



District
Management
Group

COMMENTARY

Reinventing Leaders for a New Era in Education Management

by Mike Johaneck and James ("Torch") Lytle

Originally published in *District Management Journal*, v.5, Fall 2010

Making the investment in school and central office leaders... has the potential to reap substantial return on investment, especially in times of resource contraction and heightened performance expectations—when strategic leadership is more crucial than ever.

Reinventing Leaders *for a New Era in Education Management*

OK, your day job as a school leader is no longer new. On good days, you may sense that you're actually able to act a bit more intentionally around the edges of reacting to the day's events. But, you may wonder if the direction is right, or if the changes are really taking root. You've seen a lot not work, or work in very temporary ways. You've consumed various professional development trends over the years. Some have provided critical support, but there's a growing familiarity about many of them. Too many of your colleagues have already moved on to other positions, even other careers.

| MIKE JOHANEK AND JAMES ("TORCH") LYTLÉ

So, you think about what's next in your own development, how to ratchet up your daily work. But what? What's available to the not-so-new but not-so-old school leader who is somewhere in the land of mid-career? With all the attention to recruiting newbies and to retiring the old ones, the mid-career school leader can begin to feel a bit like the middle child in a large family. Just hope the pasta lasts by the time it gets to you.

But, *most* school leaders fall into this category. Most principals are middle-aged (50, the "new 40") with eight years of experience as a principal, and with a Master's degree. Most are not independently wealthy and need to keep the day job, which takes up nearly 60 hours a week.¹ How, then, do we address the professional growth needs of the vast majority of those leading our schools now, and across the wide variety of contexts in which they work? What do they need? How do we know?

The Shifting Context for School Leadership

Further complicating this question is that the whole context of school leadership is changing. Beyond the normal challenges of leading complex organizations, district leaders today are confronted with two major colliding forces—revenue pressures and a demand for increased academic achievement.

In most states, funding for public education is likely to decline substantially over the next three to five years as ARRA/stimulus funding ends, states struggle with revenue shortfalls, and districts try to maintain present levels of service. Meanwhile, on the policy side, the press for national standards and assessments continues, and the U.S. Department of Education is using its funding authority to encourage experimentation and accountability.

Race to the Top requires states and districts to agree to put in place "career ready" standards for high school graduates, tests that reflect demanding national standards and measure individual student growth from year-to-year, better teacher evaluation systems, and data systems that can track student achievement and relate it to specific teachers. In addition, states must eliminate caps on charter schools and have explicit plans for intervening in low-performing schools.

In mid-March, the Obama administration announced its proposals for reauthorizing No Child Left Behind and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), including Title I. The administration's priorities were foreshadowed by the Race to the Top provisions.

- o States will be required to adopt dramatically higher academic standards by 2014.



Cohort VI leader Dana Liebman listens in a class.

- The “all students must be proficient in reading and math” by 2014 requirement of NCLB will be replaced by a requirement that students be college and/or career ready by 2020.
- Schools and districts can use subjects in addition to reading and math in their annual performance reporting.
- Schools, districts, and states must use a “value-added” approach to student testing.
- States and districts must intervene in their lowest-performing schools using any of four prescribed approaches.
- Teacher evaluations must include measures of what students are learning from their teachers.

Back home at the districts, superintendents, boards, and employee organizations are struggling to keep afloat. First round budget savings like salary freezes and reduced energy use have already been put in place, and the next rounds will require much deeper cuts.

These immediate funding and policy drivers combine with longer-term shifts in the leadership context. Demographic changes in communities, rapidly evolving learning technologies, continued shifts in family structures, turnover of colleagues, and continued shifts in transitions into adulthood arise amidst increasingly polarized and contested micro- and macro-political environments. New governance structures and competitive markets raise institutional stakes, while cross-agency imperatives and increasing data transparency across human services raise questions of professional identity and role. Growing economic inequalities and the shocking realities of “truly disadvantaged” communities present both heightened urgency and humbling recognition of the limits of our current impact.

When viewed in this context, it is clear why leadership, inquiry, and imagination will be at such a premium. It is also clear that we must invest in the great working majority of our school leaders, the critical mid-career practitioner core that is too seldom the focus of our investment and support. ▸

What is Needed to Reinvent a Leader for this New Era?

We are both faculty members at the Graduate School of Education (GSE), University of Pennsylvania, and we both now work in an executive doctoral program the Penn faculty created nearly ten years ago to serve colleagues leading educational organizations, chiefly but not exclusively schools. Through our experiences with this unique program, we both have come to believe that pursuing leadership growth mid-career is profoundly challenging and deeply rewarding.

“If we are to support mid-career leaders, we need to help them strengthen this underlying process of decision-making and action.”

We strongly believe that investing in human capital development is critical to improving school and district performance. And, we think that making the investment in school and central office leaders and board members has the potential to reap substantial return on investment, especially in times of resource contraction and heightened performance expectations—when strategic leadership is more crucial than ever. Penn offers a parallel doctoral program in conjunction with the Wharton School for “chief learning officers” from corporations (e.g., Marriott) and non-profits like hospitals. What we’ve learned from these companion programs is how much these sectors invest in leadership development, and how central they see this investment to their long-term success. In the education sector, it is imperative that we accord this importance to our leadership development.

But, what, in fact, is it that mid-career leaders need to learn to prepare them for this stage of their career and for a shifting set of challenges? Since anyone who has worked in a school for more than five minutes knows, silver bullets and magic formulae don’t exist, so we’ll dispense with any “here are the five key ingredients

any mid-career leader needs.” We also know that the field’s tendency to list leader traits and best behaviors doesn’t necessarily help us determine what underlying capabilities are needed, nor how we help develop these with colleagues.² So we start from a deep respect for the urgent and complex challenges of practice, and the rich mix of the personal, pragmatic, and intellectual represented on the ground. We offer no bromides here, but rather share a few areas with which we collectively struggle in support of this critical core of mid-career leaders.

What’s our problem?

We start and return constantly to the challenges our current leaders face, in part for all the reasons we know about why professional development must be work-embedded and sustained. We reject the notion that students arrive to receive the latest and greatest, the “best-bet practices” of the day, to apply with fidelity on Monday morning. Our students, all experienced leaders at the most senior levels at districts and organizations across the country, bring a great deal of expertise to the table; our challenge is to provide as rich a mix of expertise as possible, geared to the nature of the demands they face. Both students and faculty generate and receive knowledge, and the dissertation, integrated within the program from year one, represents a key milestone in each leader’s role as a knowledge-generator in the field. The students ground the preparation of their dissertations in their coursework and use their workplaces for data collection and applied study. Class discussions provide continuity for the applied research sequence, with students and faculty focusing their attention on issues of practice related to research, and on the applications of research to practice. The intent is to develop a critical and inquiry stance on one’s approach to leadership.

Our work is a shared engagement, and it is in the mix that the value is added. Our larger collective mission is to educate practitioner-scholars who make significant contributions both to practice and to the scholarship of practice, i.e., to the scholarship of leading. As an academic institution, we recognize that some of the most intellectually rigorous challenges occur in daily practice, and close attention to practice promises both instrumental and conceptual insights. As our colleague Stanton Wortham, who chairs our Steering Committee and teaches in the program, put it: “scholars should pay attention to the conceptual advances made by practitioners.”³ Or as we state in our guidelines,

FIGURE 1



The scholarship of leading foregrounds school and other educational leaders as knowledge generators and posits the Mid-Career Program as a practitioner-scholar community of current participants and graduates wherein students and faculty identify critical problems of practice that merit systematic and intentional inquiry, carry out those studies and seek appropriate venues for dissemination.⁴

Who could oppose this, at least in theory? The challenge is making it real, and in a world more often at home with compliance. Yet since this is our aim, we've forced ourselves to describe it in a bit more detail, at first to each other as faculty across disciplines and perspectives, and then to use that understanding to assess how we're doing, and what we're doing. In gross simplification, we think it follows the relationships depicted in the framework in Figure 1 above, formulated in discussions with the program's Steering Committee.

In order to focus on the ongoing improvement of the program, the Mid-Career Steering Committee developed a simplified graphic of the core leadership dynamic the program tries to strengthen. The process is central to how leaders perform, and thus should be made more explicit and more powerful, i.e., in order

to address the daily challenges of practice, each leader must name these challenges, frame them, and draw upon concepts they think help them understand what is going on. They then act upon these challenges and reflect upon the results, while collecting evidence along the way. Their "theory of leadership" in reality develops from countless cycles of deciding/acting, not in some mental act of adopting various theories. Strengthening each aspect of this dynamic means improving a leader's ability to address and understand the right underlying challenges while drawing on the appropriate evidence.

If we are to support mid-career leaders, we need to help them strengthen this underlying process of decision-making and action. We continue to work to make this concrete, visible and shared across this community. A critical stance can't simply accept that the problem presented has been identified well. Time and resources are often wasted as a result. For example, does calling a situation an "obesity crisis" help or hinder our ability to understand and address the core concerns? But practically, what most helps mid-career colleagues improve the naming of the problems they face? What are the conceptual frameworks that are ▷



Cohort VI participant Cristina Alvarez confers with classmate Randy Ziegenfuss.

most powerful in making sense of school improvement in disadvantaged urban contexts? Where and how do we develop our understanding of these in the program? If I'm supposed to be an "instructional leader," what do I really need to know about math? Our work cannot remain theoretical or slavishly instrumental. As a program, what should we see in student work or in student/alumni feedback if we're successful in strengthening this thought/action dynamic in mid-career leaders?

We wrestle with this regularly. We jointly benchmark student work, student and alumni surveys and group feedback, review them in monthly Steering Committee discussions, and revise the program accordingly. As a result, last year, eight years into this work, we tightened the focus of the preliminary exam; we embedded more casework to get at the full cycle above; and, we integrated more across related course modules. We continue to test and gauge impact.

Who are my colleagues?

With all this reflection and learning going on, our students also express another area of challenge. Their colleagues may begin to look at them askance each time they return from a "college weekend," eager to engage in "critical inquiry" of their work. We urge our students to avoid such discussions before Monday morning coffee.

But this raises a concrete issue, and a need that experienced leaders face in particular, as they often have well-established relations among colleagues.

Often our students, engaging intensely with a wide variety of colleagues, experience a shift in their perspectives—about their own work, their institution, their position, even their colleagues. This can generate a very different sort of isolation, even for someone accustomed to the isolation accompanying a leadership role. And it can lead to doubts—now I wonder who my real colleagues are? How do I define my work? Where do I wish to take my leadership?

With considerable distance from undergraduate days (usually more than 15 years out), the vulnerability of deep learning, of really putting on the table things that matter, can be quite unsettling. This is also why we have structured our program into cohorts intentionally designed to be diverse not only in terms of race, ethnicity, and gender, but in terms of experience, position, type of organization, and geography. The program explicitly uses this diversity to teach collaboration and reflective practice, while intentionally creating an inquiry community. The cohort serves as an essential personal and professional sounding board, especially in those moments when stress mounts at work, questions from course discussions undermine safe assumptions, or the family/work/study balance seems to teeter. Or, when they suddenly have to display their thinking rather transparently to new peers, with fewer of the defenses at hand that they have mastered at work. Most of these people can sniff out bad defensive postures anyway. Yet, this experience of vulnerability, it seems to us, offers a critical opportunity for mid-career leaders, a window

powerfully wedged open onto the core work of their institutions, and the experiences of many of their charges, both students and staff.

I'm the boss?

There's a good deal of buzz these days about distributed leadership, and we have colleagues doing fascinating work in this area. Much of the work challenges traditional notions of the leader's role to which many leaders have been assimilated. Coming back mid-career, suddenly having to work productively with a group, each of whom also plays the "boss" on their home turf, can provide important experiences to round out one's understanding of more lateral, more collaborative approaches to leadership. We continue to search for the best ways to support this, though we are regularly impressed with how experienced leaders seize this opportunity to experiment with more collaborative styles than they may operate from in their organization. That experimental space seems critical.

As an example, several school leaders in the program are confronting situations where their employees are extremely anxious about job security. As new accountability and incentive systems are mandated by policy makers, these leaders find themselves having to implement policies which generate strong emotional responses. As part of a cohort experiencing this leadership challenge in a variety of settings, they've had a chance to explore how leadership means more than policy implementation, but being responsive to the at-times raw emotions of those they lead.

How do I get to the balcony?

A common leadership metaphor draws from the popular work of Ron Heifetz, and describes the need for leaders to move well between the dance floor and the balcony. We have each felt the crush of the dance floor, but have also suffered the pearls of wisdom launched by those who just stay on the balcony. So, for those no longer green as leaders, the question becomes how do I do each well, and how do I move more effectively from the urgent to the important and back? How do I transition from technical to adaptive and back? How do we help experienced leaders do this?

In our struggle with this, one element we enhanced recently was the role of "foundational" disciplines, particularly philosophy, history, and sociology within the program. We found that the appetite for deeper perspective seems profound, and as valued as the most

immediately applicable guidance. Might we have underestimated the role of some traditional liberal arts toward this key need of leadership? Might Socrates support Heifetz in ways unimagined?

“We think that making the investment in school and central office leaders and board members has the potential to reap substantial return on investment, especially in times of resource contraction and heightened performance expectations—when strategic leadership is more crucial than ever.”

Folding the banners

After a decade or two in the field, most leaders will have experienced and/or waved various educational banners, advocating for more authentic this or more constructivist that. Each slogan or fad or even solid notion tends to focus on a key lever, a single key variable that will help us realize our millennial hopes. Experience dulls the enthusiasm for such singular keys to the kingdom, and instead creates an appetite for how to understand the inextricably mixed set of variables affecting our institutions, and ways to grasp the underlying dynamic of a multifaceted school community in order to lead it well and in the right direction.

By mid-career, and often sooner, leaders frequently struggle with developing a more synthetic view as a way to make sense across all sorts of evidence and actors. Any one decision affects others, and our challenge in supporting them involves no less than forcing disciplines into working conversations with each other at the point of practice. As one student worried recently, she cannot just continue to dish out technical solutions as if they were isolated treatments. Another ▷

recognized that he had to get at what was driving school culture so as to move beyond the spate of “hot button” issues plaguing the community. How do we help leaders make sense of the messy mix of reality? They are quite beyond the simplicity of “it’s all about good communication.” In this effort, these leaders also do not have the luxury of just taking the viewpoint of a sociologist, or just viewing it through a psychological lens. Reality insists on the mix, its particular mix in its particular setting, and the obligation is on the leader to force the disciplinary mix into service of the evidence.

Universities bring powerful resources to such problem-solving by leaders, but they must also traverse often well-bounded divisions within academia. The good news is that we find that our academic colleagues soon appreciate the excitement of such work. The challenge remains to infuse that understanding across more colleagues and departments so that professional education indeed serves as rich intellectual stimulus to higher education as well.

Leading beyond my organization

Our mid-career colleagues also bring a different set of needs relative to their standing in the profession. One outcome of being in a cohort with a diverse group of students is that one begins to see possibilities that one might never have considered. One student had been a successful urban principal and was asked to lead a principal training program for her district. Within a year she was recruited by a national educational non-profit to head their work on school intervention. She then was sought out for a state-level position leading school improvement efforts, all a result of seeing a wider range of leadership options.

For many, advanced studies are also part of enhancing their role in the wider field, for engaging more robustly and more creatively in the direction schools are taking. Leadership, while rooted in their home organization, also includes a growing sense of responsibility for the quality of thoughtfulness in our public discourse. They see that such responsibility requires a network of colleagues with whom serious conversations can be had, murky issues engaged, and trust developed. To speak truth to the field, they need to tend to the professional community in which they choose to grow further. We must continue to improve the ways in which we facilitate this transition, through publication and presentation support, creative networking, policy work and more.

Leadership in a New Era: An Evolving Process

In the end, our students and alumni provide some consistent and heartening feedback. When asked how they think they changed, they tend to say that they now think differently, ask more and different questions, and just pause to consider questions where before none arose. They continue to rely on key relationships formed through their intensive experience. And, they also wonder where all that time goes that they used to spend on the program!

Yet, we have much to do to continue improving how we serve our mid-career colleagues; we feel very much at the beginning of this work, and hope others will collaborate with us in learning more. □



MIKE JOHANEK, ED.D. IS A SENIOR FELLOW AT THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, WHERE HE IS ALSO DIRECTOR OF THE MID-CAREER DOCTORAL PROGRAM IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND CO-DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAS EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP NETWORK. PRIOR TO THIS, DR. JOHANEK WORKED IN THE FOR-PROFIT AND NOT-FOR-PROFIT, SECONDARY AND POSTSECONDARY, TEACHING AND ADMINISTRATIVE SIDES OF THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR AT THE COLLEGE BOARD, TEACHSCAPE, TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, AND AT SCHOOLS IN NYC, CLEVELAND, AND LIMA, PERU. HE CAN BE REACHED AT JOHANEK@UPENN.EDU.



JAMES ("TORCH") LYTLE, ED.D. IS PRACTICE PROFESSOR OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AT THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA, AND SERVES ON ITS STEERING COMMITTEE. DR. LYTLE WAS SUPERINTENDENT OF THE TRENTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS (NJ) FROM 1998-2006. PRIOR TO HIS APPOINTMENT IN TRENTON, HE SERVED IN A VARIETY OF CAPACITIES IN THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA. HIS RESEARCH INTERESTS RELATE TO INCREASING THE EFFICACY OF URBAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS, LEADERSHIP TRANSITIONS, AND LEADING SCHOOL CHANGE EFFORTS. DR. LYTLE IS ALSO A SENIOR ADVISOR OF THE DISTRICT MANAGEMENT COUNCIL. HE CAN BE REACHED AT JHLYTLE@GSE.UPENN.EDU.