

Administrator Cliff Notes

Richard Elmore: Building a New Structure for School Leadership (2000)

I. Leadership

Contrary to the myth of visionary leadership that pervades American culture, most leaders in all sectors of society are creatures of the organizations they lead. **Nowhere** is this **more true** than in **public education**, where principals and district superintendents are recruited almost exclusively from the ranks of practice. As in the military and the church, one does not get to lead in education without being well socialized to the norms, values, predispositions, and routines of the organization one is leading.

Here, then, is the seeming conundrum: **Schools** are being **asked** by elected officials—policy leaders, if you will—**to do things** they are **largely unequipped** to do. School leaders are being asked to assume responsibilities they are largely unequipped to assume, and the **risks** and **consequences of failure** are high for everyone, but especially **high** for **children**. This paper attempts to chart a way out of this conundrum through an **understanding of large scale instructional improvement.**

II. How did we get here?

Early in the development of public schooling the United States, through local elites and national opinion leaders, opted for a form of organization based on locally centralized school bureaucracy, governed by elected boards, with relatively low status (mostly female) teachers working in relative isolation from each other under the supervision of (mostly male) administrators whose expertise was thought to lie mainly in their **mastery of administrative** rather than **pedagogical skills**. (Tyack 1974, Tyack and Hansot 1982)

Administration in education, then, has come to mean not the management of instruction but the **management** of the structures and processes **around** instruction. That which cannot be directly managed must, in this view, be protected from external scrutiny. **Buffering consists of creating structures and procedures** around the technical core of teaching that, at the same time, (1) protect teachers from outside intrusions in their highly uncertain and murky work, and (2) **create the appearance of rational management** of the technical core, so as to allay the uncertainties of the public about the actual quality or legitimacy of what is happening in the technical core.

This buffering creates what institutional theorists call a “logic of confidence” between public schools and their constituents. Local board members, system-level administrators, and school administrators perform the ritualistic tasks of organizing, budgeting, managing, and dealing with disruptions inside and outside the system, all in the name of creating and maintaining public confidence in the institutions of public education.

Teachers, working in isolated classrooms, under highly uncertain conditions, manage the technical core. This division of labor has been amazingly constant over the past century.

Loose-coupling also **explains why** manifestly **successful instructional practices** that grow out of **research** or **exemplary practice** {never} take root in more than a small proportion of classrooms and schools. (Cuban 1984; Cuban 1990; Tyack and Cuban 1995; Elmore 1996)

Local politics is usually driven by pluralist imperatives; local factions mobilize by neighborhood, by racial or ethnic group, or by moral principle, they galvanize electoral support, and they reproduce, not surprisingly, the same political divisions on school boards as exist in the community at large.

Since **politics** is **not about** the **instructional core**, but about the logic of confidence between the schools and the community, **all policy decisions** are essentially about the **symbolism** of mobilizing and consolidating political constituencies.

A smart board member, in this world, is one who spends most of his or her time using issues to consolidate political support. A smart superintendent is one who can count the number of board members, divide by two and, if necessary, add one. **Superintendents come and go** based on their **capacity** to **maintain** a **working majority** on a relatively **unstable elected board**, **{rather}** than on **their capacity** to **focus** the **institution** on its **core functions** {Instruction} and make steady improvements over time.

III. **Instructional Leaders = Holy Grail**

Loose-coupling explains the elusive and largely unsuccessful quest over the past century for school administrators who are “instructional leaders.” Instructional leadership is the equivalent of the holy grail in educational administration. Most credentialing programs for superintendents and principals purport, at least in part, to be in the business of preparing the next generation of instructional leaders.

Most professional development for educational leaders makes at least symbolic reference to the centrality of instructional leadership to the work. Insofar as there is any empirical evidence on the frequency of actual instructional leadership in the work of school administrators, it points to a consistent pattern: **direct involvement in instruction is among the least frequent**

activities performed by administrators of any kind at any level, and those who do engage in instructional leadership activities on a consistent basis are a relatively small proportion of the total administrative force. (Murphy 1990; Cuban 1988)

School leaders are hired and retained based largely on their capacity to buffer teachers from outside interference and their capacity to support the prevailing logic of confidence between a school system and its constituencies.

Again, the ethic of volunteerism prevails. **Principals who develop the skills and knowledge required to actually do instructional leadership in a serious way do so because of their personal preferences and values, often at some personal cost to their own careers, not because they are expected to do so as a condition of their work.**

Overall we get about the proportion of instructional leaders in the administrative ranks that corresponds to the proportion of people in the population who are inclined to do that sort of work.

The institutional structure does not promote, or select for, knowledge and skill related to instructional leadership; at best, it tolerates some proportion of the population who indulge in it out of personal commitment and taste.