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Keepers of the Flame: Contemporary Urban Superintendents

Theodore J. Kowalski

University of Dayton, tkowalski1@udayton.edu

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Keepers
of the **Flame**

*Contemporary Urban
Superintendents*

Theodore J. Kowalski



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THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

Challenges Ahead

The key to decentralization of political power in the United States today is local action.

—John Naisbitt

Contemporary practice in the urban superintendency is neither easy to describe nor easy to understand. A multitude of variables can steer behavior at any given time, and they do not appear in routine patterns. Essentially, they can be classified in five broad categories:

- The general environments (communities) surrounding the school districts
- The organizational dynamics of the school districts
- Academic preparation and socialization into a profession
- A myriad of social, political, and economic variables that shape ideal and real role expectations
- The personal characteristics of the superintendents themselves

Often these influences interact to the extent that isolating their separate effects at any given point becomes virtually impossible.

With regard to general environments and organizational dynamics, the second chapter of this book reviewed the evolution of urban

school districts. Historians and scholars in educational administration have provided a clear picture displaying that big-city school systems have generally been resistant to organizational restructuring despite massive transitions in their ecosystems. (See Resource D for a discussion of governance structures and attempts at reform.) The lack of adaptations in both culture and climate has led many scholars to retain their characterizations of urban schools as bureaucratic organizations in that power remains centralized, administration continues to be structured in multiple layers of authority, and real community needs rarely serve as catalysts for programmatic change.

Districts we now call “urban” are not, however, a homogeneous group. Some are extremely large in enrollment and geographic territory, whereas others have fewer than 30,000 students and encompass relatively few square miles. Some are experiencing rapid declines in enrollment; others are actually among the fastest growing school districts in America. Some are less bureaucratic than others. But beyond such differences, these complex organizations share several major problems. All have high populations of students living in poverty, all have growing minority populations, and all face serious financial problems.

This final chapter addresses the future of the urban superintendency and challenges that lie ahead. Included are comments from Arthur Steller, deputy superintendent of the Boston Public Schools and currently president of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. His input was obtained in interviews conducted in the spring and summer of 1994. Steller has served as superintendent in all types of school districts, including a major urban district (the Oklahoma City Public Schools), and his insights provided another dimension to this study.

The Present

Unlike big-city superintendents 50 years ago, virtually all of whom were white males from relatively small towns (in 1958, only 2% came from very large cities), today’s urban school chiefs are a heterogeneous group. Many are female (approximately 15%-18%) and minorities (approximately 60%-65%). Some are best described as “upwardly

mobile" individuals with a strong career orientation. They tend to spend considerable time outside of their districts, and they are realistic about the improbability of staying in their current positions for a prolonged period. Others are individuals who have never worked in a district other than the one they now head. These individuals tend to spend much of their time within the district, and they usually express tremendous loyalty to their current positions.

Although slightly over half of the superintendents I studied indicated that they had never set the goal of becoming an urban superintendent, this pattern was certainly not consistent among all 17. When asked to comment on this finding, Arthur Steller noted that he had established the objective of becoming an urban superintendent as early as age 16. He further noted that he set his sights on reaching the position by age 35.

In a book on the school superintendency written over two decades ago, Carlson (1972) broadly categorized school superintendents as being either place bound or career bound. The former group included individuals who were rather passive toward the specific goal of becoming a superintendent and were not highly inclined toward job mobility (i.e., changing employers to achieve promotions). By contrast, those in the former category engaged in deliberate career planning, accepted mobility as part of their career development, and were likely to be appointed to the superintendency as "outsiders" when conditions within the school district were deemed to be unsatisfactory. Generally, the superintendents in the Reference Group were slightly more apt to fit Carlson's definition of *place bound*—a finding that certainly was not anticipated.

When asked why they entered and remained in the job, most of the superintendents from whom I collected data indicated a dedication to playing a key role in helping children in urban areas. Steller, who knows the vast majority of individuals who have served in this capacity over the last 10 years, affirmed that this is essentially true. It is difficult, however, to separate dedication from personal interests—and persons who acquire the urban superintendency have ample opportunities to gain fame and a relatively good salary. Although I did not collect data on the "afterlife" of urban superintendents, there is considerable evidence that many of them eventually move to equally or more lucrative positions with private corporations, foun-

dations, or government service. Two quite recent examples involve superintendent turnover in Detroit and San Diego. In the former, Superintendent Deborah McGriff resigned to accept an executive position with the Edison Project, a company developing profit-making schools ("Detroit Official," 1993), and in the latter, Superintendent Thomas Payzant resigned to accept a high-ranking position with the U.S. Department of Education. Although not all former big-city superintendents move to highly lucrative or desirable positions, few, if any, return to teaching at radically reduced salaries—a condition that is rather common for superintendents who end their administrative careers in small, rural districts. Further research may reveal that opportunities created by having served in the urban superintendency may, in fact, attenuate career-related concerns about the limited probability of surviving in the job for more than 3 years.

Regardless of difficulties that may exist between school boards and superintendents, it is apparent that many urban superintendents continue to have a certain level of power. Studies of work behavior provide some verification that superintendents are constrained by community and organizational conditions, but this condition does not prevent many of them from exerting influence over organizational decisions and outcomes (Pitner & Ogawa, 1981). I asked Steller about my finding that most of the superintendents in the Reference Group relied heavily on their own views in making critical decisions (a factor found to be second only to financial considerations in making decisions). Again, he found no reason to disagree, but he offered a caveat about pushing a personal agenda without regard for either timing or politics.

If you are to survive very long, you have to temper your convictions with appropriate timing and be willing to wait—to make some decisions at a later time than you may like. You have to play your cards carefully—keep some things moving forward—but other things, because the timing is not right—you may have to put them on hold for a period of time. That's an issue I don't think a lot of people have particularly mastered—and I'm not saying that I totally mastered it either. Circumstances are sometimes overwhelming. That certainly is a key ingredient in how you temper your convictions. There

is a critical element of the job that entails framing—or marketing—your convictions to other audiences.

There is a fine line between the professional responsibility to provide direction and the bureaucratic inclination to make decisions unilaterally, and Steller's observation points out the importance of being able to understand that line of demarcation. Frequently, big-city superintendents are placed in no-win situations in which both decisiveness and democratic procedures generate criticism. Taking charge and accepting responsibility for difficult decisions, the administrator may be labeled a dictator. Inviting widespread participation and sharing power, he or she is judged to be "wishy-washy," or criticized for not providing professional direction.

Politics is a central theme in virtually all discussions of the urban superintendency. Most members of the Reference Group affirmed that they had experienced tough, "hardball" politics, and several specific examples were cited earlier in the book. Steller again agreed that politics were pervasive in big-city school administration. He gave the following explanation:

Some of the urban politics may be the climate itself. In a city you have more special-interest groups, you have more diversity, and you have more community neighborhood activists. And they are different from activists you may encounter in suburban areas. I mean, I've been in both situations—as well as rural areas—and it's just a different climate in urban settings. The odds are that in an urban area you have more individuals who come from that activist, special interest segment of the public who actually get appointed or elected to the board than in suburban districts—although some of that is changing in nonurban areas. The suburban boards are not the same as they used to be either—and they are becoming more political.

Are urban districts as bad as most people believe? Over 80% of the superintendents in the Reference Group thought that big-city school systems were unfairly judged by the public. Steller generally agreed with them, but noted, "The problems are certainly serious.

They are not quite as bad as the media portray them, but that does not mean that they can be ignored. Urban educational problems can be tackled and resolved. I'm convinced they can."

Approximately two out of three superintendents in the Reference Group expressed the opinion that the general public really wants urban schools to improve. Yet reform efforts to date have been largely nonintegrative and nonsystemic; they have been predicated on the notions that (a) schools are largely responsible for the problems they face, and (b) schools can improve without corresponding changes in the community and social environments. In light of problems such as poverty, crime, and violence, this seems to be a very misguided conclusion. When asked directly about reform issues, urban superintendents expressed a degree of enthusiasm—but when asked to generally identify problems and challenges, reform was hardly mentioned. This may reflect their cynicism that reform to date has largely centered on political responses that are easy to understand, but that ignore the systemic implications of big-city problems.

A recent report based on a 1993 survey of leadership in the Council of Great City Schools, *Critical Educational Trends: A Poll of America's Urban Schools* (Ottinger & Root, 1994), showed that societal problems are usually seen by superintendents as more pressing than school reform. Violence, gang-related activity, a lack of parent involvement, bilingual education, and non-English-speaking students were all listed ahead of school reform and site-based management as the most pressing issues facing urban schools.

Before conducting the interviews for this book, I thought that the superintendents would be preoccupied with ideas that related to forcing public schools to be more competitive. More to the point, I expected them to talk extensively about vouchers, charter schools, tuition tax credits, and other ideas that are designed to provide alternatives to the public schools. Instead, what I heard centered largely on issues that can be classified as "those essentially beyond the control of the superintendents and even their school boards." They are issues such as poverty, federal and state funding of public education, crime, and the like.

In reviewing the nature of the communities, the school districts, and the superintendents, I found that generalizations were far more feasible at the organizational level than at either the environmental

or the personal level. More precisely, the structure and organizational patterns of urban school districts showed greater commonalities than did either the communities or the superintendents. This observation is critically important, because the culture and climate of organizational life have extensive effects on the prescribed and actual roles assumed by superintendents. For this reason, the immutability of urban school districts is one of the central issues that should dominate discussions about the future.

The Future

There are ample reasons to doubt whether some urban school districts will survive. The term *downsizing* was a recurring theme voiced by many of the superintendents in both their surveys and their interviews. Discussing the difficulty of dealing with diminishing resources, one superintendent put it this way:

I mean, everybody is talking about downsizing now—at a time when, you know, you need people to deliver services. And you're downsizing here and downsizing there, and cutting this and cutting that at a time when those millions of dollars in lost resources should be enhancing programs for students who come to us.

When asked about resources, another superintendent said,

We've been in a downsizing mode for the last 7 or 8 years, and that downsizing has primarily occurred at the central office level. . . . We have attempted to streamline, become more efficient—to downsize—at a time when the demands and expectations are increasing.

Over the past three decades, some urban districts have lost thousands of students, not only because of outmigration, but also as a result of court-ordered, one-way busing programs. The assessed valuations in some large cities have actually declined, and since the early

1980s, there has been a growing sentiment that radical measures are needed to improve urban districts.

Frustrations have resulted in several recommendations that threaten the very existence of urban school districts. The most prominent have been concepts that focus on competition, initiatives such as choice and vouchers, and charter schools. Critics charge that forcing inadequately funded urban schools to compete with wealthier suburban districts will only serve to intensify racial and economic segregation (e.g., Fowler-Finn, 1993-1994). Advocates of competition, by comparison, share a common perception that improvement is probably impossible under the current governance structures of urban districts. Nathan Glazer (1993), for example, declared that big-city bureaucracies have become an ineffective structure given the drain of social problems that affect children from poor and troubled homes. Proposing school choice as a more efficacious alternative, he wrote:

It is a model that frightens many school people and supporters of public schools, but if schools of the central cities, the schools that deal with the black and Hispanic children who make up a large and growing part of our school population, are to improve, it is hard to see any other alternative that can be effective. (p. 648)

Those who advocate competition are indirectly promoting the transition of public schooling to the private sector of the economy—a change that replaces decisions made on behalf of society with decisions made largely on the basis of self-interest. Paul Hill (1994), for example, suggested that reform efforts such as choice, vouchers, and charter schools can be only partially effective because they are not a complete alternative to the existing governance structure. Thus he concluded that they are more likely to be transformed by the system than to transform it. He advocated private contracting—an idea advanced by Myron Lieberman (1986) in his thought-provoking book *Beyond Public Education*. More recently, the idea has been popularized by efforts such as the Edison Project and Education Alternatives, Incorporated—a for-profit company that has stressed better management as a means of improving schools. Although the idea of competition is

appealing, the economic implications of placing all or parts of the education enterprise in the private sector of the economy need to be studied in greater detail.

Schlechty (1990) took yet another position on concepts such as vouchers and choice, suggesting that they do not offer meaningful solutions to the education problems in urban schools. He predicted that such efforts will neither change the behavior of school boards nor lead to the total demise of big-city districts:

Instead, over the long term, American education might well end up with a two-level system—one for the affluent and concerned, run by private corporations and churches, and one for groups often labeled “at risk” and those who have no effective choice because of transportation problems or lack of information. School boards will run the latter system. (p. 27)

Even proposals of choice that attempt to neutralize family wealth and reward effort (e.g., family power equalization—a concept developed by Coons and Sugarman, 1978) have been rejected by many educators who believe that much of the middle class and most of the more wealthy will find ways to use vouchers or tuition tax credits to create a tiered system of schools.

Finally, there are those who suggest that urban districts should be gerrymandered out of existence. That is, the city systems should be eradicated and their territory divided among several surrounding suburban districts. Or city systems should be absorbed into all-county districts that essentially merge suburban and city districts into an even larger organization.

But what do urban superintendents see as the future for their school organizations? What is their vision for their own jobs in the 21st century? I posed these questions to the members of the Reference Group. Although the responses uniformly suggested that more difficult times were ahead, the reasons given represented multiple perspectives.

I don't think urban districts will become extinct. I think they will have different governing structures, and we are likely to see academy schools, charter schools, and the like. You will still have the urban district, but you'll have separate entities

operating portions of the program—and these entities will still be under the auspices and control of the district school board.

I think the urban superintendency will become increasingly complex. I do not see the tenure of superintendents lengthening, primarily because of the many societal factors that urban districts must deal with. However, I think there will be those in the education profession who will attempt to get these jobs—but I'm not sure they will do so for the right reasons. Because in some instances people are only interested in the status, power, and dollars that go with the job. I don't have a lot of optimism about the urban superintendency becoming any less complex or any easier. I think it will become more difficult unless there is some kind of a change in the support from the general community, community leaders, and boards of education. It's such a difficult job that I think few people are going to be able to tolerate the complexities of the job for very long.

I think the future is going to be very rocky at best. And then you've got the whole issue of how are you going to finance schools. That ties back to the larger issue of what I call “the shrinking political constituency for public schools.” When you look at who attends school versus who pays and who votes, the lessons that we learn from our referendum [defeat of a school financing measure] keep hitting us in the face. The problems children bring to school are still growing, and this keeps making things even more difficult. In my opinion, it's not a bright future. Somehow we need to create changes and to get people into key positions and allow them to stay long enough so that they can actually make a difference. I now understand clearly why people only stay in these jobs for 2 years, or two and one-half years, or whatever the average is. . . . And the rapid turnover makes things worse. Because you have this constant change in top leadership, and the superintendents don't really control the districts. All of this instability impacts negatively on the districts.

One problem with urban districts is the superintendents themselves. Not the boards, not any other single variable. I think it is the superintendents. I'm probably the only person to stand up and say this, and I've said it to them. Because I really don't see urban superintendents being advocates for children. I see urban superintendents playing the political role to maintain their jobs—and trying to be well liked in a country club atmosphere or at the Rotary or Lions. I don't see urban superintendents rolling up their sleeves and getting in there to battle for children. And I think this is a weakness of the profession. So when you deal with those other issues, that's when you become vulnerable to the political pitfalls. Ten years ago, the pioneers were people like Art Jefferson in Detroit and Alonzo Crim in Atlanta. Today, not enough pace-setters in the Council of Great City Schools are really advocating for children. I'm very critical of superintendents—very critical. I get calls from superintendents every day, well, maybe not every day, but two or three times a week. And they ask me why I'm saying things like this. And I respond, "Why don't you say it too, dammit?" They tell me they are afraid.

Whether urban districts survive depends on the basic economics and social conditions in America. I think that right now the cities in America are literally tinderboxes—especially when you look at data that pertain to large cities. And this really has nothing to do with superintendents—or how large or how small schools are. It has nothing to do with accelerated learning or whether we are using the Coalition of Essential Schools model. We see increasing numbers of children for whom every day is literally a fight for survival, and parents who don't know what the children are doing, who are in an almost hopeless state when it comes to controlling or taking care of their children. The alienation that exists toward society in general is something that schools will have difficulty overcoming—regardless of organizational models or instructional models. And this is a frightening situation. We just had a couple of very shocking stories unfold in our city—and we're not one of the real big cities like Chi-

cago or Los Angeles. But the police picked up an 8-year-old kid who was selling "crack." This kid was himself addicted to cocaine. Eight years old! Selling drugs in one of our city parks. And during the same week, a 14-year-old girl was standing in front of her home talking to friends at 10 or 11 p.m. Someone drove by and shot her—one of those drive-by shootings—and the young girl was killed. The editor of the newspaper asked the chief of police, the head of a welfare agency, and me if we saw any connections between the two incidents. The chief said it was poverty and all the conditions that poverty breeds. The woman from the welfare agency focused on the shame of violence in big cities. I said it was a sense of hopelessness among parents and among so many young people—hopelessness that leads to alienation and vindictive action against other individuals. The editor took these concepts and weaved them into an interesting and searching article that would pertain to any large city in America. If there is one lesson that history has taught us, it is that schools are not typically change agents. Schools reflect values and society. Consequently it is extremely difficult for schools to really be successful with children who live in this milieu. And unless we have some dramatic changes in our cities, I see extreme difficulties for urban education in the future.

Steller believes that urban districts probably will survive, but only if they are able to adjust to become more responsive and flexible. Commenting specifically about the governance structure of these organizations, he noted:

Urban boards have not necessarily outlived their usefulness—although in their current form and with their tendency to micro-manage, they do not deserve to survive. The present governance structure of school districts should not be viewed as something that ought to survive for its own sake. There ought to be a reason why any approach to school stewardship, including the existing one, survives. The rationale should be . . . because it is providing better governance than other

alternatives, . . . not simply because it is a particular model or tradition.

He went on to say that there are growing signs that school boards, *per se*, may not weather the storm in some cities.

In the midst of criticism, there are mounting signs that some urban school boards have reached the point of taking unprecedented risks. In late 1993, for example, the Minneapolis School Board voted to turn over the management of its school system to Public Strategies Group, Incorporated—a private management group (Jordan, 1993b).

In addition, a growing number of big-city school boards are looking over their shoulders to observe the growing impatience of state officials. As was proven in Chicago in the late 1980s, when urban school problems become state problems, legislatures and/or governors will intervene, and their frustrations often engender drastic measures. More recently, an example of state interference was exhibited when New Jersey's education commissioner moved to take fiscal control of the Newark school system by appointing a special auditor to oversee the district's financial operations. This individual was given veto power over any school board action that involved spending more than \$20,000 (Strum, 1993). Piphon (1988) noted that when city officials engage in the political issues of urban schooling, the outcomes are unpredictable, "but when city and state officials move in concert to change a large-city school district, events become more unpredictable" (p. 398). And because the actions of state officials may well ignore the systemic realities of public schooling—for both political and economic reasons—their final stage of intervention may include legislative actions that dissolve urban districts as we now know them.

The Challenges

This book has provided a closer look at 17 urban school superintendents and their work environments. In concluding, several major challenges deserve review. They are a mix of community-, organization-, and profession-based concerns. Writing about the brief tenures of urban superintendents, *Washington Post* columnist Mary Jordan

(1993a) stated that the brief tenure of urban school chiefs underscored how the job had become a flashpoint for mounting urban social problems, soaring public demands, and increased political backbiting. Many who have studied the conditions of urban schooling readily agree with her assessment, and consequently they judge that the position of big-city school chief cannot be understood properly unless it is examined in the context of practice (i.e., the communities and school districts in which these individuals work).

Learning More About Superintendents

Given the stature and importance of the school superintendency, it is indeed disappointing that so little attention has been given to studying this position. A richer understanding is dependent on well-designed studies that probe how variables within school districts and the broader environment of the community interact with personal variables to shape work behavior. Are superintendents most influenced by personal values and beliefs? To what extent do precepts, concepts, and experiences gained in professional education influence behavior?

Because organizational transformation is a paramount issue in urban schooling, we especially need to establish more informed views regarding successful practice in this area. For example, how does longevity affect inclinations of superintendents to pursue change in their school districts? What successful practices appear to have applicability to all or most urban school districts?

In addition, we really should know more about "life after the urban superintendency." From a career perspective, what happens to these individuals when they are dismissed or resign? How many move on to even more lucrative positions? At present there is considerable speculation that competent individuals are lured to big-city superintendencies by the assured visibility—which ultimately becomes a springboard to a more desirable post with a foundation, private business, or the like. Data reported here, however, suggest a strong commitment to the profession in general and the superintendency in particular. Not all move to jobs in universities or foundations.

One reason why there has been so little research on the superintendency is that it is difficult to execute. This is especially true of

qualitative research that probes the subtleties of practice in relation to specific conditions. In the next few years, there ought to be more concerted efforts to examine the interactivity of person, organization, task, and community.

Recreating the Image of Superintendents

From the earliest days of urban school districts, administrators and professors of educational administration have sought to separate management from teaching. Although there have always been forward-thinking scholars who have challenged this initiative, the value of dividing the profession has been seriously questioned in the past 10 to 15 years. One of the most thought-provoking pieces on this topic was authored by Sergiovanni (1991). Suggesting that reform may bring both teacher professionalism and decentralized governance, he cautioned that administrators may not be well served by further distancing themselves from teachers. If teachers truly become empowered, principals and superintendents may be more effective if they are viewed as professional leaders rather than professional managers.

Cuban's study (1976) of three urban superintendents who served in the 1950s and 1960s brought to light how professional beliefs, socialization, and conflicting organizational demands served to shape their behavior. All of the men he studied had previous experience as teachers for 12 or more years. This part of their lives probably had a profound influence on their ability to assume the role of educational leader.

Today, far too many citizens only see the managerial side of administration. When I asked the superintendents in the Reference Group if their school boards really expected them to be instructional leaders, 29% said always, 53% said occasionally, and 18% said rarely or never. It is truly questionable whether either politics or management can play a lesser role in the lives of urban school chiefs as long as the tiered bureaucracy with its centralization of power remains intact.

Logically, urban superintendents must wear three hats. They must be skilled politicians; they must be effective managers; but first and foremost, they ought to be scholars who are respected for their professional knowledge, analytical skills, and planning capabilities. The current trend toward contracting school districts or individual schools

to management firms raises fundamental questions about the very essence of professional education. Factors that force or encourage practitioners to spend all of their time resolving conflict and managing resources need to be identified and altered. For when the value of the superintendency is described as political and managerial, deductive reasoning leads many taxpayers to believe that those specifically trained in politics and management may be able to do the job more effectively.

Finally, we need to come to precise understandings about the meaning of professionalism. At least two very different views are emerging in the context of school reform. One casts professional superintendents as individuals of vision and superior knowledge who enter organizations with the specific intention of implementing their ideas and goals. The other characterizes them as leaders who bring colleagues together to address problems democratically and to collectively set an agenda for the future—a view that often describes administrators as “firsts among equals.” These two perceptions of professionalization entail more than differences in leadership style, and until there is greater consensus on the more desired role, the urban superintendency is likely to remain mired in politics.

Dealing With Known Governance Problems

The past 15 years of attempted reform have opened many eyes to the reality that public schools are not likely to improve if they remain structurally intact. Discussing research on school boards, Danzberger (1994) indicated that these bodies frequently become dysfunctional “because of conflicts between members and the resulting incapacity to chart a clear direction for their school systems” (p. 370). She added that many board members often lack common perceptions of what a school board ought to do and their specific responsibilities as members.

Because communities, including big cities, are unique entities, it is unlikely that any universal prescription for reshaping the governance of school districts will suffice. In some central cities, moving from elected to appointed boards may produce improvement. Other cities may require more radical measures. Regardless of the proposals that may be produced, it is critical to protect the “public” nature of our schools. There simply are too many potential dangers associated with placing such a vital institution in the private sector of the economy.

As the problems of urban districts become more severe, there are mounting temptations to sacrifice liberty for adequacy and equity. In all probability, change can be accomplished more readily if it is imposed either by state mandates or by the views of a select few "experts." But what price must we pay? Are we willing to abandon local control completely? I think not, so I agree with Steller's conclusion that school boards have not outlived their usefulness. What is needed, however, is a reconceptualization of their role—changes that will allow decisions to be influenced more by professional knowledge and less by big-city politics.

Balancing Centralization and Decentralization

Today, decentralization is being advanced and accepted as a solution even though we know relatively little about the ultimate educational benefits that may be produced. Manifest conflicts are often swept aside as if they had little relevance or the power to deter real change. Teacher professionalism and democratic decision processes (as advanced in site-based management) offer a splendid example. To what extent are parental and student input to be limited in order to grant greater professional control over what occurs in schools?

There is a reality in practice that superintendents quickly learn. It focuses on accountability and responsibility. Those who head school districts are expected to maintain reasonable control over both resources and programs. Fullan's work (1991) on educational change reminds us that neither centralization nor decentralization is the answer to school improvement.

Murphy (1991) aptly observed that the long-standing image of superintendents as power figures with all the wisdom and answers was rendered inefficacious by the cumulative circumstances resulting from the dispersal of power and knowledge, the competing interests of multiple constituencies, a growing mistrust of government, and the concurrent application of decentralization and professionalization. As schools are given greater independence, as teachers acquire power to control their practice, and as parents and other taxpayers are integrated into the decision-making process, a different image of the successful superintendent is likely to emerge.

Concentrating on the Causes and Not the Symptoms

Some problems plaguing our central cities will not be resolved regardless of the level of improvement in public schools. Poverty, the dilemma of children rearing children, and gang violence are symptomatic of deep-rooted social problems that are steadily worsening in America. For literally millions of young people, the entertainment industry, professional sports, and other parts of "pop culture" have supplanted the family as the sources of values and beliefs. And neither repeated condemnations nor massive federal programs have been able to reverse this unwelcome trend.

Social ills are not, however, an excuse for urban schools to remain as they are. Although some big-city schools are effective, and although there are thousands of dedicated teachers and administrators working in those schools, the fact remains that many are dismal and dangerous places. The worst of them are little more than holding places for children and adolescents who are neither challenged nor encouraged to grow intellectually.

Two realities should dominate the next decade of reform. First, improvements are most likely if they are systemic—they should address both social and educational problems simultaneously. They should involve partnership ventures between cities and schools. Second, improvement is more likely if it planned and executed at the micro level. Federal and statewide reforms often have only minimal relevance for urban schools. Even district-wide efforts may prove to be ineffectual in large cities with diverse neighborhoods. This challenge, like the others, will not be easily met, because the needs of our youth must compete for scarce resources in cities that already are woefully lacking in resources.

Sustaining Effective Leadership

Put simply, we must remove the revolving door from the urban superintendent's office. No organization can be expected to engage in meaningful reforms when there is a change in top leadership every 2 or 3 years. Far too often, strong and capable leaders are forced from office in order to satisfy pressure groups or to reassure the public that

change is imminent. Perhaps urban school superintendents ought to receive contracts in relation to long-term plans and initiatives. More specifically, they ought to be employed on the basis of their philosophy and ability to bring people to a common vision; they ought to be held accountable for the results; and they should be given reasonable time parameters to complete their objectives.

It is ironic that coaches in professional sports often are accorded more opportunity to succeed than are big-city superintendents. Some survive four or five dismal seasons before their rebuilding efforts come to fruition. In an organization where the stakes are much higher, we must educate the public to the reality that schools will not improve by periodically changing superintendents. The idea that one individual can successfully transform a complex organization by imposing his or her vision in a relatively short period of time is simply myopic (Fullan, 1991).

Finding New Purposes for Education

Perhaps none of the challenges outlined here can be addressed adequately unless communities are able to reach consensus on new purposes for public education. Futurists warn that life in the next century will be harsh on those who lack the skills and knowledge necessary in an Information Age. Yet approximately one third of all students fail in our public schools (Schlechty, 1990). That is, either they do not graduate or they receive a diploma even though they are functionally illiterate (and these statistics are much more alarming when urban schools are considered in isolation).

The problems created by a growing number of undereducated citizens, most of whom are living in poverty, are already becoming clear. American society, in general, faces a difficult test. The nation is at risk, but not just because of public education. In part, contemporary urban schools are not achieving their potential because they are being pulled in too many different directions; they are expected to do far too much with far too few resources. Unless communities can successfully embrace new and realistic purposes for their public schools, these institutions may not survive.