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What is This?
The Blytheville story: The challenge of changing demographics

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Abstract
The superintendency of a public school system is an increasingly complex position that has been described as a focal point for any discontent with the schools. Regardless of the size of the school district, the superintendent of schools bears the responsibility for leading schools that are devoted to students, exemplified by decisions that reflect learner centered values. This case describes a community that was changing rapidly demographically, politically, and philosophically. Superintendents and board relationships were challenged to overcome discord and begin a united community ideology.

Case Narrative
An Era of Change

Blytheville ISD, a suburban school district in central Texas, had changed in the last ten years from a small, rural district that served one farming/ranching community to a mid-size district of 8,350 students. Blytheville is an old community with settlement history dating back to the 1840s, during the Republic of Texas. Until the population changes of the mid-1980s, the community had remained rural in its perspective, with strong farming and ranching influences. The school district had also remained rural in its perspective, with a basic curriculum that emphasized vocational training, strong interest in athletics, and a conservative approach to business affairs. While parental interest and support for the schools were evident, the superintendent and school board ran the school and few individuals voiced challenges to the “way we have always done things.”

However, changes began in the mid-1980s with the development of the Azure Bay Subdivision, a gated community of expensive homes with excellent golf and tennis facilities located on Lake Central Texas. The homes sold rapidly and the subdivision was soon home to many young professionals and retired professionals, including several physicians and attorneys. Many Azure Bay residents did not have children in school and while they were certainly advocates of a strong, effective public school system, they were not actively involved in Blytheville ISD affairs. Those young professionals with children were concerned about the lack of college-preparatory courses and that there was no gifted and talented program within the district. Azure Bay, along with two other similar gated subdivisions on Lake East Texas, added a distinctly different population to the original community of Blytheville.
Another population dimension was added when two mobile home subdivisions opened on Lake Central Texas. Many of the families who moved into these homes spoke primarily Spanish and brought significant numbers of low socio-economic children into the district. This necessitated the involvement of public health and social service agencies. These families were not hesitant to voice their expectations about how their children should be served. Because these subdivisions were on property that had originally been the Bar T Ranch, this part of the school district came to be known as the Taylorville area, since the Taylor family had owned the Bar T Ranch. This newest group was the fastest growing of any population group and was characterized by high mobility, substandard housing, and high unemployment. Their children brought personal and educational needs to Blytheville ISD that often challenged the old ways of doing things.

In one decade, Blytheville ISD had changed from a district composed of one rural, homogeneous community to a community serving four diverse populations: old rural Blytheville, the upscale Azure Bay area of retirees without children, young, well-educated professionals, and the low socio-economic Taylorville area. These separate, very diverse communities, with new residents and new ideas, caused rapid change in the Blytheville ISD.

Educational Leadership in an Era of Change

Mike Warren had been superintendent several years when the population growth began. Soon every building was crowded and there was an acute need for additional facilities. The district was able to pass a bond issue and a new high school complex was built. By the time the high school was completed, more facilities were needed. Since the bond issue had funded a high school building complete with gymnasium, band hall, facilities for career and technology classes, a stadium, field house, and an auditorium, there was considerable opposition to another bond issue so soon. The school board voted to call an election for a second bond issue and the matter was presented to voters. The bond issue would have raised local taxes above the state average and many residents voted against the second bond issue, causing the issue to fail.

Along with the failure of the bond issue, the overcrowding problems and the sociological changes in the student population, changes in the composition of the school board eventually led to Mike Warren’s resignation. The new board included several members who wanted rapid change and felt that Mr. Warren was not the superintendent to lead the district at this time. Three board members were very vocal and felt that a more involved school board was needed. They ardently challenged the district’s attention to athletics and its lack of emphasis on academics. These particular board members openly engaged in micro-management, involving themselves in administrative functions that were outside their responsibilities as board members. These board members called for Mike Warren's resignation, censuring him for clinging to old outdated concepts of school administration and urging an end to "the good old boy network."

During the next few years, the Blytheville ISD continued to grow, with new subdivisions opening regularly. Mike Warren did resign, but his predecessor stayed in office only 18 months. The school board’s dysfunctional intervention into the day-to-day management
of the school district continued and the Blytheville ISD gained the reputation of a revolving door for administrators, with five new superintendents and three new principals in seven years.

As the struggles between administrators and the board members intensified, teacher morale worsened and there was little interest in academic improvement. Gossip seemed to be the main industry of the school and the illness of the school district soon spread into several of the churches and the small city government. Parent groups were increasingly polarized. In fact, at the last board meeting of the year, several parents attended and demanded bilingual programs while others voiced a strong need for a more effective gifted and talented program. Still, the “old guard” continued to support vocational programs and athletics. After hours of heated “discussion,” and with no decisions made, the meeting came to an abrupt end when the board president simply adjourned the meeting. The breach between community members, as well as educators, was now even more distinct. One long time resident commented, "We've got our business in a mess. We need someone to step in and straighten out our school."

Confronting the Issues

Finally, the separate communities that composed the Blytheville ISD began to recognize the seriousness of the school district’s malaise. Three new board members were elected, unseating three of the most contentious board members. Shortly after reorganization of the board following the election, the board voted unanimously to contact the state education agency and ask for help with their governance problems. The state education agency responded to their request and assigned a “master” to head the district. The designation of a “master” gave complete control to this state-designated individual to run the district. In fact, this individual’s power superseded that of the school board. The master, retired superintendent James Hazelwood, worked as Blytheville ISD interim superintendent for eight months. Although his role as master allowed him total control over all aspects of the district, including all school board decisions, he began to work with the board and community in a quiet, professional manner. Dr. Hazelwood was an experienced administrator with a thorough understanding of school finance, school law, and administrative practices, and he was also totally committed to students. During the early stages of his work at Blytheville ISD, he frequently told the board, “We can defend a decision that’s best for kids. We can’t defend political decisions.”

Soon after taking over, Dr. Hazelwood focused new board training on understanding the community and how it was changing and, then, he began to work with them in identifying a shared vision for the community’s schools. Dr. Hazelwood quickly became involved in the local community and spoke at several civic meetings, as well, as at local churches. He always centered his topic on the students within the community and their need to be equipped educationally. Gradually, the board began to consider his recommendations without the hostility that had divided previous boards.

Reconstruction of a School District

Since Dr. Hazelwood's role was by legislative mandate that of an interim, a new superintendent was selected. The school board hired Dr. David Bruce, a beginning
superintendent with successful experience as a campus administrator in a neighboring school district. The community diversity and strife became immediately obvious when Dr. Bruce held his first community meeting. He looked out over the crowd and noticed that clearly, there were at least four factions in the room with one empty row separating each group. Young, professional men and women sat together toward the front, looking comfortable and well dressed; just behind them sat a row of casually dressed older men and women. Over to the left, a group clustered around a local pastor and he knew that this was the rural “old guard” who had been educated in this very Blytheville school. Sitting toward the back, looking watchful and guarded, was a group of young and old families, mostly women. Dr. Bruce knew that these people were from the Taylorville community and were relatively new to the district. School faculty, and even some students, sat by themselves in other areas of the room. It was obvious that the years of strife had left many divisions within the community. What could he do to bring a sense of one community to these very different groups?

**Teaching Notes**

**Objective 1:** The administrator promotes the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community.

**Objective 2:** The administrator promotes the success of all students by collaborating with families and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

In every community, there are many external influences that have strong affects on the local school system. These influences can come from parents, political and legal patterns, and demographic characteristics, to name just a few (Hoy & Miskel, 2001). Because of these changing demographics, the growing diversity of communities, and other external influences, the role of the superintendent is faced with even greater challenges in the 21st century (Kowalski, 1999). Organizational health is most effective when the schools mirror the norms, values, and philosophies of the surrounding society (Rowan, 1993). However, for a school to mirror the community surrounding it, the leader must first have a clear understanding of that community. Other essential leadership steps that transform schools include creating a clear vision for the school, developing a strategy to accomplish this vision, and communicating effectively with all stakeholders (Yukl, 1998). Schools cannot transform themselves. Therefore, when school improvement efforts are needed, the broader administrative, social and political environment must be considered (Sergiovanni, 2001). In fact, effective change is largely influenced by the political community, attitudes of teachers, the school board, and administration (Kirst, 1984). Because of the many stakeholders involved, successful leadership recognizes and cultivates collaborative leadership within these diverse groups (Lambert, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1992). Still, one of the most powerful advocates to transform a school district is the superintendent working with the support of the school board and the community (Fullan, 1993).
Successful schools are built when there is a link between the school “being able to develop social capital for all its students” (Sergiovanni, 2001, p.177) and their engagement with the school. Schools develop social capital by being caring communities (Sergiovanni, 1994), which leads to a sense of community that binds everyone to a shared ideology (Pellicer, 1999; Sergiovanni, 2001). The superintendent must be a great communicator of this ideology, as well as a great persuader, especially when working with the local school board (Houston, 2001). In fact, just as in Blytheville ISD, the “disconnect” between superintendents, school boards and the community can result in years of dysfunction and student suffering. Healing can only come when school leaders care enough about the larger community to address issues of diversity, recognize the political climate of the community, and communicate a shared ideology. Ultimately, ideologies influence what we believe and what we do and tie people together to commit themselves to a course of action (Sergiovanni, 2001) which, hopefully, will result in a school district that is focused on students as learners.

Discussion

1. Discuss the impact on a school district of a changing community population.

2. Identify strategies that a school district should have in place to address changing diversity of its population? How might this have diminished the conflict within this case study?

3. What external factors affect a school other than diversity of population?

4. Why should the school district consider external factors in its planning?

5. Based on general knowledge about leadership styles, what role might leadership have had in the contentious relationships of these superintendents and the school board?

6. Why does collaborative leadership appear to be most productive in this school district for bringing about positive change?

7. Suggest ways that a university superintendent or principal preparation program could better prepare students to incorporate the practice of collaborative leadership.

8. Discuss the “concern-based adoption model” of change (Hord, Rutherford, & Hall, 1987), and identify steps for the superintendent to follow when implementing this strategy to bring about change.

9. Identify strategies for developing and implementing the concept of “social capacity” within diverse school communities that builds learner-centered schools.

References


Additional Resources


**Biographical Statements**

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