Starting, Building, and Sustaining Reform

AASA
National Conference on Education
Los Angeles, CA
Feb. 21, 2013
The Initial Challenges of a New Superintendent in Driving Reform

DO YOU HAVE A WELL DEFINED JOB?
– What are you being hired to do? Without definition and the sorting out of roles, there is no “job.” There is just endless confusion, bickering, and failure.

DO PEOPLE TRUST YOU?
– You need trust from your school board, your community, and your staff.
  - If you are from outside the district, you have none, which leads to:
    - Board micro-management
    - A continuation of whatever “blame game” has gone on in the past
    - Among the naysayers, a confidence that they can outlast you
    - Among the doubters, a lack of belief that the complex process will eventually work
  - If you are from inside the district, you are burdened with the history of prior “blame game” issues.

DO YOU HAVE A PLAN?
– Most districts don’t have one (leaving it to you to develop it). But they want to have it before you’ve built up trust with the people you need to support it.
  - Actually, you need two plans:
    - A vision of the actual instructional practices and supporting mechanisms you want to put into place
    - A strategy for getting there
What to do to start, build, and sustain reform

Think about the world from more than the perspective of an educator – 
think like a lawyer, politician, and chief executive.

Be a lawyer

- Your contract negotiations are critical. Lawyers always tell clients in contract negotiations that the parties have to be clear about sharing the same expectations for the contract they are about to enter. Don’t be shy. Before you agree to any contract:
  - Clarify in writing expectations such as what the board wants you to do, how long they are going to give you to do it, and how much freedom you are going to have to execute your vision. Don’t hesitate to raise tough issues, like the amount of time you need to turn things around. (Ask specifically about “red lines,” and whether the board believes the district is special because there is a “secret sauce.” Lots of boards believe there is “something special” that they will want to maintain no matter what else you propose. Sometimes those are positive things that will help you; sometimes they are brick walls.)
  - Sometimes boards know what they want; sometimes they don’t. If they do, the issue is whether you can live with them. If they don’t, the issue is whether they can live with you.
  - As part of the negotiating process, ask to be interviewed by community leaders, your potential colleagues, and even union leaders. (Sometimes trust just cannot be made to happen. Know that before you sign.)
  - Count heads. If you don’t have an overwhelming board majority in favor of reform, don’t take the job.

- Be prepared to walk away. Desperate reformers are usually frustrated reformers.
Be a politician

- You are a public official. Think like one, and act like (a good) one.
- Like all public officials, you need trust to function. But you did not win an election (in most cases). You don’t therefore automatically acquire it. You have to build trust.
- Trust building is a 360° exercise. You need to create trust with your employer (the board), with its employer (the community, especially parents), and with your staff (administrators and teachers).
  - Your message:
    - I care about the kids and the community
    - I have the right judgment to run the district
    - I have (or will have) a plan that will make things better
  - Your strategy:
    - Be low-key. Be conscious about being positive. Avoid conflict, which means avoid the “blame game.” Don’t be drawn into conflict with unions prematurely.
    - Be prepared to spend what may seem an unconscionable amount of time trust building in your first three-six months on the job.
    - Calibrate any media strategy by remembering that it may create conflict before you are ready to deal with it.
  - Your goal: Building relationships where oversight and input occur as part of normal life, not as a disruption to it. Attempting to insulate yourself from either oversight or input dooms what you are trying to do.
- Act consistently with your message: Be a great role model and build a strong leadership team, recognizing that what you do either reinforces or contradicts the vision you are trying to convey.
Be a Chief Executive

- Have clear goals about:
  - The right instructional practices and support structures
  - The culture necessary to support those practices and continuously improve them.

- Create a plan
  - Use teachers’ own visions to sell them what you want to do. (Teachers often embrace the goals of genuine 21st Century education without necessarily understanding or embracing the means. Try to get them to espouse the goals and then show them through the plan that the means you have selected best achieve what they want. In the process, take the time to hear out teachers and others even if you are under pressure. If your plan is based on mutual respect and collaboration, show it here. If it is based on data and continuous improvement, here is the place to lay out the benchmarks and the process.)
  - Be conscious of the plan as a way to focus on student achievement against other competing demands. Use it also as a reasonable yardstick by which to measure your effort.

- Build a great management team: Reformers often are stymied by central offices as much as by teachers or poor school management. Do not accept a central office team merely because it is already there.

- Understand the “optics” of the job.
  - When you say “every child can learn,” that cannot be seen as a way to blame teachers. It has to be seen as a joint commitment, with joint responsibility.
  - When you say “I order you (the principals and staff) to take control away from the central office,” you have to mean it, and you have to get your central office staff to understand they support the schools, not the other way round.
  - When you say we believe in data, you have to pay attention to it, even if it tells you something you don’t want to hear. “No excuses” applies to you as much as to your teachers.

- Look for early real victories: Do not undermine your credibility by over-claiming successes. Although you will be pressed to demonstrate quickly that things are going well, resist the temptation to “spin” a victory where none exists. Your credibility is critical as you proceed. Don’t throw it away.