

## **Collaborative Leadership in the Era of New Normal**

"The significance of the problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we had when we created them."

**Albert Einstein**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**Schools are experiencing tough times with even tougher demands for accountability with limited financial resources. Solving this dilemma calls for working together in a collaborative manner to develop cost-effective solutions. With the new normal now being the standard, it is critical that school leadership becomes connective in nature rather than practiced in an educational vacuum.**

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### **The New Normal**

The New Normal is a term coined by William H. Gross in March 2009. The impetus is on the changing economic landscape, not only now but in the future. Shifting from one economic and social order to another is a phenomenon which involves less household debt, higher personal savings, and lower rates of consumption (Galston, 2010). With a dismal budget outlook, the new normal is causing much concern as it spreads a ripple effect in our economy. Differing fiscal constraints placed on every aspect of American society portray this new economic schematic. Schools and education are struggling with stretching the shrinking dollar. U.S. Secretary of State Arne Duncan (2010) describes the new normal as a reality and certainty by which everyone seeking to improve education must accept. Doing more with less has become the scenario for achieving better academic outcomes for all students. A bright revenue forecast in education is not likely anytime soon. For the next several years, preschool, K-12, and postsecondary educators are projected to face the challenge of stretching resources in creative ways as never before witnessed (Duncan, 2010).

Budgets at educational institutions have been slashed over the past few years and those institutions are preparing for deeper and more dramatic cuts in 2012, according to NEA chief economist, Richard Sims (2009). Sims predicted there will be bleak years ahead even with Stimulus funds earmarked for educational institutions.

With the pessimistic fiscal outlook increasing, Duncan (2010) surmises the new normal to be a wake-up call to America and a time to rethink how to invest in the education of our children. A repositioning, by way of moving educational management from an individual attribute to contingent enactment makes it possible to study its specific workings including how it operates to produce, and to challenge, the generalizing logics of market and economism that characterize contemporary education (Ball, 2007).

Frederick Hess and Eric Osberg (2010) in their book *Stretching the School Dollar: How Schools and Districts Can Save Money While Serving Students Best*, offer a differing view of the new normal. Their focus is more of a celebration of budget cuts, provision of strategies and approaches for identifying waste, and concrete examples of serious dialogue about the political and practical challenges.

### School Leadership Re-Defined

The ever-changing dynamics of schools has had a great weight on what occurs in schools as well as the perception of school leadership (Montgomery & Growe, 2003). Those attributes are increasingly associated with effective school leadership and administration (Growe & Montgomery, 2000).

The traditional concept of leadership is largely equated to leaders' competences, behaviors and values. At the very least, this definition warrants expansion if leadership development can meet the needs of complex organizations in the 21st century (James, 2011).

Fullan's (2001) *Leading in a Culture of Change* agenda emphasizes "thinking about and leading complex change" (p. 3). According to Fullan (2001), this framework represents independent forces that mutually bring about positive change. Relative to leadership in the school, Fullan (2001) stressed that leaders must treat schools as if they have minds. Forging new relationships is crucial to the addition of resources and establishing greater coherence for the school's purposes and programs (Fullan, 2001). Fullan explained, "first, people will not voluntarily share knowledge unless they feel some moral commitment to do so; second, people will not share unless the dynamics of change favor exchange; and third, that data without relationships merely cause more information glut" (p. 6).

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) *Standards for School Leaders*, developed in 1996, redefined school leadership standards to "reflect principals' present leadership role that centers on enhancing teaching and learning and creating powerful learning environments" (Kaplan et al., 2005, p. 31). A goal of the ISLLC standards is to re-culture the leadership of schools. The standards are research-based and meant to "focus on indicators of knowledge, dispositions, and performances important to effective school leadership" (Kaplan et al. 2005, p. 31).

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## Collaborative Leadership

This period of stripped down budgets is causing educators, community leaders, policymakers and other stakeholders to be more aware of the need to use scarce resources to maximize results (Blank, Jacobson, Melaville, and Pearson, 2010). "Most schools, health and social service providers, youth development organizations, higher education institutions, public and private agencies and government officials work in isolated "silos," concentrating on single issues. Experience teaches that these single issues overlap and diverse stakeholders are all, in effect, responsible for the same children, the same families and the same communities. But bureaucratic organization and fragmented funding streams make it hard for their respective sectors to work together to better meet community and family needs" (p. iii). .

Collaborative leadership and community school theories align with what is being addressed and examined in developing cross-section collaboration. The Connecticut State Board of Education (2002) adopted a position statement endorsing the requirement for 21st century schools to initiate the type of leadership that can promote the changes essential to adequately prepare students for the world today and in the future. Research suggest that the underpinning for high academic achievement, more productive schools and students is strong collaborative leadership which includes community-based collaborative leaders.

Collaborative leadership is demonstrated by groups working together to solve agreed upon issues. It uses supportive and inclusive methods to ensure that all people affected by a decision are part of the change process. For effective collaboration to take place, it is important for people to release their ego and participate honestly and openly in the process (Sergiovanni,1994).

A fact which cannot be disputed is that schools are facing increasingly complex situations, uncertainty, ambiguity, and high expectations for innovation and reform. Educational leaders, adopting more collaborative forms of leadership, which involve parents, teachers, students and other stakeholders in the process could prove enriching and connective for all involved (Murphy and Hallinger, 1992 and Hallinger 1992. Working collaboratively is an unavoidable feature of the 21st-century school and a consistent part of government policy for the provision of services to children. Unfortunately, little research has been undertaken into the nature of leadership required to maximize the potential of such partnerships based on working within this context (Coleman, 2011).

New collaborative leadership models are differentiated from more traditionally individualistic models of leadership (Senge and Kaeufer, 2001; Fletcher and Kaeufer, 2003; Fletcher, 2004). Although, research in new leadership thinking details collective, collaborative and distributed forms of leadership as better leadership models for dealing with contemporary organizational challenges, the leadership development literature still focuses primarily on the individual leader. New conceptualizations of leadership are overlooked while continuing to focus on traditional skills (DeRue and Wellman, 2009).

School leaders will face challenges that seem to have no solution. Johansen (2009) states that interestingly, they will have to make tough decisions anyway. "Leaders will be buffeted, but they need not allow themselves to be overwhelmed, depressed or immobilized. Leaders must do more than just respond to the whirl of events, though respond they must. They must be positive change agents in the midst of chaos, creating the future. Some things can get better, even as other

things get worse." (p.3). To help create a better future, leaders must seek experiences and opportunities to learn and apply new leadership skills more applicable to the new normal.

### **Leadership in Aligning External Services with Schools**

The new normal has brought about a different mindset in how to provide a quality education to our students. It reaches beyond the scope of the educational community for resources in accomplishing this goal. This coalition is with people who are different from us. Gerberding (2007) cites that "we need to learn how to build a connectivity that includes people who are not like us—people in business, people in the faith-based sector, people in the health care delivery system, people in the nonprofit community—and there is one absolutely essential requirement to our capacity to do this kind of collaboration. It is the concept of meta-leadership" (3).

With the meta-leadership concept in mind, implementation of collaborative school-linked services is a viable approach in addressing the nuances associated with the new normal. Dolan (1992) examined school-linked programs across the country and identified characteristics of programs that have lasted over a period of time, have been well accepted, and have had positive outcomes. Research by Wang, Haertel, and Walberg (1995) supports the notion that

Collaborative school-linked services require altering the way services are delivered. Service integration calls for service providers to work together in coherent ways to bring improved educational, medical, mental health, and legal services to students and their families. Inherent in the concept of school-linked services is the recasting of children's services from the perspective of overcoming children's 'academic,' 'physical,' or 'physiological' problems to 'cases' of children and families with a variety of needs. Labels and artificially separate categories of problems are replaced with a broad-based working framework that redefines client needs and increases interprofessional collaboration. (p.1)

In *Connecting Families, Schools & Communities* (2004), school-linked services were described as an inclusive concept which encompasses a number of diverse initiatives, including community schools, extended service schools, community education, wraparound services for students in schools, school based health clinics, staff of public and nonprofit agencies placed in schools, school-linked services, and school/community partnerships.

### **Conclusion**

In our schools, the paradigm has shifted to a leadership that embraces different kinds of organizational components to achieve the best for the greater good. The focus tends to be on a connectivity designed to bridge the gap in schools by creating systems that reach beyond educational boundaries. Connecting and building linkage with individuals and organizations not like us could lead to the leveraging of funding streams necessary for economic survival. This new normal has gone beyond a label. The reality is to do much more with far less.

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