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A View From The Field: How NCLB's Good Intentions of Accountability Damage Our Educational Leaders and Our Schools

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School districts and campuses throughout the nation are working around the clock to avoid an unacceptable accountability rating under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. In Texas the label has recently changed to “Improvement Required.” An “Improvement Required” label forces districts and campuses into the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS), a system implemented by Texas to satisfy the NCLB federal requirements, and to engage struggling districts and schools toward academic school improvement. The NCLB Act has good intentions; however, it might be creating a crisis in education. It is important to remember that NCLB, “the 2002 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), was born in bipartisan spirit to do something positive in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001” (Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer & Wood, 2004, p. viii-ix). In addition, Meier, et al. stated “NCLB is premised on the notion that schools will be made better by following a yearly testing regime that leads to every child being proficient in reading, math, and science by 2014” (p. xii). The debate continues over whether the Act will accomplish what it set out to accomplish. The premise of the book Many Children Left Behind, by Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer and Wood (2004) is that “even if ... technical problems [with the NCLB implementations] are fixed, NCLB cannot, will not, and perhaps was even not intended to deliver on its promises” (p. xi).

Irrespective of the debate, educational leaders and schools are being forced to do whatever is necessary to survive the label of being an academic failure, whether it is earned or unfairly placed on them. The labels placed on schools are causing educational leaders to question their formal leadership training, to test their integrity and ethical conduct, and hold the ratings and status of their schools in a much higher regard than doing what is best for individual students. They are deciding whether they “can have their cake and eat it too.” I share the following story with no great sense of pride.

The Story

This past August I received a telephone call from a person in the Lakeview (pseudonym) Independent School District. This Special Programs Director for the school district was inquiring about the possibility of me serving as a Professional Service Provider (PSP) for their high school campus that fell into “Improvement Required” for the 2013 -2014 school year. This was the first time this very successful district has ever experienced failure of any sort under the NCLB accountability sanctions. The news was implausible. The initial shock released anger. After the anger, embarrassment settled over the district like a dark cloud before a major thunderstorm. According to the new standards, Index 4 requires schools to graduate as many students as possible on the Recommended or Distinguished (RHSP/DP) graduation program. The

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percentage of students graduating on the RHSP/DP program summed with the overall graduation rate for four and five-year graduation cohorts determine whether a campus met standard in Index 4. During the 2012 – 2013 school year, the year in question, Lakeview graduated 19 students, 11 on the Recommended plan and the remaining on the Minimum plan. Unfortunately, this 58% combined with the graduation rate fell short of the required percentage and Lakeview High School found itself paddling upstream in the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS).

Lakeview is a small school district. It sits in the woody area and intersection of three fairly large school districts. The leadership, teachers and many of the students travel to the district to enjoy the small school atmosphere, the escape from crowded classrooms of the larger schools, and a chance to “start over.” Demographically, the school is predominately Anglo, and largely economically disadvantaged. While parent participation in the school is lacking, the students perform extremely well academically. However, this school’s report card, based primarily on state approved graduation plans, forces the school to operate with state interventions. In a real sense I was being asked to provide professional educational services and leadership to a group of professional educators and leaders who for years have helped their students in unprecedented ways. “While well intentioned, it has become clear that the NCLB Act will, in the next few years, label most of the nation’s public schools “failing,” even when they are high performing and improving in achievement” (Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer and Wood, 2004, p. 5).

The Damage is Done

The students who attend Lakeview appear to be happy as expressed by their smiles as they change from one class to the next. In Lakeview they can be the “star” on the football or volleyball team; a notability they could only dream of in one of the larger adjacent schools. Lakeview provides them an opportunity to blossom emotionally, athletically and academically. It might be their utopia.

Students perform well on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) and End of Course (EOC) tests. Their test scores have ranged from 75% to 96% in all subject areas and among all subgroups (although their size has limited them in the number of subgroups represented). Irrespective of the years of quality work produced by quality leaders, professional educators and dedicated staff, the community now views the school and the work performed in it as mediocre, unacceptable and failing. The damage has been done. A small technicality in types of graduation seals has caused wide-spread doubt in the minds of community members as they begin to question the leadership of the district, the ability of the teachers, and the possibility of the closure of the school.

Lakeview in Wonderland

Lakeview has been closed before. The district operated as a Chapter 41 property rich school district because of the oil wells and mineral rights located within the district zone. When the wells ran dry, Lakeview High School had a very difficult time remaining open for several reasons. After closing in the late 1980s, and remaining closed for six years the school reopened again in 1994. The current superintendent, serving in that capacity for over 26 years, has survived the roller-coaster ride experience that Lakeview has endured. The leadership is absolutely not interested in entertaining any notion of spreading the message to the community that the school is facing intervention sanctions, and runs the risk of falling into the reconstitution
stage. However, they are at a crossroads. Which road they take depends on where they eventually wish to end up. Given all the training and experience that the leadership has engaged in, the crew has switched to survival mode. In this mode, nothing else matters but survival.

Currently, Lakeview has 13 seniors preparing for graduation in 2014. Of this 13, 12 students need to graduate on the Recommended or higher graduation plan in order for Lakeview to reach its Index 4 goal of 90%. As the Campus Leadership Team (CLT) reviews and analyzes the data, and writes a needs assessment with goals and strategies to reach those goals, they realize four of the students are members of special populations with an Individual Education Plan that does not allow them to take the courses needed to graduate on the Recommended Plan. In addition, one student, although very capable of graduating on the Recommended Plan, is choosing to graduate on the Minimum Plan for personal reasons. There is nothing wrong with graduating on the Minimum Plan. Students have entered the nearby community college with the Minimum Plan and have been very successful in their pursuits.

Pressure To Meet The Standards

One could argue, quite legitimately, that the pressure to maintain the highest rating has been on our schools for a while, and the damage an unacceptable rating or improvement required rating have caused is nothing new. I have searched extensively and have found no research that supports our children are better prepared for colleges and universities, to be better employees, to be better prepared to enter the military, or to be better people as a result of graduating with a Recommended seal. According to Darling- Hammond (2012), many students who perform exceptionally well on standardized tests and/or graduate in the top percentages of their graduating class fail significantly in their first year at the university. Nonetheless, the reality is that school leadership is doing whatever is necessary by whatever means necessary to meet the standards in order to avoid a “failing” report card.

Closing Thoughts

Lakeview is one of many schools that have fallen into the category of “failing” when in actuality the school is an educational lifesaver for many students. Lakeview’s story could be the story for many schools that have found themselves waddling in the muddy pits of the NCLB Act. Perhaps Lakeview’s students, like students in many other schools, need tools that are not offered in the NCLB box. Meier et al. (2004) offered the following conclusion:

There is no denying that NCLB has brought some long overdue attention to the problem of educational inequality. Those of us who wrestle daily with the realities of this inequality in our classrooms and our schools welcome this attention. The problem is that what NCLB proposes to do about this inequality is woefully inadequate to the task, and in some ways, will make things worse. It shines the spotlight on problems it has no strategies for solving and it imposes tests and sanctions that will increase inequality in education rather than reduce it. The more people see how NCLB actually works, the more it becomes clear that NCLB is not a tool for solving a crisis in public education, but a tool for creating one. Public schools need a very different tool kit for the problems we face. (p. 64-65)
The ultimate question could be: What tools are we offering in our educational leadership programs that could help our future leaders counteract the NCLB dilemma? Potential educational leaders complete our preparation programs equipped with the knowledge base and skills needed and required to be exceptional leaders. However, they find themselves bombarded with meeting standards of NCLB and maintaining accountability measures that keep them out of Improvement Required. Improvement just might be required, except in shaping and reshaping what was initially meant to be a step forward after September 11, 2001, but has arguably, according to some, resulted in two steps backwards.

References
