

INTRODUCTION

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Do we need a new prescription for educational leadership? Many would argue that we do—that conditions of schooling have changed so much in recent years that the old prescriptions are not helpful anymore. Few would argue that educators are not facing many different demands now. The current context within which educational leadership is developed and exercised reflects a culmination of years of ferment and public dissatisfaction with the schools in the United States (Murphy, 1999). Scholars and practitioners have offered a variety of predictions regarding leadership trends and recommendations for change (Brunner & Björk, 2001; Duke, 1996, 1998; Elmore, 1999; Ferrandino, 2001; Grogan, 2000; Houston, 2001; Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Murphy, 1999; Tirozzi, 2001). Despite differing opinions on the emerging nature of school leadership, there are agreements that tomorrow’s leaders must respond to the shifting economic, social, and political forces that are reshaping public education. To be aware of the past is helpful, but to know the present is vital.

Duke (1996) argues that the facility to prescribe leadership needs depends on being able to “address the conditions perceived to necessitate leadership” (p. 841). The chapters of this book address such conditions in Virginia, conditions created by the implementation of a new statewide educational accountability system. The focal question that has guided the authors’ thinking is: In light of the statewide accountability initiative, are educators (1) continuing to rely on conventional notions of educational leadership, (2) resorting to a managerial model, or (3) developing new or hybrid forms of educational leadership?

Researchers have tried to understand leadership by focusing on various aspects of the phenomenon. Recent years have seen increased attention to the interactions between leaders and the contexts in which they lead (Duke, 1998). These contexts are characterized by followers, belief systems, norms, and organizational structures. Another focus of attention has been how leaders identify and solve problems (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1995). Presumably, Virginia’s new accountability plan has generated conditions in schools and school systems that

might be regarded by educators, and others, as “problems.” Dealing with these problems can be expected to require considerable interaction between educational leaders and those they supervise and serve. The contributors to this volume have made an effort to determine the kinds of problems posed by systematic accountability and the nature of the interactions that have resulted from efforts to address these problems.

The story of Virginia’s initial responses to a major accountability initiative is a complex one. Although many benefits and costs have been identified, there is one overarching effect of the reforms that stands out clearly—the importance of high-stakes tests. The Foreword to the Standards of Learning (1995) explains that:

A major objective of Virginia’s educational agenda is to give the citizens of the Commonwealth a program of public education that is among the best in the nation and that meets the needs of all young people in the Commonwealth. These Standards of Learning chart the course for achieving that objective.

Consistent with what is happening all over the country as Heinecke, Curry-Corcoran and Moon point out in chapter 1, what the Virginia story reveals is that the present focus is primarily on high-stakes testing though it is only one part of the whole. The state describes the Standards of Learning, school accreditation, and the report card as other equally important initiatives in Virginia’s educational agenda (Foreword, 1995). To be sure, it could be that the tests embody the reform in its early years because they represent the most radical departure from earlier methods of assessing student achievement. Or it could be that the tests attract more attention because they are the most flawed part of the reforms in their current form. Whatever the case, the chapters in this volume illustrate the need for a concerted effort to put testing back into perspective so that the goal of improving instruction to facilitate student learning can be at the center of reform.

The Virginia story confirms the need for a new model of educational leadership. Leaders who are proactive and adept at designing and nurturing learning environments are needed at all levels. Educational leaders must keep the big picture in mind. Rather than being consumed by the managerial demands of their work, they should constantly interrogate the conditions under which they are being asked to deliver instruction. Instruction must be at the heart of their work, providing the foundation for helping students to develop into competent, compassionate and connected human beings. Tirozzi (2001) asserts that “preparing teachers for the “age of accountability” requires enlightened leadership” (quotation marks in the original, p. 438). To be enlightened means to strive to achieve the larger goals of the reform movement. It is worth noting that Virginia officials describe the standards as minimum requirements, encouraging schools to go beyond them to enrich the curriculum to meet the needs of all the students (Foreword, 1995).

The new model for educational leadership suggested by the following research entails teamwork and shared responsibility. Even enlightened educational leaders cannot bring about change single-handedly. The Virginia story suggests that educators need to accept the state as part of the “team.” If, as Heinecke, Curry-Corcoran, and Moon suggest in the first chapter, “professional influence has been replaced with political control [and] local control replaced by state control” educators must be sensitive to the state’s political culture. School and district leaders cannot stay focused only on internal affairs. They must become educational activists. Instead of resenting the erosion of local control that current reforms symbolize, local educational leaders must find ways to have their agendas recognized and incorporated into future iterations of statewide reform. Bridging the divide between those in the field and those in government, is, of course, an enormous challenge, but one that has to be undertaken.

Leadership in an age of accountability, as it is described in the following chapters, is an emerging response to a strong state presence in schools and districts. As the chapters unfold, the impetus to meet the challenge outlined above becomes clear.

The first chapter provides the national context within which Virginia’s reforms are nested. Heinecke, Curry-Corcoran, and Moon review the historical development of the notions of accountability that have driven similar reforms in most of the 50 states of the country. They also provide a succinct overview of various state accountability plans, plans that reveal the values and purposes of policy makers who are changing the conditions under which leaders must work. We learn how accountability is defined, and what beliefs undergird it, and we gain insight into the broad challenges posed by the national standards and assessment reforms. The chapter offers a rich backdrop for subsequent discussions of Virginia’s experiences with accountability.

The Evolution of Educational Accountability in the Old Dominion, the second chapter, narrows the focus to accountability reform in Virginia. Duke and Reck trace early policy initiatives from the 1970s through the early 1990s, then examine the politics surrounding the adoption and implementation of the revised Standards of Learning and statewide tests. They conclude with some lessons about statewide accountability initiatives that bear consideration by contemporary educational leaders both within and outside the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Chapter 3 reports on the initial efforts of 16 Virginia high schools to respond to the new accountability measures. Speculating that the schools facing the greatest challenges are those with relatively poor student performance on state tests and low levels of financial resources, Duke and Tucker explore the implications of these factors. They note promising developments including an overall increase in test scores across Virginia, heightened levels of cooperation among teachers and administrators, and the emergence of principals as instructional leaders. They also identify several areas for concern, including the fear that

course content will be limited to what is tested, the elimination of electives, loss of teacher autonomy, and triaging of students.

In the next chapter, Tucker builds on the study reported in chapter 3. “The Principalship: Renewed Call for Instructional Leadership” focuses on the high school principal’s role in instructional activities. Tucker argues that “Virginia’s accountability initiative has introduced an external challenge for schools and educators with relatively little instructional guidance” (p. 172). She concludes that principals clearly see their ability to address instructional issues as a key to their effectiveness, but she also questions whether it represents instructional leadership as we know it or a reinvented form.

Grogan and Roland also report on high school principals’ responses to Virginia’s accountability plan in chapter 5. In addition, their study includes the voices of teachers who were successful in preparing students for the end-of-course tests in seven different high schools in Virginia’s Region V. The study was commissioned by the Best Practice Center in that region to discover replicable classroom strategies used by successful teachers and key principal actions that supported teachers’ efforts. The authors conclude that district assistance is important, but that its effectiveness depends, ultimately, on the engagement of teachers and principals.

Chapter 6 broadens the leadership lens to include department chairs. “The Impact of Virginia’s Accountability Plan on High School English Departments” provides an opportunity to understand the role of department chairs in efforts to achieve educational accountability. Duke, Butin, and Sofka surveyed English department chairs across Virginia to gather their perceptions of how reforms affect teachers and teaching in their departments. The authors offer suggestions for how the role of the chair can be strengthened to facilitate staff development and student success.

The next chapter focuses on student achievement gaps that have been revealed by Virginia’s new Standards of Learning tests. Discrepancies in test scores for Black and White students were the focus of interviews with 15 superintendents. Grogan and Sherman found that very little is being done at the moment to eliminate the achievement gap specifically. The authors discuss the context of superintendent responses and issue a call for targeted action to address the problem.

In chapter 8, Tucker and Grogan examine the data from several of the studies reported in the book in order to understand educators’ moral concerns related to the accountability plan. They ground their discussion in a review of educators’ beliefs and attitudes prior to the reforms, and adopt Starratt’s three-part analytical framework involving the ethics of care, justice, and critique in order to come to terms with current misgivings about accountability measures. Tucker and Grogan invite educators to work toward refining and strengthening the reform to ensure that the goals of accountability are consistent with the goals of equity and social justice.

Duke, Grogan, and Tucker conclude the volume by reflecting on educational leadership in an age of educational accountability. They describe the changing context of educational leadership, consider both the benefits and possible costs of accountability in its present form, and discuss the implications of the reforms for preparation, recruitment, selection, and evaluation of educational leaders.

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