that iPads had transformed the district’s classrooms into interactive, exciting, engaging places that were not only improving learning for at-risk students but also challenging gifted students to a higher level of thinking.

By spring of 2013, every single student and teacher in the district had an iPad, for a total of 8,400 devices.

But to have technology just for the sake of it isn’t enough. Hooker explained that for technology to truly be transformational in schools, we need to traverse the technology use continuum, eventually getting to the “R” in what’s known as the SAMR model.

You can ever so slightly enhance learning, he said, through Substitution—the “S” in the model. At this stage, technology serves as a direct substitute for an existing tool, with no functional change. At the Augmentation (A) stage, technology acts as a direct tool substitute, with some functional improvement. Schools start to become more student-centered in the Modification (M) stage. At this point, there is a physical shift in the classroom, with technology allowing for significant task redesign and collaboration. But it’s at Redefinition (R)—when technology allows for the creation of new tasks that were previously inconceivable—Hooker said, where we achieve profound, student-led learning.

“At Eanes, we’ve seen this transformation. We’ve proven time and again that when teachers step back from the process and let kids have a voice and a choice in learning, the product improves exponentially,” concluded Hooker.

Juxtaposed with the affluence of Eanes ISD is Manor ISD, which serves students who come from predominately low-income households. Nearly 70 percent qualify for the free and reduced-lunch program, and many are English Language Learners; its ELL population has grown by 144 percent since 2004. Just a few years ago, its high school was classified as low-performing, with a dismal 40 percent completion rate.

In 2007, the district opened Manor New Technology High School (MNTH), with a mission to prepare students to excel in an information-based and technologically advanced society; and a principal, Steven Zipkes, who was determined to deliver.

Though students must apply to attend MNTH, there are no admission criteria outside of application completion and promotion to the 9th grade. Administrators use a lottery system to select from the pool of applicants, so the ethnic and income demographics of MNTH are similar to those of Manor High School, the district’s comprehensive high school.

With its doors open just a few short years, MNTH boasts a dropout rate of nearly 0 percent and an attendance rate of 97.4 percent. And, MNTH is outperforming the state by 20 percent on standardized tests. Additionally, close to 100 percent of its graduating seniors are accepted to college and more than 60 percent of them are the first in their families to pursue a postsecondary education. Additionally, for the past three years, MNTH has experienced a 100 percent teacher retention rate.

Zipkes credits the school’s successes to its project-based learning approach, its focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and the seamless integration of technology into instruction.

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Zipkes credits the school’s successes to its project-based learning approach, its focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics), and the seamless integration of technology into instruction.

“Students take control of their own learning and, consequently, have moved from passive recipients of knowledge to creators, authors, and empowered learners,” said Zipkes. “Project-based learning is not a program. It’s a pedagogical shift in instruction. With PBL, the learning takes place within the product, not with a grade at the end.”

Additionally, said Zipkes, because teachers treat students as agents in their own learning, students begin to develop their own higher expectations and foster a culture of learning. And, teachers promote 21st century learning skills in all classrooms and support a graduate profile consisting of communication, critical thinking, collaboration, and technology literacy skills, as well as habits of work ethic.

Kathi Whitley is a writer/editor for Compass Learning.
Moving from Data
to Making a Difference

by Andy Hegedus

In the last 10 years there has been increased focus on using “data” to inform decisions and to leverage change within educational settings. This renewal was manifested in policies such as NCLB and Race to the Top, but extends also to recommended strategies for identifying best educational practices and program evaluation. But we all know that improving student outcomes requires much more than merely gathering data. In an ideal world, a student could take an assessment, and the resulting information would automatically result in tailored instruction and programmatic changes that provide all students with precisely what they need for maximum learning at any given time. Of course, it doesn’t really work that way.

In this article, I present a view on the types of problems faced in education and outline key characteristics of a process that begins with collecting data and ends with evaluating progress. I use the issue of students dropping out of high school to illustrate the steps.

Wicked Problems

The problems faced within education resemble the problems in many social settings in that they lack clear definitions, have many potential causes, lack simple solutions, and defy straightforward measurement. In this sense, such problems are “wicked,” as opposed to being “tame” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). Wicked problems are characterized with many features, including:

- There is no definitive formulation
- There is no immediate or ultimate test of a solution
- They can be explained in numerous ways, and the choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem’s resolution

Whereas tame problems are easily solvable (are familiar, routine, and causes and solutions are mostly agreed upon), wicked ones need to be understood and managed so that progress and improvement can be made, even if full solutions are ultimately unobtainable. (Cuban, 2001).

Preventing high school dropouts is an example of a wicked problem. As of the 2010–11 school year, the U.S. Department of Education is now using a standard formula to measure dropout rates. However, the measurement doesn’t account for students who graduate from high school in more than four years or students who earn a GED (Chen, 2012). Thus, because the DOE defines the phenomenon in a way that is difficult to measure accurately, there is no definitive measure we can rely on to know that the dropout problem is solved. Is it when no one in the entire country drops out of school? Is it when 95 percent stay in
school? How can we resolve it? It depends on whether we think students drop out because they lack parental support or role models, are doing poorly in school, or don’t perceive a link between education and their future.

Despite the fact that “wicked” problems defy simple solutions, the majority of solutions posed as remedies typically involve one of two basic strategies: working harder or working smarter. But such solutions, while they may produce short-term improvement, may also reduce the likelihood that long-term solutions or system-wide changes will be made. However, if we focus on fixing the system in which people work, rather than fixing the people, long-term improvement results (Repenning & Sterman, 2001).

Where to Begin?
To know how best to implement improvement, the first step is to identify what data are available to understand actual performance and whether these data are adequate, and to agree upon a set of priority focus areas. Why? The noted systems scientist Dr. Russell Ackoff said it clearly: “We more frequently fail to face the right problem than fail to solve the problems we face.” (Ackoff, 1999). A process to identify and understand these areas should consider the following questions:

- Is the school or entity currently performing at a high or low level?
- What data need to be included to assure that the issues are being adequately identified and defined?
- Who needs to be involved in planning to get an adequate variety of perspectives on these issues?
- How can the planning phase be structured to ensure that all perspectives are heard and valued?

A school (or entity’s) performance level is defined on the basis of two attributes: achieved results (typically evidenced by various types of data) and the organizational culture in which people produce these results (as indicated by dimensions like open communication, ongoing learning, focus, shared power and involvement, etc.). Schools that have dysfunctional cultures and are producing poor data tend to suffer from global, systemic problems. It is typically easier to establish priorities for improvement in such schools because the systemic problems tend to be easier to identify and agreed upon. In schools with better results and more functional cultures, improvement planning is more likely to focus on smaller strategies intended to meet the needs of subsets of students. Improving results in a dysfunctional culture can happen through a dictatorial management style; however, the results are not likely to be sustained and the process for identifying the focus areas needs to be carefully considered so that the process also helps to improve the culture as well.

Once a planning process is established, it should move forward using existing structures, such as grade-level meetings or Professional Learning Community time, or through the creation of special school-wide groups with clear provisions to each team on how its output will be combined into a comprehensive whole.

Student achievement data often tend to be included as one (if not the primary) data source in designing school improvement plans. However, such data are often used inappropriately. Input from student data should include multiple sources after consideration of the strengths and weaknesses of the sources. For example, if state test proficiency rates are the primary metric for comparing grade levels, the focus can be placed on the wrong grade simply if the state has a significantly more difficult standard for proficiency in one grade than all the others, as happens in many if not most states. (Durant & Dahlin, 2011). When using student achievement data, one must use types, sources, and displays of the data that adequately convey their richness while not being so complex that the process becomes overwhelming and unmanageable. (Lipton & Wellman, 2012).

To illustrate the concept using the earlier dropout rate example, one might examine various types of current and historical data,
including academic achievement, attendance, discipline, student and teacher demographics, and coursework. The team examining the data might include teachers from different subjects and tracks, counselors, advisors, parents, students, coaches, community social workers, and discipline deans. They might review the elements of data in small teams looking for significant anomalies. Each team might report its findings to the larger group, looking for similarities and differences. Further exploration can continue based on what is discovered initially.

**Elements of Clear Data-Based Statements of Each Focus Area**

These efforts would result in a well-articulated statement of the problem, defining its magnitude, location, and duration. Magnitude expresses the extent of the problem. Location defines where the problem is and is not. Duration defines how long the problem has existed. With these elements clearly articulated, a solid platform now exists for further conversation exploring the causes of the problem. Questions about causes and points of leverage can be logically tested to confirm that they make sense in light of the specifics. Improvement can be demonstrated over time.

For the dropout problem, the team might define a problem as:

- Forty-one percent of our students who enter our school in 9th grade, and who still live in our feeder pattern, never graduate with a high school diploma.
- Fifty-two percent of these students leave in 9th grade and 35 percent leave in 10th.
- Sixty-five percent who leave are males compared to 52 percent of the 9th grade class being male. Sixty-nine percent are African American compared to 61 percent of the 9th grade class being African American.
- The reading assessment results for students who leave average the 17th percentile nationally. These data were essentially steady over the last three years with no significant trend in any of the data reported.

**Finding the Points of Leverage**

Before strategies are selected to tackle the problems, it is important to identify the leverage points. This can be difficult because people tend not to perceive the link between long-term system problems as the causes for performance problems in the moment. (Repenning & Sterman, 2001). Rather than address all elements of the problem, finding ones that are deeper and have more influence on the outcomes is important, particularly in complex, “wicked” situations. To find them, all of the perspectives need to surface, and people need to learn from each other in the process.

Most of the tools used to find causes were developed to address tame problems—ones that might have some technical complexity to them but by their nature have linear cause and effect relationships. Fishbone Diagrams, the Five Whys, Force Field Analysis might help structure the discussions, but ultimately they fail because wicked problems have no real root cause; there are simply factors that exert more leverage than others. The key question to discover leverage is not asking people about which ideas are important but which ideas exert the most influence. The answer to the influence question drives people into a conversation about the relationships between ideas—a systems-based discussion—rather than one simply about constraints (e.g., our budget is too small). Focusing on importance instead of influence can lead to setting erroneous priorities. (Flanagan & Christakis, 2010, p. 53).

A map of the dropout rate high-priority factors and their influence might look like the following (Ashworth, Christakis, & Conaway, 2005).
The problems Inherent in Planning
Moving from defining and understanding the leverage points into planning, action, and results presents challenges. Gaps exist in our knowledge between what we actually know and what we’d like to know. Gaps exist in the alignment between what we would like people to do and what they actually do. Gaps exist between the effects our actions actually have and what we wish they had. In response to these gaps, most organizations respond with more detailed plans, instructions, and controls. A better response is to decide what really matters and formulate the strategies as broad intentions rather than specific plans. Communicate the intentions and what people should achieve and why they are so. Encourage people to reach the intent by planning their actions considering available time and resources, and then allow them to adapt their actions to realize the overall intentions while they experience what is changing in their environment. Routinely having people explain what they are going to do to meet the intent can confirm understanding and alignment. Routinely monitoring what is done to assure action, alignment, and changes in results can confirm the intent is being realized. However, the burden of reporting and communicating progress should be minimized. (Bungy, 2011).

Because a shared understanding of the goals and the process is so vital, graphical representations (like the one above), often facilitate communication. A flowchart or other graphical representations between areas of focus, causes, effects, and intended strategies can help to clarify communication at all levels.

For the dropout problem above, different teams could work initially on strategies and actions to understand and address parent involvement, improve the cultural relevance of the instruction, and implement a program to reinforce positive behaviors since these are three areas with the most influence. From the diagram they would also understand why the selected strategies have priority and how they are expected to influence the problem.

Evaluating Progress
Prior research on reducing dropout rates provides assurance that the selected strategies, if implemented with fidelity, will produce the desired effect. The severity of the problem, along with the costs and consequences for implementing the strategy, dictate how broadly it should be implemented. The more resource intensive the implementation, the more a rigorous evaluation needs to be conducted that looks not only at changes in the results but at the fidelity of implementation and the quality of the supports provided to achieve the desired fidelity.

During the evaluation phase of a new implementation, one needs to consider both the expected and the unexpected results. For example, in a modification of an existing mathematics program to boost student achievement in computation with fractions, one would obviously look for evidence that their abilities with fractions improved. However, one would also want to look at other domains to make sure they didn’t decline at the same time.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are an ideal vehicle for evaluating a new implementation. PLCs allow teams to discuss which actions they will take to implement the strategies. Members can support each other and celebrate successes. They can hold each other accountable for implementing a change in the classroom between meetings. They can review data and discuss what is working, what is not, and how to adjust. They can conduct their own action research to monitor the implementation of fidelity. They can provide feedback to others via team meetings, meetings with administration, and minutes from their work together.

To return to the context of the high school dropout example, prior research suggests that a school-wide positive behavior support program is likely to be effective; however, the evidence for it at the high school level is limited (Bohanon-Edmonson, Flannery, Eber, & Sugai, 2004). Therefore, the school has chosen to implement it on their 9th grade team only as a one-year pilot, since this is the grade with highest need. With training and support materials provided over the summer, the 9th grade PLCs then meet routinely to monitor progress, based on feedback.
on their own and their students’ experiences. They adapt what behaviors are rewarded and the rewards themselves based on student feedback. They change the language and specificity they use when acknowledging the positive behavior. Each team member commits to trying something different between meetings and reports back on the success each time. They review low-level discipline data comparing prior months and similar months in prior years to evaluate progress. They look for unintended consequences by examining broader data to ensure students whose discipline rates have declined are also showing steady or positive trends on other measures like attendance and academic achievement and growth. They document what they are doing in individual action plans and meeting summaries. Periodically, an administrator joins the discussion to discover other ways progress can be made and other supports that the team needs. They discuss how the initial training and support materials could be improved for future implementation.

Once the year is completed, the 9th grade team assesses the overall results and their fidelity of implementation, and makes a formal recommendation to continue the work for a second year.

Making a Difference

The general process outlined in the preceding pages is designed to be flexible so that it can be adapted to different settings and contexts. The goal is to maximize the probability that actions taken will result in significant performance improvement. The data reviews, collaborative conversations, and planning activities are simply a vehicle to get to effective action.

Improvement requires continuous examination by those involved. Improvements can be seen quickly if one is looking for them, and if the measurements are sensitive enough to detect the changes. Transitioning from new implementation into standard policy (i.e., so people say “that’s how we do it here”) takes more time. Keeping the focus on the intended changes really does support the old management adage “what gets measured (and attended to) gets done.” And getting the right changes done well is what ultimately makes a difference.

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References


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Data Reporting Tool for Schools (DaRTS)

Following the Employment, Assignment, and Retention of District Teachers

by Sherri Lowrey and Mona S. Wineburg

The Center for Research, Evaluation and Advancement of Teacher Education (CREATE) is a research and development consortium of 53 Texas universities whose mission is to advance the quality and effectiveness of teacher preparation in Texas universities. CREATE seeks to engage university and public school leaders by planning, developing, and delivering strategic, data-driven analyses focused on teachers and their preparation, particularly university-based teacher preparation.

One resource that CREATE provides to teacher education programs associated with the CREATE consortium of universities is a data resource and planning tool called Performance Analysis for Colleges of Education (PACE). PACE represents a school-centered planning tool that allows university educational leaders to assess long-term trends related to public schools in their area and respond effectively to public school need. A full discussion of the type of information and data in PACE was presented in the Winter 2007 edition of INSIGHT.

CREATE has now developed a similar data resource tool for school districts called Data Reporting Tool for Schools (DaRTS). This series of reports—showing employment, assignment, and retention trends for district teachers—equips school district decision makers with timely and easily accessible information that may assist in reaching both short- and long-term goals. The data, derived from state data sources, are configured to show how various preparation pathways contribute to district staffing and employment patterns. The reports make employment, assignment, and retention information more transparent by systematically disaggregating staffing trends.

Staffing and recruitment challenges can create enormous financial burdens for school districts already struggling to do more with less. Not all districts have the resources to support staff members who routinely collect information for human capital management. And unless available data are in formats that allow for systematic analysis, there is little ability to understand, reflect on, or make informed decisions about changing trends. Communicating results and trends to stakeholders in meaningful and understandable ways is essential to building a teacher workforce with the types of credentials that districts need. Given the changing financial landscape, making the right kind of data available in a useable format can help human resource departments become active partners in increasing organizational effectiveness and teacher quality as well as helping to inform a variety of district functions, including teacher recruitment and strategic planning.

DaRTS contains 39 reports grouped into three sections: employment, assignment, and retention. The size of each report depends upon the size of the district’s teacher workforce. The reports in each section are structured so that each successive report is disaggregated to give more detail than the previous one. A description of the reports found in each section of DaRTS follows.
**SECTION I. Employment Trends**

Section I reports link teacher employment to teachers’ initial preparation programs.

Reports 1–4 include the data for all district teachers. The data in Report 1 show teacher employment patterns over a ten-year period disaggregated by the initial recommending source (pathway). A user could easily discover the names of individual recommending sources that supplied teachers to the district and the number of teachers each supplied since 2001.

Report 2 disaggregates five-year teacher employment by the following certification pathways: university, for-profit, and non-profit alternative programs; SBEC/TEA; and undetermined. The university total is further disaggregated to show the number of teachers that received certification through a standard, post-baccalaureate, or alternative university program.

Report 3 further disaggregates teacher employment from the previous report by campus level: elementary, middle or high, and multi-level schools. Users of this chart could see how the number and percentage of teachers are distributed across campus level as well as distribution by certification pathway.

Report 4 disaggregates five-year employment trends of teachers by initial recommending preparation program. Within each type of certification pathway, data are sorted so that the programs with the highest number of teachers employed in the district during the last academic year are listed first.

Reports 5–8 refer only to data for newly hired district teachers, defined as those teachers who are teaching for the first time in the district regardless of years of experience. The reports are organized the same way as the previous reports: newly hired linked to initial teacher preparation, newly hired employment by pathway, newly hired employment by pathway and campus level, and pathway disaggregated by individual program contribution to the district’s newly hired teacher workforce.

**SECTION II. Assignment Trends**

Reports in this section are divided into two main parts: Reports 9–20 show the full-time equivalent (FTE) assignment distribution patterns of all district teachers disaggregated by school level; Reports 21–32 show the same information for newly-hired district teachers. School level is determined by its classification in the AEIS database. The reports for elementary, middle, or high schools are grouped into separate sections and follow a similar organizational scheme as previous reports, where the data become increasingly disaggregated. For each campus level, there will be an overall FTE assignment summary, an assignment summary by certification pathway, then an analysis of assignment by subject area by pathway, and finally subject area assignment by recommending program.

The information in these reports is extensive. Rather than go through each report in this section, we think it would be more useful to generally describe the content in the four types of reports and then give examples of how the report might be used.

**Chart 1, Summary of Campus-Level Teacher Assignment,** is an example of the first type of report. It is a general summary chart showing the FTE distribution by subject area occurring at each campus level over a five-year period. Using these charts, one could easily find the number and percent of district elementary school FTEs teaching English as a Second Language in 2008–2009 (Report 9); the number and percent of high school mathematics FTEs in 2011–2012 (Report 17); or the number and percent of newly-hired middle school French FTEs in 2010–2011 (Report 25).
A second type of report, **Summary of Campus-Level Teacher Assignment by Pathway**, summarizes the FTE distribution of campus-level assignment by initial certification pathway. Using this set of reports, one could discover which certification pathway provides the most high, middle, or elementary school FTEs (Report 18); compare middle school FTE numbers between universities and for-profit alternative certification programs across years (Report 14); or compare elementary FTE numbers between all teachers (Report 10) and the newly hired (Report 22).

A third type of report, **Campus-Level Teacher Assignment by Pathway**, gives even more detail by disaggregating the FTE contribution of the subject-area classifications found at each campus level for each certification pathway. Using this set of reports for any given year one could find which pathway provides the highest FTEs in high school mathematics (Report 19), the number of FTEs devoted to special education in middle school (Report 15), or what pathway provides the most newly hired elementary FTEs in science (Report 11).

The last type of report in this section, **Campus-Level Teacher Assignment by Recommending Pathway**, provides information about the number and percentage of FTEs that are employed by the district and certified through a university or alternative preparation program. The data are disaggregated by campus level, subject area, and program. For convenience, the data are organized from high to low within each pathway so that programs with the highest number of district FTEs in the current fiscal year are listed first. This set of reports might be used by recruitment personnel to find the universities or alternative certification programs associated with FTEs in high-need areas such as mathematics, special education, and science; or to identify sources for new teachers in other subject areas.

**SECTION III: Retention Trends**

Section III of DaRTS supplies graphs and charts that represent how long cohorts of teachers remain in the classroom. An initial cohort of teachers is identified and followed for a number of years. The initial cohort consists of all teachers, both new and experienced, who started teaching in the district in the initial cohort year. All the charts and graphs in this section are important because teacher attrition is both expensive for the district and detrimental to students. Choosing teachers from preparation pathways that have high retention rates makes sense economically and is good for campus stability, a factor related to student achievement.

**First set of reports**—This first set of reports is useful in following the retention of various preparation pathways. The reports compare retention disaggregated by one of the following certification pathways: university, for-profit ACPs, non-profit ACPs, and SBEC/TEA. Other charts further break down the retention data by school level. Thus, one can look at five-year district retention of elementary, middle, or high school teachers separately.

**Other retention reports of interest**—

1. The retention of teachers in the cohort who received initial certification through a specific certification program can be reviewed. For each certification pathway, programs are sorted to show which preparation programs have the highest rate of retention in the district. (2) A summary of the retention of different groups of teacher cohorts could be used to see where groups of teachers begin to drop out so that support or professional development could be provided.

**Chart 2, Retention Summary of 2007–2011 Teacher Cohorts**, shows the retention of several cohorts of teachers who were new to the district since 2006-2007. There are many ways the cohort data could be used. For example, the retention rate of cohorts can be compared by looking diagonally from left to right across the chart. The 2006–2007 and 2007–2008 cohorts have similar fourth-year rates (62 percent and 64 percent respectively), but the 2008–2009 cohort has a 6 percent higher fourth-year retention rate (70 percent). What caused this increase? Was a different recruiting strategy put into place? Did the district institute a pay increase? Were new professional development programs initiated?

There are many advantages to using DaRTS. First, the reports equip decision makers with timely data. Second, information becomes...
more transparent and tells a story about the district’s employment, assignment, and retention trends. Third, the data is easy to use and packaged in ready-to-use tables and charts giving school leaders data they need in a format that they can use. Lastly, the reports can powerfully augment local data and be used to track trends, spot potential problems, reallocate resources, or document goal attainment.

DaRTS is available to all public school districts in Texas. The data package comes on a CD and includes a PDF of the 39 employment, assignment, and retention reports; an excel file listing the assignments, certifications, and certifying organizations of all district teachers (except current new hires); and a data dictionary. Please contact Dr. Mona Wineburg, executive director, for information on pricing, to order the data for your district, or to discuss how CREATE can help you with your data needs.

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Stand Up

and Make a Difference

by Jeremy Wagner

The 2012–13 school year brought a number of trials and tribulations as well as positive efforts to improve our education system. As the year progressed, we saw the effects that the deep budget cuts of 2011 had on our students, buildings, and staff members. We witnessed the Senate confirmation of a new education commissioner, and the appointment of new House and Senate Education Committee members. Statistics showed that most schools in the state fell below AYP standards as the second year of the more rigorous STAAR testing system led to an increase in pressure for students to meet the higher standards.

In addition to adjusting to these changes and challenges, this year was memorable for me personally. I received the honor of being named 2013 Texas State Teacher of the Year. This acknowledgment provided me the privilege of representing every teacher within the state. As I first reflected on what my mission and goals should be while representing Texas teachers, I found it difficult to narrow the possibilities down. Over the course of time, through many conversations over cups of coffee and through prayer, I concluded that the year as a whole needed one driving motivational statement as a daily mantra: Stand up and make a difference.

This mantra, patterned after a statement from Gandhi, can provide an important message to Texas educators. Gandhi faced a great injustice within his nation and did great things to move an entire people. He stood at the precipice of positive change and did what needed to be done. In Texas, we also stand at the precipice of worthwhile change and should heed the mantra to ensure it happens.

During the legislative session there has been much debate in the House and Senate on various education bills. Many of these bills, like HB 5, attempted to make changes in the right direction. Other worthy bills attempt to restore some of the funding cuts, lessen the number of tests tied to high school graduation, and open the door for students to seek a variety of pathways to graduation. These are huge steps in the right direction, and our legislators should be commended for listening to the concerns of stakeholders and addressing those concerns through legislation.
Teacher Accountability

Contrary to popular belief, many educators I work with feel that increased accountability is a great thing. However, these educators believe that accountability should look a lot different than it does today. The state has continually relied on high-stakes, state-level testing of key subjects at the end of each academic year. This has created a culture amongst teachers, schools, and districts that emphasizes a one-shot chance to prove that we are doing what we need to do throughout the year. This leads teachers to focus on helping their students succeed on a pen-and-paper exam that does little to truly reflect their attainment of knowledge and skills throughout the year. This kind of testing does not reflect the variables that influence student learning on many levels.

What should accountability look like if the current system isn’t working? The answer is simple. Teachers need to be held accountable for what actually happens in the classroom. In order for this kind of change to happen, it’s going to require that many educators and administrators tighten their belts and become accustomed to something that we may be uncomfortable with at first. We need to make a fundamental change to the teacher evaluation system. The current system allows for an educator to look amazing on paper with one evaluation at one point in the year and a handful of classroom walkthroughs.

The evaluation system is frequently viewed by people in the system as a method of removing teachers we want out of our buildings. This has to change. Teacher evaluations need to be more frequent and focus on analyzing student and teacher growth. Administrators need to be given the freedom and flexibility in their schedules to visit teachers’ rooms four or five times a year (or more) in order to create a tapestry of information that can accurately show how a teacher plans lessons, delivers content, links to state standards, engages students, creates an engaging environment, and takes every single step necessary to connect to kids and make them successful. There are a few systems in place like the evaluation rubric from the Teacher Advancement Program.

Collectively, educators are one of the most powerful voting groups in the country. Despite this, we are often one of the least active voting groups in the professional world. We sit idly by and wait for someone to come along and fix all of our problems. Instead, we have to call our congressmen and state legislators and tell them exactly what we think and believe needs to happen.

State Level Testing (STAAR)

That being said regarding teacher accountability, most educators agree that state-level testing isn’t something that needs to totally disappear. This kind of testing does provide valuable information that can be used as data points to adjust instruction, modify curriculum, and guide decisions made on local levels. These tests simply shouldn’t be the sole data point to determine a teacher’s effectiveness.

Additionally, from looking into the questions and comparing them to benchmarks for brain development well researched by giants like Piaget, we are missing the mark of what is intended to happen with these exams. Our tests seem to have crossed a line in what is expected from our children and what they are developmentally capable of delivering. I challenge the legislature to begin putting in place a system or tool created by university researchers, top educators across the state, and government officials that could compare available data on test questions to established research on cognitive development.

Funding for Education

There is little question amongst educators, the people connected to education, and the students in our education system that we are currently in the throes of the worst budget cuts we have experienced in modern times. These cuts have stemmed from a lot of issues—one of the primary ones being the reaction to economic hardships. However, these cuts are beginning to show negative results more quickly than most of us anticipated. These cuts have led to scrapping or removal of extracurricular programs and enrichment opportunities, increased class size, and even the closures of many campuses across the state. Many of the things cut are the very things that kids need to keep them motivated and coming to school.

Funding cuts can be linked to more than just economic hardship. Many voter decisions have driven the decision to cut education to the bone. Frequently, educators have heard people say something like, “My kids are grown and working now—I don’t need to be putting my tax dollars into something that doesn’t affect me anymore.” This is a prevailing thought amongst many people. It is up to us to inform them exactly how reliant they are, or will be, upon the students currently in our classrooms. Who will they turn to when they need laparoscopic surgery? Who will they find when they need a young and energetic lawyer? Who will be their next congressman or senator? The students in our schools today are the foundation upon which to build for the future. Our kids do not inherit the future from us; we are borrowing the future from our kids, and we need to treat it with the care it deserves.

Connecting with Community

How do we get our constituents to understand, vote for, and move in the direction needed in order for change to happen?

When community members are welcome to come into our schools, they are opened to a world in which they can see exactly what we are doing on a daily basis to connect with kids, enrich their lives, and prepare them for a world that is increasingly challenging and changing. Parents are curious about what is happening and sometimes feel that the
school is a place of mystery and a point of frustration in their daily lives. We need to change this outlook.

Additionally, business owners need to be brought into our schools. When parents and business owners are encouraged to come to PTA meetings and participate in fundraisers, they begin to see how important student growth is for the local economy.

**Stand Up**

Here’s the bottom line. The roller coaster of despair…and hope…and more despair…and more hope shows me that we are not beyond the point of no return. We must realize that policies can be changed, politicians will change, culture can adapt and grow, education can become a focus again, and we can be the catalyst to make it happen. We can no longer sit idle and wait for someone else to solve the problem for us. We have to begin to connect to our communities in a way that we have only dreamed about before.

Stand up and make a difference like we dreamed about when we took up the mantle of teaching. We must stand up and hold ourselves accountable. We have to stand up for our profession. We have to represent ourselves. We have to educate the community as well as ourselves. Stand up and call government officials with ideas and suggestions, not just complaints. We have to stand up and be the leaders our education system needs. We have to guide other teachers to understand their role beyond the classroom and give them courage to stand up with us. We have to stand up and be the difference we want to see in our profession. I choose to stand. I choose to change. Now, will you stand with me?

Jeremy Wagner is an eighth-grade math and science teacher at Heritage Middle School in Frenship ISD and Texas’ 2013 Secondary Teacher of the Year.

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Is It Our Story?

by Helen Williams

Before saying yes or no to a media request, ask yourself, "Is it our story?"

What do you do when the phone rings and it’s a reporter telling you he needs to interview you immediately for a story he’s working on? Or that he’s on the way to your office to put you on camera for a live interview in 10 minutes?

Reporters live in a world ruled by deadlines, so their requests are often urgent. As educators, we live in a world ruled by many demands—meetings with parents, staff, committees, school board members; human resources interviews and decisions; and community relations and media relations, just to name a few. And all the while, there is a steady flow of phone calls and emails.

Our schedules are so packed that it’s always a challenge to drop everything to take care of a media request. However, community relations and public relations are a key part of any organization, and especially one that is funded by taxpayers’ dollars.

Any good reporter will tell you that, whether the story is positive or negative, it’s important to articulate your side of the story. It’s much smarter to get ahead of the story than clean up the damage a negative media campaign can cause.

And let’s not forget Mark Twain’s words of wisdom: "Never pick a fight with people who buy ink by the barrel."
So back to that phone call, what should you do?
Are you obligated to drop everything every time a reporter calls? No.
Should you just let the call go to voicemail and hope the reporter goes away? No.
Instead, take a systematic and strategic approach to every media request by asking several key questions.

- **What is the story about?** Listen carefully to learn if the story applies to your district and your core principles. Also judge whether the story is breaking news or more of a feature story. If you decide to go forward with the story, you will want to ask the reporter about the deadline and when the story will run. If you decide to decline, it is advisable to do so politely.

- **What is the best way to convey the information? Should we do an interview?** This is a question for you and your staff. If you decide this is your story, think about the best way to reply. Here are some options:
  - **Do a phone interview**—This is a quick and convenient way to offer a comment. It's fine to record the interview or take notes for future reference or to confirm the accuracy of the quotes.
  - **Do an in-person interview**—This is more time-consuming than a phone interview, but meeting in person sends the message that you think this story is important, and you value your relationship with the reporter enough to take the time out of your day to sit down face-to-face.
  - **Determine the best person or people to do the interview**—The school district spokesperson is not always the best person for the interview, especially if he or she is not the expert in the subject area that is being covered. If the story is spotlighting something positive in the classroom, you might consider the teacher, principal, and/or students for the interview.
  - **Agree on how long the interview will be**—Whether the interview is in person or over the phone, set it up as you would any other appointment, and agree in advance on the amount of time the interview will last. Usually, 15–30 minutes is reasonable, depending on the scope of the topic. You can always follow up with a phone call or email with more information following the interview.
  - **Prepare for the interview**—Identify your key talking points (usually three is a good number), and bridge back to those points during your conversation. If the reporter doesn’t address the talking points, introduce them yourself, and tell the reporter why you think they are important. Remember, television and radio sound bites are short, so be sure to stick to your key points.
  - **Don’t feel that you have to answer every question**—Especially if the topic is controversial, it is a good idea to have a conversation with the reporter ahead of the interview to let him or her know what you can and cannot address. If the question comes up during the interview, even if the cameras are rolling, you can say, “As I mentioned earlier, that is not something I can discuss with you today. However, what I can tell you is…,” using the opportunity to bridge back to what you can and want to say. If a reporter asks you a question that you don’t have an immediate answer to, it is best to simply say, “I don’t have that information right now, but I can get it for you,” then follow up later.
  - **Don’t speculate**—Beware of questions such as, “What do you think he was thinking?” or “How do you think this will turn out?” Simply stick to the known facts and explain how processes work.
  - **Don’t speak for other districts**—If a reporter asks you about something that occurred in another school district—especially if it is a negative story—it is not a good idea to comment. Stick to your district and your story.
  - **Issue a written statement**—This is advisable in situations where you do not want anyone to go on camera or risk being misquoted. If it is regarding an issue of student discipline or a personnel matter, you can explain why you cannot discuss the matter.
  - **Avoid “no comment”**—Even in cases involving highly confidential information, such as ongoing investigations, student discipline, and personnel matters, you can always issue a written statement or comment about the process, while not commenting on any particular case. Saying “no comment” is abrupt, and it makes people suspicious that you’re hiding something. Instead of “no comment,” a response such as, “the district must respect our students’ and families’ right to privacy” or “the district is committed to protecting our employees’ right to privacy.”
Each new situation brings its own challenges, which is why the answer to the question “Is it our story?” is not always clear cut. Here are some scenarios to illustrate how the decision-making process works:

### Scenario One:

One of your second-grade classes forms a partnership with a second-grade class in Ghana, Africa. The students are working on a book project together, and they communicate via email and Skype several times a week.

**Yes, this is your story.** In fact, it’s the kind of story PR professionals live for because it illustrates innovation and multifaceted learning. You should do everything you can to help the reporter with this. Here are some steps for you or a designee to take:

- Find out the reporter’s deadline and schedule the classroom visit. Communicate with the appropriate central office administrators, the principal, and the teacher.
- Be sure the parents know about the visit to the classroom and that it’s OK with them for their children to be interviewed.
- Take pictures the day of the interview, and publicize when the story will air on television or appear in the paper.
- Let your school board members know about the story.
- If you have an electronic newsletter, publicize and link to the story.
- After the story has run, assuming the outcome is good, write a thank-you note or email to the reporter, copying his supervisor.

### Scenario Two:

Your high school receives a bomb threat via text message to multiple students and staff members, and the school is being evacuated while bomb-sniffing dogs search the campus.

**Yes, this is your story, but it is not your story alone.** You share the story—and, therefore, the communication strategy—with your local law enforcement agency. You will need to work hand-in-glove with the police every step of the way.

This is one of those situations that demands immediate action. Your campus principal needs support; the police need cooperation to do their work; and reporters will arrive at the scene, sometimes without letting you know they are coming. Here are some steps for you or a designee to take:

- You will need to first communicate with your staff and parents to let them know that everyone is safe and that you will keep them posted.
- Consider posting and updating an announcement on your website and using other communications outlets, such as email, a mass text message, or a mass phone message.
- Depending on the size of your district, you might want to let other campuses know as well, and be sure the people answering the phones have a copy of the written announcement so they can pass along the correct information.
- Be sure to follow through on your promise to keep everyone updated. Assuming the threat is found to be baseless and classes can be resumed, communicate that information through an update, and be sure to thank law enforcement officials and emergency responders for their work and support.
- Refer questions about any criminal investigation to the law enforcement officials, and let those officials know that you have made the referral so they are expecting the call.
- Throughout the process, provide the media with the same information you have provided to parents and staff.
- Keep the police authorities informed, and be sure you share a common message.

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**About TSPRA**

The Texas School Public Relations Association (TSPRA) is a nonprofit, professional organization dedicated to promoting public schools through effective communications. TSPRA, an award winning chapter of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), was chartered in 1962 and incorporated in 1977. With more than 800 members, TSPRA is comprised primarily of public information and communications professionals who serve the public school districts and education organizations of Texas. In 2004, TSPRA opened its membership to education foundation staff and boards that support our public schools. The membership also includes superintendents, school administrators, principals, executive directors, web/technology/electronic media and graphic professionals, school consultants, vendors, and others who support public education in the state.
Scenario Three:

A dozen representatives from Gideons International just showed up at your fifth/sixth-grade campus, where they presented the school secretary with a letter from their attorney asserting their right to distribute Bibles on public property; i.e., the sidewalks around your campus. They are handing out Bibles to fifth- and sixth-graders during dismissal time, and parents are contacting news stations, the campus, and the administration building to complain. Other parents, hearing the complaints, are countering that they think it’s a good thing that Bibles are being handed out to students.

Is this your story? That’s debatable. On the one hand, the distribution of Bibles is occurring on the sidewalks around your campus, and it is clear that your 10- and 11-year-old students are the target audience. Parents in the carpool line are asking why this is occurring on campus, although technically it is not on campus, which is precisely why it is able to occur. But the perception persists.

On the other hand, Gideons International is in no way affiliated with your school district or campus, and you are neither endorsing nor discouraging the organization’s activities. Their Bible distribution campaign has nothing to do with any campus curricular or extracurricular activities.

When this occurred in our district, we took the following steps:

• We declined to go on camera, but we emailed a statement to the media.

• We also let the media know that we were contacting the local Gideon chapter to request that in the future they give us advance notice so that we can keep disruption during school dismissal to a minimum. It also allows parents to speak with their children about how to respond when approached by a stranger.

• We emailed parents immediately letting them know about the Gideons’ campaign and about our request to be informed of future campaigns.

• As a side note, the Gideons have responded favorably to our request, and they now inform us of the time period when they are planning to distribute Bibles. We let the parents know about the upcoming campaign in advance.

Scenario Four:

A local author has written a children’s book about bullying, and he has asked you to allow him to have an assembly at every elementary school to be followed by a book signing and opportunity to purchase the book. You politely declined. He calls the media, claiming that bullying is an important topic, and that the school district leaders are hiding their heads in the sand by not allowing him to spread his message. Now reporters are calling you.

Is this your story? Probably not. The school district cannot and should not serve as the marketing department for local authors, entrepreneurs, and businesses. At the same time, it is important that you make it clear that the district is committed to preventing bullying and providing a safe learning environment for students. One possible strategy would be issuing a statement about the district’s existing anti-bullying efforts in response to media inquiries. While not commenting on the author’s work, you could tactfully communicate that holding a schoolwide assembly for the purposes of selling a book is not an appropriate use of instructional time.

If it is later determined that the author’s work and message have merit, you might want to consider reaching out to him to be a guest speaker in an appropriate venue such as career day or at an existing program in which his message would be appropriate.

In conclusion, there are so many challenges and decisions that we face every day, and in the era of social media they can be instantaneously held up for debate and public scrutiny. We must be discerning in choosing which stories are ours, which we share with other entities, and which are simply not our stories.

Helen Williams is the communications director at Highland Park ISD, where she has served since 2004. Before joining Highland Park, she served in the communications departments at Keller and Hurst-Euless-Bedford ISDs. Prior to her career in school public communications, she worked for 15 years as a journalist, where she worked as an editor, columnist, and education and police reporter. She is the North Texas Regional Vice President for the Texas School Public Relations Association.
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