

You Say You Want a Devolution

A Review
of
The Autonomy Gap:
Barriers to Effective School Leadership

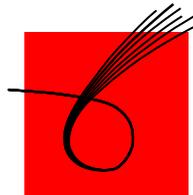
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The Autonomy Gap: Barriers to Effective School Leadership¹, by Steven Adamowski, Susan Bowles Therriault and Anthony Cavanna, takes a look (via in-depth interview-surveys) at the views of 33 elementary school principals (30 from public school districts; three from charter schools) in three states in an attempt to learn “whether today’s principals actually possess the authority to exercise strong leadership.”

This report is interesting, worthwhile – and, above all – one with the feel of authenticity. Those who support individual school autonomy as a key feature of school improvement will find something of value in it. Others, however, may have concerns.²

What I care about is the idea that public schools might be freed from the onerous control of district bureaucracies. This way lies genuine school improvement. The report shines some light on the practicality of the concept. What captures my interest are some of the report’s general conclusions about public school principals and their orientation to their job responsibilities. Based on my experiences in public education³ they sound right.

These conclusions (culled from the Executive Summary):

- “In general, [principals] have come to accept their job as it is, and instead of trying to change the system, they learn to work the system. They see their role as “middle manager” – not CEO.
- “... most public school principals feel that they have the ability to exercise effective leadership within the terms of their job as they see it.

¹ I couldn’t find a copyright date. The research was conducted in Spring, 2006, and the first notice of publication I found was April, 2007.

² Some may criticize the report for its small sample size, the way respondents were selected, and perhaps for the way the interviews were constructed, conducted, and reported. I will leave the nit-picking to others. Some may employ non-logical *ad hominem* arguments against one or both of the sponsors – a clear no-no.

³ Early in a 33-year career in a medium-sized Midwestern urban school system, I worked in six schools under ten principals. Later, as a district-level instructional specialist and curriculum supervisor, I worked with all the district’s principals (40+). Viewed from either organizational perspective, the principalship was often not a pretty sight.

- “Principals with greater longevity in their school districts come to feel a sense of *de facto* autonomy
- “... principals in ‘managed instruction’ districts ... described a lack of autonomy [and] *principals in a more decentralized district did too*. [Emphasis added. A cautionary finding]
- “Although leaders in that district used rhetoric about empowering principals with greater autonomy, in practice union contract provisions severely limited their autonomy.
- “Principals in a right-to-work state felt just as restricted as principals in unionized states in discharging ineffective teachers.” [Another cautionary finding.]

The Executive Summary concludes with a recommendation for empathy, rather than condemnation, for principals⁴. “The system caused the problem and until the system changes the ground rules and procedures, policy makers and education reformers are kidding themselves if they expect the majority of principals to do anything but adapt to the circumstances in which they find themselves.”

It’s good to see scales drop from the eyes of think-tank and university types who gain insight into the realities of public school life – and are willing to admit it. Of course, the folks at Fordham and AIR may have had these understandings all along and constructed their research project to reveal them. Whatever the case, a number of the points the report makes need to be made. At the very worst, perhaps some wider replication of the study needs to be conducted.

Some years ago I learned that, although school leadership had been extensively studied for decades, researchers continued to struggle to reach agreement on the hallmarks of good leadership, and the means by which it can be improved. My guess is the situation is much the same today.

A simple point made early on in my studies was that the position of principal is one of

⁴ A view perhaps less easily accepted by teachers than others.

ambiguity – filled by folks who are literally in the middle of a hierarchical bureaucracy. They’re expected to answer to those above them, such as superintendents and other central district officials, and to serve those below, teachers and other employees in their schools, as well as parents and others in the community.

Given this ambiguity, it might be expected that poor and mediocre principals would try to please the more powerful officials above them, perhaps at the expense of meeting the needs of teachers and others in their dominion. The master principals – unfortunately rare – are the ones who learn to work the “system” on behalf of their teachers and clientele⁵. Some of The Autonomy Gap’s conclusions capture similar aspects of principals’ work.

The report identifies three areas as presenting critical barriers to raising achievement and creating the largest autonomy gaps for principals in public school districts: (1) staffing, (2) instructional time, and (3) instructional decisions. “These principals identified union contracts, state laws, and district policies as the sources” of these gaps. It seems correct to cite such structural features of public education as barriers to achievement, for two reasons. First, given sufficient political will, such barriers can be changed by the institutions that created them. That is, they are not like some intractable social conditions. Second, the implication that all that is needed is the removal of such barriers is an appealingly simple solution. It seems to call for a new educational slogan, perhaps something like “All Principals Can Improve.”

Perhaps all principals *can* improve, but the report’s identified barriers to achievement will not be easily overcome. This seems to be the view of the authors of the report as well. Their

⁵ Of the ten or so principals I worked with as a teacher, only one was gifted in manipulating the system to the benefit of his teachers and students. It was the best school I ever taught in, and his contribution to my success was significant.

concluding remarks express a surprisingly gloomy forecast:

“The key barriers identified by principals are very real Yet rather than decrying these constraints ... we found that district principals in general accepted these limits as immutable realities associated with their jobs. ... Why is there such tolerance for the system as it exists? We hypothesize that these veteran principals ... cannot readily imagine a different system. ... As practiced system-workers, these principals know how to ... be effective ... within the system as it stands.

“While education reformers understandably yearn for district school principals to ... transform the system (e.g., fighting teacher unions ... or pushing back hard against ill-conceived district or state policies), under today’s ground rules that yearning is destined to remain unfulfilled.

“A better strategy, at least for traditional public education, may be to help principals become expert middle managers, while taking modest but specific steps to close the autonomy gap. ... At the school level, unless the environment changes, the principal will accomplish more by working the system, not changing it.”

To which I say, “For Heaven’s sake folks ... nobody said significant school reform would be easy.” School autonomy is a great idea, and if principals won’t take us there we’ll just have to find another way.

Part of the problem is that most individuals in current positions as education leaders, from principals on up, have (1) oversold their leadership abilities, and (2) have no real motivation to change a system that provides them with financial security and other perks. Decentralization, school autonomy, teacher empowerment – or whatever this kind of change in governance of public education may come to be called – represents a revolutionary change in the way public education is organized. A few words from Machiavelli seem appropriate:

There is no more delicate matter to take in hand nor more dangerous to conduct nor more doubtful of success than to step up as a leader in the introduction of change. For he who innovates will have for his enemies all those who are well off under the existing order of things, and only lukewarm support in all those who might have been better off under the new.

The folks at Fordham, with last year’s publication of Fund The Child and other instances of support for public school autonomy, have taken important steps in that direction. What is

needed now is a workable strategy for moving public schools toward autonomy.

Some suggestions.

Take the long view – the current system of governance has been around since the late 19th Century. It's not going to be given up easily.

Look for public school allies. Not everyone likes the system the way it is. Some public school folks have already left for opportunities in charter schools, but others remain in alternative and magnet public schools, as well as traditional schools. Some principals, even superintendents, are interested in increased autonomy. Nevada, for example has a governor and the superintendent of its largest district (Clark County - Las Vegas) who have both expressed support for individual school empowerment. Latch on to these people and find ways to help them be successful.

Think of this reform as missionary work – one convert at a time. If real autonomy, where schools spend 95% (or more) of their per-pupil funding as they see fit, gets a foothold here and there in public school systems, these success stories can coax others into taking the plunge.

Look for volunteers. Don't try to force the concept of school autonomy on public school people. Many will have fears and reservations. Maximize the success of those willing to give autonomy a try. Require a certain level of unanimity among all significant players. For example, the principal has to agree, along with say 70% of other groups – teachers, other school employees, parents, etc.

Seek some kind of contract with the district to protect volunteers from arbitrary changes in their status, something that would assure their autonomy in exchange for an appropriate level of performance, no matter what changes in leadership philosophy occur later. Find ways for those who don't buy in to move to a location more to their liking. Find ways for those bureaucrats in

top-down school systems – whose positions become obsolete through increased school autonomy – to find new duties, or a graceful exit to retirement.

A change in attitude, specifically toward teachers, is needed along with changes in strategy.

Proponents of school autonomy need to realize the full implications of such a revolutionary change in governance. It won't only add authority and freedom-to-act to the role of principals. Teachers and parents will also become empowered. Paradoxically, as principals gain authority from the hierarchy "above," they will lose power to those "below."

A section in the Autonomy Gap reveals the lack of appreciation of this insight. The last section in Part III (General Findings) is entitled "Key Leadership Skills," where principals identify areas where they need more training. Nine items are listed:

1. managing and analyzing data;
2. communicating effectively (externally);
3. making data-driven decisions;
4. building a community of learners;
5. developing a teacher/staff performance accountability system;
6. building a community of support;
7. evaluating classroom teachers;
8. evaluating curriculum; and
9. designing curriculum.

A different group of 30 principals would add several items to this list. Recent articles by principals have increasingly decried the multiple duties heaped on them. No one person can handle all these duties, nor should they. It's a form of organizational insanity.

Such crazy ideas persist because of the over-selling of educational leadership, for self-serving reasons, in a bureaucratic system where true leadership is largely unnecessary except where the real action takes place, at the classroom level.

Other adults engaged in the education enterprise need to be able to accept responsibility for their performance as well, and for this they need to be empowered. As Stigler and Hiebert persuasively argue in The Teaching Gap, teachers need to be able to fix their own teaching.

There is another fact of school life that needs to enter the picture. Individual schools develop an organizational “personality.” School climate researchers investigated these collective personalities back in the 1970s. John Goodlad wrote persuasively about the holistic nature of schools in A Place Called School. Call them collective enterprises or communities or whatever. They function for good or ill as a unit, and school improvement requires a genuine collaborative effort that a principal may promote, but cannot simply command.

Look into new efforts to analyze and operate schools. Check out Jim Spillane at Northwestern University and consider his ideas about distributed leadership. Talk to union leaders who have been engaged in developing “thin contracts” that focus on professional as well as financial issues in bargaining.

A final point, one that combines a change in attitude toward teachers with another strategy for promoting school autonomy, is this. Once teachers begin to experience the benefits of autonomy and the freedom it brings to better control their work situation, the less interest they will have in the job protections traditionally offered by unions and tenure laws. Don’t get me wrong – I’m not anti-union. Collective bargaining in my state has greatly improved the lot of teachers. But the change in governance that school autonomy promises will make the traditional role for unions largely obsolete. Teachers in autonomous schools will be able to act in their own financial and work-life interests.

As sensible school autonomy spreads, people will look back and wonder why they ever ran schools any other way.